

Marino Institute of Education

An exploration into the play pedagogical practices of an infant teacher:

A case study.

Thesis

By

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work.

Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly.

This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution.

The work was done under the guidance of Dr. Joan Kiely and Gene Mehigan at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

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Abstract

This case study, *An Exploration of an Infant Teacher's Practices in Play Pedagogy*, is a small scale research study exploring an infant teacher's practices during child led play session. Research tends to state what teachers *do not do* in relation to play pedagogy, while this case study aims to uncover what teachers do. The case study uses qualitative methods; interviews and observations. The participant engaged in a semi-structured, pre-observation interview, where she was asked about her practices in play pedagogy and her approach to learning through play. Following this, the participant was observed on ten occasions in her classroom during play sessions. Field notes, using a robust observation schedule were used to document the research participant's practice. Following the completion of the observations, the participant took part in a semi-structured, post-observation interview. Findings showed that the participant had a nurturing relationship where partnership is encouraged with the children. She was found to encourage agency and arranged her classroom environment to do the same. Despite what research suggests, the participant was actively involved during play and the children were encouraged to interact with one another and with the participant. The case study concludes that despite challenges in using play in an infant classroom, the participant in this case study demonstrated many examples of good, research-informed play pedagogical practice. To overcome challenges identified in the study, this research has a number of recommendations, including a recommendation to reduce class sizes at infant level. This would allow teachers time to engage in play practices endorsed by the literature.

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List of abbreviations

CPD	Continued Professional Development
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
NCCA	National Council of Curriculum and Assessment
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
PSC	Primary School Curriculum
SST	Sustained Shared Thinking
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1: Introduction

Aim

The aim of this research study was to explore, in detail, the practices in play pedagogy employed by one infant teacher. The exploration of this teachers practice examined what theoretically underpinned practices are used in her daily routine.

Background

It is acknowledged in infant education in primary school that children learn through play. In the words of Maria Montessori, one of the great philosophers of education, play is the work of the child (Lillard, 2013).

Play has always been a feature of interactions in infant classrooms. However this play was either completely directive or completely unguided (Fallon, 2017b; Gray & Ryan, 2016). Since the introduction of the *Aistear Curriculum Framework* (2009) in primary schools, a new style of play has become more prevalent where teachers are involved in play with the children and aim to extend their learning potential.

The *Aistear Curriculum Framework* was launched in 2009 to establish principles and themes that all early childhood services in Ireland could work towards. It sought to extend and complement the *Primary School Curriculum* (PSC) in infant classes (Gray & Ryan, 2016). The framework, which defines curriculum as all of the experiences children engage in at school which contribute to their learning and development, was intended to be used as a tool to deliver the PSC playfully (NCCA, 2009c). In essence the *Aistear Curriculum Framework* was designed for infant teachers to use as a methodological support to implement the PSC (Hollingsworth, 2016).

The *Aistear Curriculum Framework* introduced play-based teaching and learning to infant classes in primary schools in Ireland. Since its implementation, the new *Primary Language Curriculum* has further endorsed play-based learning in the delivery of the curriculum which aims to lead learning ‘through appropriately playful learning experiences,’ (NCCA, 2015, p.11).

The present case study was conducted using qualitative instruments comprising semi-structured interviews and a robust observation schedule. The participant in the study is a teacher in a senior infant class in a DEIS co-educational school in North Dublin. This participant engaged in two semi-structured interviews, over the course of this study. One interview was conducted prior to the observation period with the other taking place after the classroom observation schedule.

Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis comprises five chapters. A brief summary of the content of each chapter is described as follows:

- Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the research project and sets the context for the study. The chapter includes a statement of the problem underpinning the investigation and a rationale for the present study. It continues with a description of the focus of the study and an outline of the professional significance of the research. The chapter concludes with a description of the layout of the thesis.

- Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents a review of the literature pertaining to play pedagogy in early childhood education.

- Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter presents a description of the methodology employed in the study. It features a description of the research design of the study and presents the aims of the study including the description and the rationale for the research methods employed. The chapter also describes the qualitative research methods used for the case study and the methods of data analysis. The chapter concludes with an outline of ethical issues in relation to the study and a statement on the limitation of the research findings.

- Chapter 4: Presentation and Analysis of Findings

This chapter presents the results of the case study which sought to examine an infant teacher's current practice in playful pedagogy in an urban DEIS school.

- Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter draws together the research by reviewing the key findings of the study and identifying recommendations emanating from the attendant analysis and discussion. The chapter closes with suggestions for future research and concluding comments on the researcher's reflection on the study.

Conclusion

Current research shows that children learn best in an environment which is not formal but through play. This research project aims to investigate the practices in play pedagogy in use in one Irish infant classroom. It is hoped that the findings of this case study will not only illustrate what practices in play pedagogy are being implemented in an Irish infant classroom but that the experiences of one infant teacher's implementation of a play-based approach to learning will be valuable to researchers and to teachers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This thesis is a case study on a senior infant teacher's current practice in play pedagogy, in a primary school in North Dublin. To set the context, this chapter is a review of the current literature on best practice in play pedagogy. Both the international and Irish contexts are examined. Issues in relation to play pedagogy in Irish infant classrooms are also detailed.

A trawl of the literature suggest that playful pedagogy, relational pedagogy and dialogic pedagogy are all considered indicators of appropriate pedagogical practice in early years' settings (Hunter & Walsh, 2013; Kernan, 2007; Kiely, 2017; Walsh, 2017). These pedagogies will thus be examined. There will also be a consideration of what pedagogy has looked like in recent years in Irish classrooms (OCED, 2004). This will give insight and understanding to the evolution of practice in the Irish context.

Play pedagogy, a term used throughout this research project, can be defined as the actions and work, undertaken by teachers which support the children's development and learning. 'It infers a negotiated, respectful and reflective learning experience for all involved,' (NCCA, 2009a, p.56). In essence it is a term for the playful approach teachers take to children's learning and development.

What is best practice? – An international perspective

The concept of best practice is disputed by many (Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 2000; Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Tobin 2005). Moss et al., (2000, p.103) suggest that there is no such thing as best practice in early childhood education. Rather early childhood education is 'permeated by values and is socially constructed,' within its context. When

assessing quality in early childhood Moss et al. (2000) present three variables to interrogate best practice; the process of defining quality, the understanding of what quality is and the context and culture. A measure of quality in one context may not prove to be effective in another. In essence there is no definition of quality that is suitable for all contexts, although there are common indicators of quality (Urban, Vandebroek, Van Laere, Iazzari & Peeters, 2012).

Before examining perceived best practice in early years pedagogy, it is important to explore pedagogical ideas at an international level. Georgeson and Payler (2013) remind us that ideas about young children's education and care have always been shared with other countries. They also reflect on the changing of childhood and the understanding children over time. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) places children internationally at the centre within policy and practice. Recurring themes in the literature include: the importance of listening to the voice of the child, the child being at the centre of the learning experiences, the role of play, play pedagogy, curriculum and socio-cultural theory (Georgeson & Payler, 2013).

There are many schools of thought on what is effective early childhood education. Soler and Miller (2003) acknowledge the tensions early years curricula encounter. Early years curricula must meet the needs of the individual child but also meet the needs of society and the economy (Soler & Miller, 2003). At one end of a continuum is the instrumental view described by Klieberd (as cited in Soler & Miller, 2003) as representing 'homogenisation, standardised testing, effective management and other aspects of what can be characterised as a social efficiency movement' (p.60). At the other end of the continuum is the progressive view that identifies the learner as agentic, in relationships of reciprocity rather than hierarchy with adults. Learning

happens through play and social interaction (Soler & Miller, 2003). Early years curricula are located variously along this continuum.

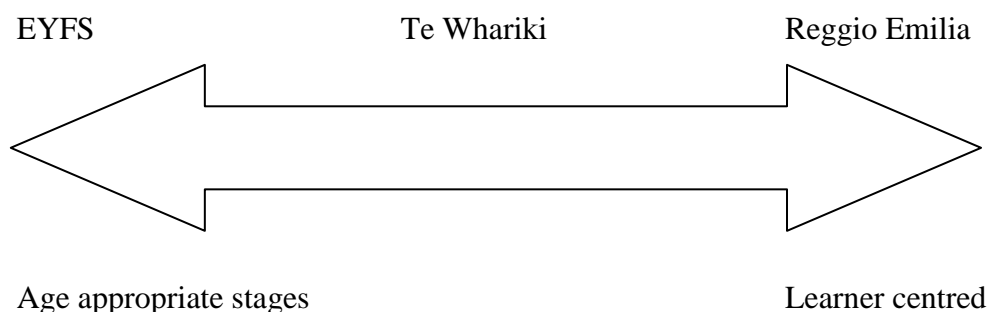


Figure 1: Continuum of curricula

Soler and Miller (2003) place the English Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) at the instrumental view side of the continuum where curriculum is based on linear age appropriate stages. In the centre is New Zealand's Te Whariki curriculum framework and they place Reggio Emilia at the other end of the continuum where the learner is at the centre.

Almost all of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2017) countries have a framework or curriculum for the early years. These curricula encompass varying age ranges from birth or two and a half to three years. Some are an integrated model for both early years and compulsory school age children (OECD, 2017). Ireland is an example of this where the *Aistear Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009a) is designed for both early years services and infant classes in primary schools. The overlap of curriculum aims to ensure that best practice is observed, whether in an early years or primary school setting. Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal and Thornburg (2009) state that this overlap aims to insure that the appropriate elements of early childhood pedagogy are continued in the formal school setting. In terms of theorists, the Western policy curricula and frameworks endorse Piaget's and Vygotsky's development

theories, in particular Piaget's experimental learning and Vygotsky's socio-constructivism (Hunter & Walsh, 2013).

Best practice is a disputed term due to the contextual or cultural perception about what measures and defines quality early childhood education. However many OECD countries have curricula or frameworks with common elements which could be regarded as best practice.

An Irish perspective

The O.E.C.D. (2004, p.58) reported that the teaching they observed in Irish infant classrooms was too 'directive and formal.' A formal curriculum in the early years is incompatible with current pedagogical understandings (Dunphy, 2008; Fallon, 2013a; Hunter & Walsh, 2013; Moyles, 2005; Walsh, 2017). They found that teachers require appropriate training to move towards the 'practices observed and theoretically underpinned,' in other countries, where 'exploratory learning and self-initiated, hands-on activities,' are common (OECD, 2004, p.58). Hunter and Walsh (2013) had similar findings in Northern Ireland during a research study carried out to investigate the reality of play in early year's classes in primary schools.

There has been extensive research on overly formal pedagogy being inappropriate for young children (Alexander, 2009; Bennett, 2005; Wylie & Hodgen, 2007). Many teachers are still 'directing, instructing, lecturing and controlling children's learning in the classroom environment,' (Hunter & Walsh, 2013, p.20). In the words of Fallon (2013a, p.1) 'formal is not normal in infant classes.'

However, changes have already begun to take place. While teachers lack skill in the provision of quality experiences they do recognise the value of play (Hunter & Walsh, 2013). Much of the current literature states that it is essential that teachers

receive training in order to facilitate learning using methods of best practice (Brodie, 2014; Dunphy, 2008; Fallon, 2017a; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hunter & Wallsh, 2013; INTO, 2006; O’Kane & Hayes, 2007; Walsh & et al., 2013). At a policy level play-based learning is endorsed in Ireland with the *Aistear Curriculum Framework* and new *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) but there are issues with its implementation (NCCA, 1999; NCCA, 2009; NCCA, 2015) and these issues will be explored presently. Following a review of the current literature, lack of confidence and training in play-based pedagogy, including the Aistear curriculum framework, are issues identified by Irish infant teachers as needing attention (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hollingsworth, 2017; Hyvonen, 2011; Moyles, 2010; O’Kane & Hayes, 2007).

Curriculum issues

There is no statutory obligation to operate a play-based curriculum in Irish primary schools. Hollingsworth (2016) found that two thirds of her junior and senior infant teacher participants used the *Aistear Curriculum Framework* as a model of play-based learning in their schools and suggest it is due to the Department of Education’s lack of mandatory professional development input into play-based learning in schools, there is a pick-and-choose attitude towards play in the infant classes. It seems unwise that schools and teachers may or may not choose to implement a curriculum framework based on the latest research in Early Childhood Education. However, Walsh (2016, p.78) states the *Primary School Curriculum* (PSC) is in the process of a review, focusing on ‘aligning the approaches and the methods in the infant classes with those of Aistear as recommended in the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011).’ The new *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) (2015) is the beginning of this review. The NCCA (2015) suggest that ‘through appropriately playful learning experiences’ the

children in infants should be able to achieve all of the curriculums learning outcomes (p.11). These experiences may be through adult-child interactions or through meaningful interactions with their peers (NCCA).

Much of the current literature in the relevant field reports that early years education in the first years of primary school is too formal in Ireland and the U.K. (Alexander, 2009; Bennett, 2005; Dunphy, 2008; Fallon, 2013a, Hunter & Walsh, 2013; Moyles, 2005, OECD 2004; OECD, 2017; Walsh, 2017; Wylie & Hodgen 2007). Research has suggested that although teachers do value play they are not confident in extending and developing learning through it (Hall, 2015; Hunter & Walsh, 2013; Walsh, 2017; Whitebread, 2012; Wood, 2013). While the gap between theory and practice has been researched, there has been little carried out in relation what teachers in Ireland actually do in their practice (Fallon, 2017). It would appear that the main focus has been on what they are not doing.

The *Aistear Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) is referred to throughout this literature review and is based on recent research in Early Childhood Education. This framework was not introduced in schools to replace the Primary School Curriculum in the infant classes, but ‘to complement and extend areas of the Primary School Curriculum,’ (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p.189). Gray and Ryan (p.191) report this play-based and child-led approach to learning, ‘was introduced to primary schools to be used in tandem with the curriculum goals encapsulated in the PSC.’ The *Aistear Curriculum Framework* in the primary school classroom recommends playful learning activities and experiences, led by the teacher throughout the day at class and small group level. French (2007) recommends opportunities for children to construct their own learning during different types of play and that freedom and choice should also be offered where possible. The *Aistear Curriculum Framework* is a suggested play-based

methodology for teachers to use in their classrooms (NCCA, 2009c). Teachers are not expected to use its goals and aims in their planning (NCCA, 2017). It was introduced ‘to schools in the hope of supporting a play-based approach and taking a more child-centred approach to infant education,’ (Hollingsworth, 2016, p.17).

There is no mandatory training on play-based approaches for teachers. The NCCA’s (2009c, p.21) *Aistear Audit of Similarities and Differences* suggests that opportunities should be provided for teachers to learn about using Aistear with the PSC through ‘planning, teaching, assessing and reviewing,’ their work with both junior and senior infants. The NCCA offer Continued Professional Development (CPD) for teachers through the Aistear Tutor Initiative (O’Kane, 2016). This is a partnership between the NCCA and Association of Teacher’s Education Centres. They offer summer courses and suites of workshops during term time (NCCA, 2017). However participation in the courses offered by the initiative is voluntary. O’Kane (2016) reports that, to date, they have supported over ten thousand teachers and principals in developing play-based learning using the *Aistear Curriculum Framework*.

The concept of best practice in the early years is socially and culturally determined (Tobin, 2005). Tobin (2005) illustrates this by giving examples of Japanese and French best practice which are not culturally relevant elsewhere. He continues that quality standards reflect local issues and values. However despite this cultural dissonance there are common elements which indicate best practice. In Ireland research shows children are educated in an overly formal environment in their early years in primary school, despite playful pedagogy being an indicator of best early years practice (Farquahr, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Walsh (2017) describes her understanding of playful pedagogy under three pillars. Research indicates that playful learning is an

indicator of quality practice in the early years (Farquhar, 2003; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Walsh, 2017). Therefore, playful teaching and learning merits scrutiny here.

Three pillars of playful teaching and learning

Introduction to the three pillars of playful learning:

It is widely accepted that children learn through play (Chesworth, 2016; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007; NCCA, 2009a). Play is the foundation of young children's learning. Whitebread (2012, p.62) states that 'today it is almost universally accepted within the world of early years education that children develop and learn principally through play.' However it is challenging for early years teachers to recognise the educational potential of play and they also find it difficult to support and enhance play (Hunter & Walsh, 2013; Whitebread, 2012). Other issues in relation to play include the role of the adult and provision (Hunter & Walsh; Wood, 2013).

In order to understand playful learning it is necessary to differentiate between play and playful learning. Moyles (2005) describes play as a process whereas playful interactions are a medium for teaching. In essence children have more choice and autonomy during play. In contrast playful interactions are more adult led and may have specific learning targets, while also being playful.

Walsh's (2017, p.48) Three Pillars of Playful Learning are:

- Establishing caring yet nurturing relationships
- Enjoying playful yet skilful interactions
- Creating enjoyable yet challenging opportunities.

The U.K's curriculum guide for the EYFS (2012), *The Development Matters*, document affirms these pillars by emphasising that positive relationships support and encourage

learning and the environment that teachers provide can enable learning. They also include that Sustained Shared Thinking¹ as part of positive relationships.

Pillar 1: Establishing caring yet nurturing relationships

Teachers must establish caring, nurturing relationships with the children in their class. This can be achieved by developing relationships and partnerships with both children and their parents.

It is important that teachers engage in caring and nurturing relationships with the children in their care. Bergin and Bergin (2007, as cited in Walsh, 2017, p.37) state that ‘establishing secure relationships is foundation for enhancing children’s social and emotional wellbeing.’ The Aistear Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009, p.7) adds that relationships and partnerships work together to benefit the children, where each party ‘recognises, respects and values,’ the other. Research by Hall (2015) also supports the importance of relationships in the infant classroom.

Care and education

The divide between care and education in the Early Years is constantly being debated and discussed. Hayes (2008, cited in Walsh, 2017, p.38) warns against mothering but suggests a ‘nurturing pedagogy.’ In this nurturing pedagogy the teacher takes on an educational role and offers nurturing through ‘affective and dispositional aspects.’ This enables the child to develop skills to grow and learn in a nurturing environment. Children are motivated to learn when their basic needs are being met. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs lists these as: children’s physiological, safety,

¹ Sustained shared thinking: sustained, shared thinking involves children and educators working together in conversations which provide opportunities to discuss and think about problems or challenges in a serious, extended way (Touhill, 2010, p.1).

love/belonging and esteem needs. The nurturing pedagogy allows for educational development whilst also being cared for.

The support of a nurturing teacher will enable the child to develop skills to ‘build what Claxton et al. (2011) refer to as ‘learning power,’” (Walsh, 2017, p.39). This learning power not only focuses on the children’s secure learning environment but also caring for their minds. The children’s dispositions and skills are nurtured and encouraged to flourish (Walsh, 2017).

Partnership with parents

Partnership with parents is an important part of building nurturing relationships with children. Recent research places importance on working in partnership with parents (Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Huggins, 2013; NCCA, 1999; NCCA, 2009; NCCA, 2015; OECD, 2017; White, 2016). French (2007) reminds us that learning is enhanced when education settings work with parents. According to the OECD (p.34) this type of partnership is seen to ‘enhance healthy child development and learning.’ Supportive relationships between school and parents also lead to positive learning outcomes (NCCA, 2009b).

Partnership with children

The notion of children working in partnership with teachers, where children are encouraged to speak and have a voice, is widely supported (Fullan, 2013; Lansdowne, 2011). The *Aistear Curriculum Framework* (2009) suggests the use of ‘Plan, Do, Review,’ adapted from High Scope model, which encompasses both developmental and research theory, as a model to discuss the play they have engaged in. Through this the

children are active participants in their own learning by planning, 'doing,' and reviewing their play (Georgeson & Payler, 2013).

In the establishment of caring yet nurturing relationships the teacher and child build a positive relationship. The teacher educates and cares for the child in an equal and respectful manner. The partnership with the child and their parents aims to ensure connections are made and learning is successful.

Pillar 2: Enjoyable but Skilful Interactions

In the creation of enjoyable but skilful interactions teachers must be involved during play. It is important that they take on various roles in the planning, playing and reviewing of play. Teachers need to challenge children and be involved in skilful interactions.

Teacher involvement in play

It is imperative that teachers are actively involved in play (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002). Teachers can engage children in knowledge and intentionally link play with adult directed activities (Wood, 2014). It is the adult participating and interacting in play, in partnership with the child that guides them. This participation moves the boundaries within what Vygotsky describes as their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and moves the play to a higher and more advanced level (Hakkarainen et al., 2013). Tasks that the children may find too difficult alone may be mastered with support from the teacher (Santrock, 2007). Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) is more likely to happen when teacher is involved in play (Fallon, 2013c). Despite the clear advantages of teachers being involved in play there is virtually no evidence that teachers in Ireland engage with the children during playtime at school

(Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hayes & O'Flaherty, 1997, cited in Fallon, 2017b McGettigan & Gray, 2012; Murphy, 2004a & 2004b; OECD, 2004).

In spite of the benefits of teacher's involvement in play, many OECD countries emphasise the importance of unguided play time in their frameworks (OECD, 2017). However the Starting Strong report (OECD, 2017) does state that currently this is being incorporated into content areas that encourage learning through play. Hakkarainen, Bredikyte, Jakkula and Munter (2013) report that the Scandinavian model supports free play in which adults are not involved, while the Soviet Union supports 'didactic play,' where children are instructed how to play. Yet it is in between these opposites where the adult guides, interacts and is involved in the play (Walsh, 2017).

The involvement of a skilful adult can include children's ideas and themes into the play. When the children are more experienced at this they will be enabled to do so without support and this educational type of play 'supports the development of new skills and competencies in participants,' (Hakkarainen et al., 2013, p.223). The teacher's involvement provokes higher order thinking and learning (Walsh, 2017). While involved in play the teacher is in an influential position, they have the ability to guide play to reach its full educational potential.

Literature indicates that some teacher's can find it difficult to be involved in play, they range from being passive, taking on roles where they merely observe, facilitate or mediate, to what Davis and Peters (2011, p.5, as cited in Walsh, 2017) describe as 'hijacking the direction of learning,' and taking over by using artificial questioning. To reap the benefits of play, the teacher must be involved without taking over, it is at this mid-point in the continuum children are free to lead themselves while also being supported.

The teacher has an extremely important role during play. This role is to enrich and extend the children's play (Wood, 2013). Vygotsky perceived the role of the adult as central in social and cognitive development during play (Walsh et al., 2011, as cited in Hunter & Walsh, 2013, p.22). The *Aistear Curriculum Framework* clearly defines the teacher's role during play. Its definition is in keeping with current nurturing pedagogical literature. The teacher is expected to plan for play by planning and organising play and the environment, providing resources, building on the children's knowledge, challenging them and providing them with choices. During play the teacher is expected to support the children by interacting and conversing with them, being respectful of the children and helping them. Following play the teacher shares observations and discusses the play with the children, documents, assess and interprets what they have seen (NCCA, 2009).

Playful interactions

As previously stated there is a difference between play and playful interactions (Moyles, 2015). Walsh, Sproule, Mc Guinness and Trew (2010) list the characteristics of playful interactions as motivating, enjoyable, engaging, as well as being stress free and encompassing some element of spontaneity. These types of interaction allow for deep and extended learning potential, which are 'spontaneous, improvisational and creative,' (Walsh et al., 2010, as cited in Walsh, 2017). However, Fallon (2017b) reports that teachers are not using playful methodologies in curriculum implementation. There is a gap between theory and practice in relation to play. Teachers are aware of what they should be doing but on an everyday basis this is not happening (Fallon, 2017b; Walsh & Hunter, 2013).

Sustained shared thinking

There are many crucial elements of nurturing pedagogy. Hayes (2006, cited NCCA, 2009b, p.3) describes nurturing pedagogy as emphasising ‘children’s feelings and dispositions such as motivation, confidence, perseverance and how they see themselves as learners,’ while also promoting ‘communication, thinking and problem-solving skills.’ Katz (1999, as cited in NCCA, 2009c) describes these dispositions as habits of mind, where children need to be ready, willing and able to engage and learn, this is perhaps the most significant of all the components. Siraj-Blatchford et al, (2002) emphasise the co-construction of learning, both child and teacher initiated learning and activities, where modelling, demonstration, questioning and explaining are imperative. All of these are elements of best practice in early childhood. SST may be the most significant of all. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) defines SST as:

an episode in which two or more individuals ‘work together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend thinking (Sylva et al., 2004, p.36).

Wood (2013, p.100) describes SST as a ‘recommended form of pedagogy to support effective practice.’

During SST, in play or class activities, the adult-child or child-child interactions scaffold children’s knowledge as Vygostky maintains (Santrock, 2007). O’Kane and Hayes (2006) report that adult child ratios, time, class size and lack of knowledge and training mean that opportunities for SST are limited. Furthermore Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell (2002) found exchanges resulting in SST do not occur commonly, perhaps due to large class sizes. The OECD (2004, p.61) reported that Irish

large class sizes (twenty nine to one) are a considerable barrier to ‘quality since they militate against meeting young children’s learning needs in any meaningful way.’

Teachers are challenged to create opportunities for SST in their classrooms.

In play-based learning teachers must create enjoyable yet skilful interactions for their pupils. The teacher is expected to take on many roles in planning and providing for play as well as assessing play. They must be involved in play to develop and enhance the children’s learning. This involvement will ensure opportunities for higher order thinking and SST are created.

Pillar 3: Create enjoyable yet challenging opportunities

Teachers are challenged to create enjoyable yet challenging opportunities. They have to plan the environment as well as planning the resources and space. Teachers must also link the curriculum with play and incorporate the children’s interests in their planning (Alexander, 2009; Chesworth, 2016; Marshall, 2013; NCCA, 2009a; Walsh, 2017).

How learning experiences are enjoyable yet challenging

It is important that playful but educational opportunities are provided for children to ensure that they are effectively challenged and their interest maintained. Barrett (2005, p.162) suggests that learning experiences are ‘interesting and enjoyable, yet appropriately purposeful and challenging.’ Play should not be viewed as separate to work but interlinked. Papert’s (1996, p.162) notion of hard fun encapsulates this; ‘learning can be fun because it is hard, challenging and stretches the participant.’ He suggests that it is fun because it is hard and this level of challenge makes the task enjoyable, fun, free, creative and uses energy. Barrett (2005) presents play as a methodology for work and learning, rather than separating play and work. While

children in primary schools are completing work at a more formal level, it should be fun and playful. Barrett (p.174) maintains that ‘fun without hardness is frivolity, [but] hardness without fun is drudgery.’ This notion corresponds with playful learning which is enjoyable for the child but also difficult and challenging.

Enjoyable yet challenging experiences are essential in interlinking work and fun. However, Hunter and Walsh (2013), when investigating the reality of play in Northern Ireland classrooms; found that higher order thinking is not always common. This is possibly due to the complexity of play in practice. Hunter and Walsh found that their participants all valued play but lacked the skills needed to provide high quality play opportunities. Gray and Ryan (2016) had similar findings in Ireland where they studied teachers’ experience of Aistear vis-a-vie the PSC. Hunter and Walsh also found that engaging in the co-construction of knowledge with children, where progression and extension were goals, did not come easily to teachers. Hakkarainen et al. (2013) recommend that colleges and universities should include courses on active participation in children’s play. This type of course will aim to close the gap between theory and practice.

Children should not have to distinguish between work and play. Both should be attractive and enjoyable. Howard (2010, cited in Wood, 2014) found that children make distinctions between work and play-based on the level of choice, freedom and control. Teachers offering a degree of choice and freedom will allow for a playful element in ‘work,’ tasks.

Enjoyable yet challenging experiences built on children’s funds of knowledge

Learning is more effective for children when they are interested and motivated (Barrett, 2005; Broadhead & Burt, 2012; Walsh, 2017). Hedges (2014) advocates using

Inquiry Based Learning to build on children's interests and their 'funds of knowledge'². This approach acknowledges the child's prior experiences and interests. Chesworth (2016) describe the notion of 'funds of knowledge,' as acknowledging the richness of children's experiences at home and in their community. The curriculum can in turn build on these to deliver its concepts. This leads to the curriculum being 'more meaningful, individualised and engaging,' for the children (Hedges, 2014, as cited in Walsh, 2017, p.45). It also offers teachers a lens to engage and respond to the children's interests 'in relation to their social and cultural experiences,' (Chesworth, 2016).

An emergent and interest driven curriculum can motivate children as it is relevant to their lives. The *Aistear in Action Initiative* (NCCA & ECI, 2013) worked with teachers and early years workers employed in Ballyfermot, Dublin. They found that practitioners built curriculum and made plans following the children's current and emergent interest once they were shown how to do so. The participants found that the children were motivated to learn when the curriculum was connected to their interests and inquiries about the world around them (NCCA & ECI, 2013). An emergent³ interest-driven curriculum will connect children to the world around them.

How the environment and resources create enjoyable yet challenging opportunities

Before any playful learning can take place the classroom must be prepared. Siraj-Blatchfor et al. (2002, p.7) pedagogical framing describes the 'behind-the-scenes,' work teachers must undertake to provide a learning environment for children; provision

² **Funds of knowledge** encompasses the content of children's early learning and processes and provides a foundation for extension into academic content without pretension (Hedges, 2014) .

³ **Emergent curriculum** is a philosophy of teaching and way of planning curriculum that focuses on being responsive to children's interests to create meaningful learning experiences. This philosophy prioritizes active participation, relationship building, flexible and adaptable methods, inquiry, and play-based learning (KCCC, 2018).

of resources, arrangement of space, daily routines, assessment, and planning. Fallon (2017) adds that pedagogical framing resources and organises play, but does not aim to control the activities. Following this the teacher-led learning is planned around these resources. The teacher has to make informed decisions about the content of the curriculum and structure (Woods 2013). The environment is so important in Reggio Emilia they refer to it as the ‘third teacher,’ supportive of educational encounters, communication and relationships (Wood & Attfield, 2008, p.129). Learning does not simply happen, there is careful thought given to the provision of the learning environment.

Planning for play

The link between the learning during play and playful interactions does not occur by accident. Fallon (2017a) acknowledges that the creativity needed in the provision of resources to allow for play and playful learning is a sophisticated element of professional practice. There must be a link between the resources provided and the planned learning experiences. The resources can be the connecting tissue between play and playful learning experience provided for during curriculum delivery (Fallon). Fallon (2017b) found that Irish teachers are not linking play with curriculum implementation. The integrated nature of play and playful learning promotes the making of connections and meaningful experiences. There is little research in Ireland examining if this link is common practice (Fallon, 2017b; Hunter & Walsh, 2013).

Connecting curriculum and play

The use of the resources available for the children during play sessions in teacher-directed lessons provides a link for learning. The children are enabled to play with the resources freely during play, while in more formal lessons the teacher can be

more prescriptive (Fallon, 2017a). When the children are playing with resources and concepts they explored in class or discussing what they have discovered about resources during play, they are actively connecting the curriculum with play and vice versa. Hall (2015) reminds us that when children are connected to learning they are able to self-motivate. The integrated nature of the learning will ensure children are able to make connections.

Space and resources

Settings which encourage active learning must carefully plan interest areas and how resources are presented. If the environment is to be the ‘third teacher,’ it is important that the children can independently access and use resources (Wood & Attfield, 2008, p.129). The NCCA (2009a) recommend a carefully planned environment to allow for learning. They also remind that there should be ‘sufficient resources, time and space for all children to benefit from the experiences on offer,’ (p.30).

A planned environment allows equipment and materials to be available to the children (NCCA, 2009a). Resources must be stored efficiently and accessibly to allow children to use them. Each item having a place and/or being labelled will ensure items are retrieved and returned (NCCA, 2009a). While it is important that resources have a place it is also recommended that the room is planned and reviewed regularly in line with the children’s interests and learning goals (NCCA, 2009a). Resources can be added or taken out, in line with the children’s interests.

Space and furniture should be arranged in child-sized areas as opposed to one large playing space (NCCA, 2009a). This will create areas of interest. The *Aistear Curriculum Framework* describes interest areas as defined areas of interest encouraging different types of play, for example: art area, pretend area, library area, construction area and messy play area (NCCA, 2009a). These types of interest areas a new concept

for Irish teachers who previously gave preference to tables rather than separate areas. Although in the past teachers did have had library areas and nature tables.

Hough and Foster (2013, cited in O’Kane, 2017) report that following the completion of courses delivered by the *Aistear Tutor Initiative* teachers have made changes to the learning environment as well as interactions. The participants of the NCCA’s (2013) *Aistear in Action* group reported that their ideas and practice around room layout and play areas changed as a result of training.

Affordance

The most important feature of resources is their affordance. Carr (2000, p.62, as cited in Fallon, 2017a, p.166) defines affordance as ‘the perceived and actual properties of an object or artefact, those properties that determine just how it could possibly be used and how the technology facilitates or hinders learning of various kinds.’ The quality of the resources chosen will impact on the quality of the play experiences (Fallon, 2017a; Moyles, 2005). The resources that are presented to the children for play are central to what teachers plan for the children to do with them and what they actually do. The resources are the middle ground between what educators intend the children to learn and the children’s intentions and agency (Fallon). Fallon suggests extending the resources affordance by careful observation and reflection on how the children use the resources.

Real resources

The type of resources provided is also important (Beth Marshall, 2013). The use of authentic resources including real, everyday items is promoted (Fallon, 2013b; Fallon, 2017a; NCCA, 1999; NCCA, 2009; Walsh, 2017). These sort of resources encourage imagination and creativity which lead to symbolic play; where children

imagine and pretend play, re-enacting the past and rehearsing the future,' (NCCA, 2009).

Changing/adapting resources

Fallon (2017a, p.166) states that as a result of the teacher playing in partnership with the children they are enabled to develop 'insights and empathy,' with the children's play experiences. Through playing with the resources with the children the teacher can observe and assess how the children are being challenged by them. The teacher's familiarity with the resources ensures that resources are adapted and changed in line with the children's needs to build progression in addition to challenge (Fallon, 2017a; NCCA, 2009). The teacher will know how children are playing with objects and how to extend their learning from this knowledge.

Open-ended resources

Open-ended resources require children to be innovative and imaginative with their use. Odegard (2012) describes open-ended resources as having no particular task or goal, with their use being open to interpretation. Children are encouraged to explore these resources and be creative in their use. By providing flexible and open-ended resources, such as blocks, play dough and fabric, there are 'multiple affordances for children to draw upon their interests and construct meaning in their play (Chesworth, 2016). With the significant provision of resources to be used in both play and more formal learning experiences teachers are enabled to complete their curriculum obligations without being very prescriptive (Fallon, 2017a). Broadhead (2004, as cited in Moyles, 2005, p.84) found that when children were exposed to open-ended resources along with the provision of sand, water and construction, their teachers noticed

improved levels of concentrations and the emergence of leadership skills and these skills transferred into more formal learning activities.

Open-ended play supports language development (Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Moyles, 2005; Walsh, 2017). Children are encouraged to speak and converse (Moyles, 2005). Open-ended resources lend themselves well to be substituted for a desired object (Brodie, 2014). For example an orange spool could represent a carrot. This requires a high level of thinking from the child and Brodie recalls how SST can help discuss and elicit what the object represents.

Child and adult led learning experiences

In play-based learning there should ideally be a mix between adult and child-led activities. A mixture of child-led and adult-led learning is important in ensuring that children feel that their voices are being heard and that they have a sense of agency. Early Childhood Australia (2015, p.1) define a sense of agency as when ‘we feel in control of things that happen around us, when we feel that we can influence events.’ Child-led learning experiences will enable the child to feel in control of their play and learning. Children will be agentic when they are listened to and respected and when they feel their opinion matters (ECA, 2015).

Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart (2010) reported that the creation of opportunities to extend child-led play as well as teacher initiated group work is an element of best practice. Fallon (2017a) adds that both child-initiated play and teacher-led contexts are necessary and connections between the resources are enhanced by this, the connectivity across learning contexts ‘promotes continuity of pedagogical approach and cohesive learning experience for the children’ (p.170). As

previously mentioned, the integrated approach links resources, child and adult led experiences and learning together to enhance the learning experience.

In the High Scope model there is a shared control and a balance between child and adult led activities. The *Aistear Curriculum Framework* encompasses many of High Scope's elements. Children are allowed to control 'child-sized decisions:' where, how and what they play, whereas adults control the 'adult-sized,' decision's the daily routine, resources and the environment. A support atmosphere is created where adults and children work in partnership throughout the day (Georgeson & Payler, 2013, p.176).

Relational pedagogy

The concept of best practice in relation to early childhood education, as noted earlier, has been disputed (Moss et al., 2000; Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Soler & Miller, 2003; Tobin, 2005). However play pedagogy has been recognised as best practice in the OECD (2017) countries. These include the *Aistear Curriculum Framework in Ireland*, (NCCA, 2009a) the *EYFS* in England, (Department for Education, 2017) and the *Norwegian Curriculum Framework*, (Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2013). In addition to play pedagogy, best practice in early childhood education also includes relational and dialogic pedagogy, where the importance of relationships is recognised and the child and adult are partners (Boyd, Mac Neill & Sullivan, 2006; White, 2016). According to Brodie (2014, p.62) 'relational pedagogy acknowledges the matrix of human experience.'

Mac Neill and Silcox (2006, as cited in Boyd, Mac Neill & Sullivan, 2006) define relational pedagogy as acknowledging relationships as the foundation of good pedagogy. Neylon (2014) adds that children are regarded as partners and active

contributors in their own learning. There is a mutual respect between teachers and students (Brownlee & Berthelson, 2006). The children are viewed as individually and not as a group. Reflective behaviours, circle time and student centred learning are practices defining relational pedagogy (Boyd et al., 2006). This reinforces what Walsh (2016) describes as nurturing and caring relationships.

The importance of interactions between adults and children, as well as children and children is a key concept in relational pedagogy. Quality interactions are not only important with adults but are also crucial with other children (NCCA, 2009b). The adults key role in these interactions is emphasised (Hayes, 2007, Kernan, 2007; NCCA, 2009b) and the ‘reciprocal relationship between adult and child,’ is also acknowledged (Gray & Ryan, 2016, p.191). The teacher is no longer viewed as instructor but rather as a facilitator. Traditionally in school the teacher’s interactions were directive and closed however the nature of interactions has evolved (Walsh, 2017). Quality, reciprocal interactions with children are made possible by the elements of relational pedagogy (NCCA, 2009a). Hall (2015, p.43) does however warn that building reciprocal relationships can be difficult as they require adults who are ‘confident and knowledgeable enough to allow children independence and yet offer reassuring guidance.’

It is commonly thought that there must be a balance between adult and child-led activities in a playful approach to learning. The OECD (2004) observed that practices in Irish infant classrooms were teacher-led. The INTO’s (2006) curriculum survey underpins the OECD’s finding as ninety one percent of teachers used teacher-led instruction most of the time. Although following the introduction of the *Aistear Curriculum Framework* teachers now have the opportunity to begin the change towards a child-centred approach (Dunphy, 2008). French (2007) states a balance between adult

and child-initiated activities is very important for the children's development and learning to facilitate them reaching their full potential. Children must be afforded time to play in the classroom in activities they lead to create a balanced approach to learning.

Relational pedagogy where children's opinions are valued and quality interactions are supported are becoming more prevalent in Irish infant classrooms with the adoption of the *Aistear Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009a) the implementation of the *PLC* (NCCA, 2015). The children are encouraged to speak and their opinions are valued, while their interests are being valued in the child-led activities. This is a move for the conventional infant classes to move towards a play-based, relational pedagogy classroom.

In addition to relational pedagogy, elements of dialogism manifest themselves in early childhood education context. They are relevant in providing high quality experiences to children during their early years. Kiely (2017) links the ideas of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on dialogism with early years pedagogy. The teacher and child build meaning collaboratively and there is a suspension of centrality, where previously only one voice was heard (Ferholt, 2015; Smidt, 2014; White, 2016).

There is no pre-determined teaching point which the teacher is trying to inculcate; rather the teacher builds on the child's understanding, teasing out ideas together. The teacher is no longer viewed as the expert and the children are seen as equals and experts in their own learning (White, 2016). According to Smidt, (2014) the dialogic teacher is non didactic, listens with interest, elaborates and follows up on answers and uses a range of strategies including humour.

Conclusion

This literature review has examined the current literature on national and international best practice in play pedagogy and the three pillars of effective teaching and learning. It has also looked at relational pedagogy in early childhood education terms.

While the term best practice was disputed, (Moss et al., 2000; Moss & Dahlberg, 2008; Tobin 2005) and it was agreed that best practice is socially and culturally constructed, a list of common indicators of quality was compiled. Research supports a rights-based approach to early years education where children have been given a voice.

In Ireland, policy affirms the elements of best practice in the western world. However, research suggests in practice there is a gap between what educators should be doing and what they actually do (Brodie, 2014; Fallon, 2017b; Fullan, 2013). Much of the research points towards that despite policy reinforcing quality indicators, Irish infant classrooms are too formal (Dunphy, 2008; Fallon, 2013a; Hunter & Walsh, 2013; Walsh, 2017).

The elements of effective play and playful learning were also examined. This was completed under Walsh's (2017) three pillars; establishing caring yet nurturing relationships, enjoyable playful yet skilful interactions and creating enjoyable yet challenging opportunities.

Research indicates a strong support for caring, nurturing relationships as essential in early years education. Teachers must ensure that relationships are both caring and educational. This is important as it highlights the care and education debate in the early years. Partnerships between children, parents and teachers are an imperative

part in the creation of caring and nurturing relationships. Each party is respected and valued and work together to build towards the child's educational success.

It is vital that interactions between teachers and children are skilful and playful. In an effort to create fun yet challenging opportunities research states that teachers must be involved during play (Fallon, 2017b; Walsh, 2017). However despite the research stating this teachers are not confident in this involvement (Hall, 2015; Hunter & Walsh, 2013; Walsh, 2017; Whitebred, 2012; Wood, 2013). Teachers in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have identified that they require training in supporting play. In order for teachers to challenge children appropriately and playfully they have requested further training (Brodie, 2014; Dunphy, 2008; Fallon, 2017a; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hollingsworth, 2017; Hunter & Walsh, 2013; Hyvonen, 2011; INTO, 2006; OECD, 2004; O'Kane & Hayes, 2007; Walsh & et al., 2013). Interactions like SST are rare due to teachers' perceived inability of how to extend children learning in a non-formal environment. Fallon (2017b) has identified that there is little evidence that teachers in Ireland are engaging with children during play. There is a gap in Irish research in this area.

In the creation of enjoyable yet challenging activities teachers are participating in the professional practice of pedagogical framing. This includes the planning of the environment, resources and space, whilst following the children's interests and linking play with the curriculum. They must provide a mixture of child and adult led activities to challenge the children in a way that is enjoyable for them.

Play pedagogy has been recognised as 'best practice,' in high quality education. In addition to this, elements relational pedagogy are relevant to play pedagogy. The children are encouraged to form relationships and interact with teachers, their input is valued and they have the power to lead activities and offer opinions. The most

important concept in dialogism is that everyone has a voice and is equal is an important factor.

The next chapter details how the research methodology was employed to explore how play pedagogical practices are implemented by a senior infant teacher in her classroom.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The previous chapter explored educational theory and the attendant literature explored best practice in play pedagogy. The literature review also contended that some of the elements of relational and dialogic pedagogy are applicable to play pedagogy. The purpose of this chapter is to describe, in detail, the research methodology and instruments used in the current research study. The rationale for choosing this methodology will be presented. The research sample and site are described and a description of the pilot study presented. A section on ethics details the ethical considerations in the research study and the position of the researcher is stated. The limitations of the research are discussed and this chapter also briefly describes how the data was analysed.

Aims of the research study

This research study aims to examine an infant teacher's current practice in playful pedagogy in an urban DEIS school. The research project will use the case study model where the practice of one teacher will be explored in detail. This case study set out to research what one particular infant teacher does in practice during play sessions. An aim of the study is to investigate if pedagogical play practices occurring in an infant classroom are in keeping with the literature. Findings will be examined and studied against the backdrop of relevant literature in the field.

Rationale

Following a review of the current literature; the lack of training in play-based pedagogy, including the Aistear curriculum framework is an issue identified by Irish

teachers (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hollingsworth, 2017; Hyvonen, 2011; Moyles, 2010; O’Kane & Hayes, 2007). Given that teachers have stated they require training in play-based pedagogy, including Aistear, an exploration of a teacher’s current practice in this area would be pertinent to research. The case study presents an opportunity to explore what practices a teacher is using in her classroom in the light of established practices in play pedagogy.

Overview of the Research Design

The proposed project is a case study. According to Range (2016), case study methodologies examine a system in detail over time using multiple sources of data. A case study is concerned with and focuses on the issues associated with the case in question (Denscombe, 2011; Stake, 1995, cited in Bryman, 2001).

This case study investigates a teachers’ practice in play pedagogy in-depth. This case study uses the qualitative data collection instruments of observation and interview (Ware et al, 2009). Range (2016) states that it is the richness of the detail of the data that makes case studies fascinating. Bryman (2001) states that in case studies, the emphasis is on an intense examination of the setting and Denscombe (2011) describes case study as an in-depth investigation. He argues that unique insights may be gained as well as an opportunity to delve into things which may not be apparent to the researcher in research that is superficial. In this case the teachers’ classroom practice in play pedagogy is being examined in detail in a senior infant classroom setting.

Interview

The case study employed semi-structured interviews as one of the research instrument. Two interviews were carried out and there was a pre-observation interview and a post observation interview. The reason for choosing semi-structured interviews as

an instrument of data collection is because the participant will be given the opportunity to discuss their ‘opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences,’ (Denscombe, p.174).

The open-ended, semi-structured interviews will allow for set questions to be answered, while also leaving scope for the participant to elaborate and explain (Denscombe, 2011; Howson, 2017). Howson adds that interviews also provide an opportunity for relevant topics and issues the researcher has not thought about to be discussed. The participant was enabled to answer the questions the researcher has listed, while also having the freedom to discuss new, additional but relevant topics. Interviews are not the same as conversation. The participant must give consent, be ‘on the record,’ and discuss what the researcher has on the agenda (Denscombe, 2011, p.172). Rubin and Rubin (2005, p.4) describe semi-structured interviews as ‘conversations in which a researcher gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion.’

Initially the participant was interviewed on her classroom practices in relation to play pedagogy in her pre-observation interview (See Appendix 1). Following ten discrete observations in the participants’ classroom, another semi-structured interview was administered to gather further information about the teachers’ attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and feelings, as well as additional information about their classroom practices and daily routines (See Appendix 2). There was an opportunity for mutual checking at the end of the interviews. For example one of the questions from the post-observation interview was: ‘In your school day you said you had a variety of learning experiences. Can you please tell me which ones happen in your classroom, how often they occur and how they look?’ The interviews allow for a depth of information, the participant’s insights and validity, where data can be checked for accuracy (Denscombe, 2011).

Bryman (2001) advises interviewers to know the interview schedule as this will avoid repetition and ensure the interviewer is at ease when questioning. Knowledge of the schedule will also allow the interviewer to be flexible in the order of the questions. They will also be able to allow the participant to elaborate on points of interest (Denscombe, 2011). The interviewee was given a copy of the transcribed interview and she was given an opportunity to make comments or changes.

The purpose of the pre-observation interview was to discuss the participants approach to teaching and learning, her relationship with the children and playful interactions she engages in. The data from this interview set a base line for the observations and gave insight to the participant's attitude towards play and playful learning. In contrast, the purpose of the post-observation interview was to follow up on statements that participant had made in the initial interview or actions she had undertaken during the observations. It gave the researcher and participant an opportunity to clarify any unanswered questions or explanations.

Observation

Following the pre-observation interview the researcher began observations. Observation is a reliable instrument of data collection as it is direct, it does not rely on what people say they do or think (Denscombe, 2011). Denscombe adds that observation focuses on what actually happens. In terms of this research project, the teacher was observed in her classroom during play time. The teacher's actual actions were recorded, not what she reports as practice.

According to Denscombe (2011) observations include the following characteristics: direct observation, fieldwork, natural settings and the issue of perception. Direct observation of the subject is employed with the researcher in the field

collecting data first hand. The research is conducted in a natural setting to record what typically happens. In this case the researcher was in the participant's classroom on ten occasions, each for one hour during a play session, collecting data. The researcher attempted to minimise her effect on the situation being researched. The researcher was discreet and did not interrupt the running of the play sessions. She aimed to blend into the classroom by sitting in an unobtrusive place. With regard to Denscombe's (2011) fourth characteristic of direct observations, perception, the researcher needs to be aware of her position as insider researcher. In carrying out observations for the purpose of this research project, Denscombe's characteristics, direct observation, fieldwork, natural settings and issues of perception, were adhered to.

For the purpose of this case study participant observations were the instrument of choice. Systematic observations were not used because they observe behaviour only and not intentions. They oversimplify behaviour and assume it can be categorised easily. Observation schedules can also miss contextual information (Denscombe, 2011). Becker and Greer (1957, cited in Denscombe, 2011, p.206) define participant observation as the method where the 'observer participates in the daily life of the people under study.' They add that the researcher observes what is happening and being said over a period of time. They also observe behaviour and intentions. A priority of participant observation is to gain information about events which would remain hidden if using other methods (Denscombe, 2011). As the purpose of this case study is to explore an infant teacher's current practice in playful pedagogy in an urban DEIS school, using observation as the main method of data collection is ideal, as it will allow the researcher to see exactly what types of practices the teacher is employing. Denscombe (2011) states the participant observer will aim to provide in-depth data rather than focusing on the breadth.

Denscombe (2011) states the longer the researcher spends on site the better. For this reason the participation observations were carried out over ten one hour site visits. This allowed the researcher to gain an informed view of the setting. The researcher made field notes during the observations (Denscombe, 2011).

A disadvantage of using observation is that they focus on the behaviour and not the reasons for it (Bryman, 2001). Therefore an interview before and following the observations gave the participant an opportunity to describe or suggest reasons for behaviours observed.

The interactions, approach to playful teaching and learning, relationships, learning experiences, space, leading of activity, planning and resources were recorded during the observations. The researcher took detailed field notes on what the teacher was doing. These will be ‘detailed summaries of events and behaviour,’ (Bryman, 2001). These full field notes which will be recorded during the observations are one of the main data sources (Bryman, 2001). Bryman (2001) continues that these field notes may be added to following the observations to ensure they can be understood at the reading and analysis stage.

A very simple, adapted version of Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish’s (2015) assessment tool ‘Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) Scale,’ was used during the observations in addition to the field notes. This scale is quite detailed and requires users to do a training course in its use. The researcher has used relevant headings to this research project, from the scale to record additional notes during the observations. It was used to identify quality indicators in play pedagogy during the observations (Appendix 3).

Each observation described the classroom at the beginning including the areas and resources available to the children. The observation lasted an hour and during this time the researcher took field notes on what the participant was doing. This included what she did and said and occasionally the children's actions were noted to put what the participant did into context.

Certain behaviours were noted under the headings of the schedule adapted from SSTEWS (Siraj et al., 2015) scale (Appendix 3). These headings included self-regulation and social development, encouraging choices and independent play, supporting socio-emotional well-being, encouraging children to talk, teacher actively listens to children and encourages other children to listen, sensitive responsiveness, supporting curiosity and problem-solving, encouraging SST in investigation and exploration, supporting cognitive development and higher order thinking and encouraging SST in investigating and exploration through sharing books.

Creditability, Transferability and Trustworthiness

It is important that research is both valid and reliable. Denscombe (2011, p.238) describes validity as referring to the 'accuracy and precision of the data,' as well as whether or not the data answers the research question appropriately. Reliability and validity are not viewed separately in qualitative research as they are in quantitative research. Instead the terms used encompass credibility, transferability and trustworthiness are used (Golafshani, 2003, p.600 as cited in Kiely, 2017). A trustworthiness record is established by drawing on different data sources (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011, p.549 as cited in Kiely, 2017).

Trustworthiness is concerned with the conclusions generated from the research study (Bryman, 2001). An approach which is as unbiased and as fair as possible will be

trustworthy if it answers the research question. The researcher made every effort to ensure the research is trustworthy. For example, the post-observation interview afforded an opportunity to check the validity of the data with the participant. This could be viewed as a form of triangulation as the participant's practice is being examined from more than one perspective (Denscombe, 2011). Both the perspective of the researcher and the participant herself are studying the play pedagogical practices the researcher has observed. .

Bryman (2001) describes the generalisability, or external validity, as whether a single case can be representative of yielding findings which may be applied to other cases. In qualitative research this is known as creditability. Findings from a single case cannot be generalised. While the findings are not externally valid, they should be valid internally, in this case study, the use of interview and observation should answer the research question.

Denscombe (2011, p.238) defines reliability as to 'whether a research instrument is neutral in its effect and consistent across multiple occasions of use.' Bryman (2001) explains that reliability questions if the research projects results are repeatable. While reliability is mainly an issue with quantitative data (Bryman, 2001), the concept of reliability is relevant in case studies as the study could be repeated in similar or different circumstances. In qualitative research reliability is known as transferability. The research methodology in this case study is clear to enable replication in another case or set of circumstances. This case study may be replicated if its findings do not match the literature (Bryman, 2001). Bryman states that in order for replicability, it is imperative that the researcher details and describes the procedures in great detail. The case study is transferable and reliable as the research method has been

very clearly described and this would enable other researchers to carry out the case study as it was in this instance.

Sample and Site

Denscombe (2011) states that it can be difficult to negotiate access for case studies. The participant has agreed to be a part of the case study. The participant has been informed that their rights to confidentiality will be upheld. No obvious identifying factors of the site or sample are given. The participant and researcher have built a relationship of trust through four years of professional collaboration and cooperation. The participant is thus comfortable in sharing her professional practice with the researcher.

The teacher being observed is in a mainstream, senior infant classroom. The class consists of twenty five children.. The school is an urban, DEIS band one, vertical mixed primary school situated in North Dublin.

The participant was interviewed twice, both before and after the observations. These were recorded on a dictaphone and stored in a secure location. Observations were undertaken in the participants' classroom. The raw data was recorded as field notes in a notebook which was stored in a secure location with the dictaphone (Swetnam, 2009). The interviews were also be carried out at a private location to suit the participant.

Pilot Study

A pilot study prior to the interviews and observations ensured the research instruments were fit for purpose (Bryman, 2001; Cohen et al., 2011). Oppenheim (1998) states that piloting is essential and several researchers have observed that piloting research instruments is the most effective means of pre-testing in order to increase reliability, validity and predictability. A pilot of the interview schedule will give the interview

‘some experience of using it and can infuse them with a greater sense of confidence,’ (Bryman, p.155).

A pilot observation was carried out with the researcher and her supervisor to ensure the research instrument was effective. The researcher and the supervisor observed the same practices and compared data following the pilot observation. They found their findings were identical and were satisfied the data collected and recorded was similar. The researcher was observing in a neutral manner and observing the exact, rather than perceived, behaviours. This allowed for any issues with the observation schedule to be addressed. The pilot study helps in the designing of a realistic and logical research methodology (Basit, 2010).

A pilot interview for the pre-observation interview was also carried out and following this some of the questions were re-phrased as their meaning was not clear. This pilot also gave the researcher knowledge of the interview schedule.

Data Analysis

The data will be subjected to analysis which will be carried out under six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These are familiarisation with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing-up. The data collected in this case study was examined under these phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researcher will become familiar with the data by reading and re-reading it to ensure deep familiarity. It is anticipated that during the re-reading process that categories and themes will begin to emerge which will be noted by the researcher in the coding phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the searching for themes phase, the qualitative data will be organised into categories and themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Following this the themes will be reviewed and after this phase the themes will be named. The final phase is the writing up of the data where the themes will be traced back to see if what the researcher found corresponds with the theory from the literature review (Cohen et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2011).

Ethics

During the research project, the utmost must be done to maintain the integrity of the research process (Howe & Moses, 1999). Mc Naughton and Hughes (2009) comment that in research the potential harm towards the participant will be minimised, as well as ensuring the participant reaps the maximum benefits. The researcher has completed a rigorous ethical form prior to the commencement of the research project and the steps set out in this were followed (See Appendix 4). The participant has given informed consent to be a participant in the research project and her privacy was protected (Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2009). She has also been made aware of her rights to confidentiality and participation. The participant was given the opportunity to read the data and transcriptions and was invited to make amendments (Mc Naughton & Hughes, 2009).

It is important to note in this ethics section that the participant completed a summer course, facilitated by myself, the researcher, called 'Aistear- Play, Literacy and Numeracy.' I facilitated this course in my role as a part time Aistear tutor for a nearby education centre and the NCCA. The purpose of this research project is to look in a holistic way at how the participant engages with her senior infant class in playful learning. The purpose of this study is not to evaluate how the participant has implemented the content from the summer course. The teacher's expertise has come from a variety of sources and not solely dependent on learning from a

summer course. The participant has completed a primary degree, as well as a post-graduate diploma. She has also taught at various class levels and worked previously as a special needs assistant. The participant has completed numerous CPD courses, including 'Aistear, delivering for learning through child led play in infants.' The teacher has also built relationships with the children over the last year and seven months.

The relationship between the researcher and subject is described as professional. The researcher is the participant's colleague and they have worked together in the same school for four years.

Reflexivity and the Position of Researcher

Qualitative research accepts the subjectivity of the researcher. 'Reflexivity recognises that researchers are inescapably part of the social world that they are researching,' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p.14, cited in Cohen et al., 2011). While it is not always possible to be objective the researcher must be aware of their position and potential bias. Their own ideas and beliefs should not be communicated during the data collection stage of research study (Denscombe, 2011).

However Cohen et al. (2011) state the researcher should acknowledge and disclose themselves in the research. This will show their position while keeping their opinions and beliefs from influencing data. In terms of quality research, reflexivity is a major strategy (Berger, 2013). Reflexivity may be influenced by the researcher's social position or beliefs (Berger, 2013). It is important that the researcher does their utmost to prevent this. This researcher endeavoured to maintain self-awareness and to interrogate her own thinking throughout the process.

The researcher's an advocate of using the *Aistear Curriculum Framework* as a methodology in the infant classrooms. Her position in relation to play pedagogy is ever evolving following the readings as a Masters of Education student in Early Childhood Education and professional development courses. As a reflective practitioner the researcher is reviewing and altering practices in line with the current research on play pedagogy (Fallon, 2017a; Walsh, 2017). The data is viewed through the lens of the researchers experience and learning.

The motivation for the participant's involvement in this research project in the first instance was desire to support a colleague with her studies. Secondly, the participant and researcher were interested in a community-of-practice approach to professional development, that is, both parties were keen to discover what they might learn from the process and how that learning might inform their practice. The observations led naturally into conversations about what happened in the classroom and why. The post-observational interview also provided an opportunity for discussion and further learning. A relationship of trust and respect between the two parties, built over the last four years, allowed this research work to take place.

Limitations

The main limitation in the research project is that this case study examines only one particular case. The research will only highlight what is occurring in one classroom. Although, the researcher will know the case in-depth and a case study is 'an excellent opportunity to gain tremendous insight into a case,' (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

It is recognised that findings from a small scale case study cannot be generalised. However after the case study has been carried out, lessons learned, questioned answered or implications may be applied to similar cases (Range, 2016).

Range (2016) states that a case may be chosen either because it is unique or typical. In this case study, the setting is an Irish infant classroom and for this reason suggested implications may be applied to similar cases, when appropriate. A detailed account of the methodology aims to ensure that the case study is transferable, creditable and trustworthy to allow for replication.

The ‘interviewer effect,’ may also be a limitation as the participant may be only willing to divulge information that they think the researcher wants to hear during the interview (Desncombe, 2011, p.178). The data collected during the observations was subjected to a form of triangulation when the researcher asked follow up questions in the post-observation interview. For example when the researcher asked ‘how would you describe a quality interaction with a child?’ the participants answer allowed the quality interactions observed to be validated. The observations will aim to eliminate the interviewer effect from the findings.

Conclusion

In order to explore an infant teacher’s current practice in playful pedagogy in an urban DEIS school, a case study was the ideal methodology as the participant was observed and interviewed in order to be as accurate as possible. The case study provided an in-depth examination of the current practices as used by one teacher. Data around the same topic was collected using observations and a pre-observation and post-observation interview, about a particular case. Of course, with any research design, there are limitations; however this research design is the most suitable in an attempt to examine a teacher’s current play pedagogical practices.

Chapter 4: Finding and Discussion

Introduction

The previous chapter detailed the research methodology of the case study. The methods of data collection employed in the case study were a pre-observation interview, ten hour-long observations of the participant in her classroom during play sessions, and a post-observation interview. Both interviews were semi-structured and the observations were narrative and described in detail what the participant was doing during play time.

This chapter presents the main findings, the analysis and the discussion of the case study and details how the researcher used Clarke and Braun's (2013) phases of thematic analysis to analyse the data. The aim of the research study was to explore the practices an infant teacher employs in her classroom. Current research often details what teachers do not do during play time, while there is little research to show what teachers actually do during play in their classrooms (Dunphy, 2008; Fallon, 2017b; Gray & Ryan, 2016). The research projects aim was to explore what practices one particular teacher carries out in her classroom during the children's play session.

The main findings of the interviews and observations include the participant's relationship and partnership approach with the children and her involvement during play with them. The findings also include how agency is encouraged, as are interactions. The participant's well resourced classroom is also discussed.

Data Analysis

This chapter presents and discusses the findings from the data collection. A pre-observation semi-structured interview with the participant was conducted before the observations commenced (See Appendix 1). These questions were derived from the literature review. Following this there were ten observation sessions in the participants

classroom. These observations took place for one hour each over the course of three weeks. The participant was observed and her actions and interactions were recorded as field notes. Following the observations, there was a semi-structured, post interview with the participant (See Appendix 2). The interview schedule was composed from what the researcher had observed in order to gain more insight and to answer any outstanding questions by the researcher. There were also some questions following up on some statements the participant made in the original interview. Both, the pre-observation and post-observation interviews, as well as the ten observations were examined thoroughly.

Clarke and Braun's (2013) six phases of thematic analysis were followed to analyse how the data was collected. The researcher followed these phases which led to the findings being discussed and analysed.

Results of pilot study

As a result of the pilot study some of the interview questions were changed or re-worded to ensure their meaning was clear and accurate. The order of questions was also altered slightly to ensure the questions flowed in a coherent manner.

Following the pilot observation study the researcher was satisfied that the observation schedule was effective and fit for purpose as both the researcher and supervisor had observed similar practices. No changes were required and the observation schedule remained the same.

Six Phases of Thematic Analysis

As discussed in the previous chapter, Braun and Clarke (2006) devised six phases of thematic analysis. These were: familiarisation with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing-up. The data collected in the case study was examined under these phases.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

Following data collection the researcher organised the observational data and transcribed the interviews. Thus the researcher became familiar with the data. The interviews were listened to and read numerous times and the observations notes were read and re-read, as recommended by Braun & Clarke (2006). Detailed notes were taken on the data during this phase.

Phase 2: Coding

After the familiarisation stage, the data was subjected to rigorous coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These codes were created by the researcher to label the important features of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cohen et al., 2011; Denscombe, 2011). All of the data were coded and recorded in a spiral bound notebook. The observations were given page and line numbers to allow the researcher to be able to locate examples of the code. For instance, samples of the participant's knowledge of the children are on pages 29, line 10; page 41, line 4 and page 55, line 14. The interviews were also coded in the same way. One hundred and seventy two codes were created. The codes and relevant data were then collated (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Table 3.1:

Codes with the Greatest Concentration of Data.

Code	No. of references
Encourages talk	13
Assists tidy up/return of and getting resources	12
Partner in play	11
Suggests rather than instructs	10
Extends learning	9
Knowledge of environment/routine	9
Shared interest/investment	9
Shared delight	8
Interacts with all	8
Supports play	8
Supervises	8

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Braun and Clarke (2006) define a theme as a pattern which is meaningful and coherent in the data and also relevant to the research question. Essentially the codes were coded to identify and group similar pieces of data. Creating the themes was a relatively speedy process as the codes used by the researcher were specific and not vague as recommended by Clarke and Braun (2006).

Codes of similar meaning or connotation were grouped to create themes. For example the codes observing, assessing, supervising, facilitating, supporting and involvement were grouped to form the theme ‘role of the teacher.’

Seventeen main themes were generated from the codes. These themes were then organised under Walsh’s (2017, p.48) Three Pillars of Playful Learning, as discussed in chapter 2:

- Establishing caring yet nurturing relationships
- Enjoy playful yet skilful interactions and
- Create enjoyable yet challenging opportunities.

The first pillar ‘Establishing caring yet nurturing relationships,’ encompassed the following themes; relationships, nurturing pedagogy, partnership with children, responsiveness, self-regulation, social development, well-being and supporting social-emotional development. The second pillar ‘Enjoyable but skilful interactions,’ included teachers involvement in play, playful interactions, the role of the teacher, sustained shared thinking, cognitive development, higher order thinking, curiosity and problem solving. The third pillar ‘Creating enjoyable yet challenging opportunities,’ comprised of enjoyable and challenging learning opportunities, children’s experience and interests, enjoyment, connection to the curriculum and choice.

Phases 4: Reviewing themes

Themes were reviewed to ensure that coded extracts corresponded with the full set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Some similar themes were merged together to make one theme (Basil, 2010). For example nurturing pedagogy and relationships were merged as they had very similar elements. There were seventeen initial themes but following the review of themes there were twelve.

Phases 5: Defining and naming themes

Following a detailed analysis of each theme a precise, informative name for each theme was created (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were labelled with suitable names for the practices they incorporated and the themes with the highest concentration of codes were selected to be discussed.

Table 3.2

Themes with the Highest Amount in the Data

Theme	No. of references
Relationships	88
Involvement in play	76
Agency	40
The environment	38
Partners in play	32
Encourages interactions	26

Phases 6: Writing-up

The writing up phase of thematic analysis involved putting analytical narratives together with data excerpts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cohen et al., 2011). For the purpose of writing up in this chapter, the data will be presented and discussed concurrently.

The main findings

Following the use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis the most common themes were; relationships, involvement in play, agency, the environment, partnership in play and encouraging interactions (See Table 3.2). Each of these themes will be analysed and discussed in detail.

Relationships

Good, positive relationships are very important when working with children (Hayes, 2007; NCCA, 2009a; Walsh, 2017). The establishment of secure relationships enhances children's social and emotional development (Bergin & Bergin, 2007, cited in Walsh, 2017; Hall, 2015; NCCA, 2009). Teachers should be encouraging, nurturing, respectful and responsive (Hayes, 2007). In all of the observations the participants nurturing relationship with the children was observed.

In the pre-observation interview (p.4, l.34) the participant described her relationship with the children as a 'good,' respectful relationship, where children 'get along very well,' and are able to 'come to,' her about issues. This description was echoed in the observations where the participant was encouraging and nurturing, she encouraged the children with a 'smile, praise, touch,' the shoulder (Observation5, p.36, l.2). The participant also encouraged and supported conflict resolution on numerous occasions (Observation 1, p.3, l.4; Observation 3, p.17, l.17 Observation 6, p.36, l.2, Observation 7, p.43, l.2 & Observation 8, p.50, l.6). The children were encouraged to try to solve these issues by themselves with the participant being available to intervene and support if required. For example in Observation 1 (p.3, l.4), when there was a sharing issue the participant asked 'the children to get the sharing timer,' and they were

able to use it unaided. The encouraging, nurturing atmosphere allows the children to thrive and develop (Sylva et al., 2004; Walsh et al., 2010; White, 2017).

The participant also encouraged independence and encouraged the children to try tasks for themselves. In Observation 2 (p.9, l.1), the participant encouraged a 'child to build something herself.' She stepped 'back to be available but without taking over,' as she had in the example of conflict resolution. Walsh (2017) states that children will flourish once their dispositions and skills are nurtured. This type of episode supports children's autonomy and encourages independence, resilience and perseverance.

The participant has created an atmosphere where the children's ideas are valued and they are treated as equals in her classroom. The children are encouraged to communicate and share ideas during play and at recall time, following the play session. In Observation 9, one group of children created 'The Garden Centre,' with their teacher. At recall time where the children share what they did at play time, this group were invited by the participant to 'explain and describe what they,' had done. The children also took 'ideas from the class and [the] teacher records them to add,' to the garden centre the following day (p.56, l.13). White (2016) views children as experts in their own learning. This is certainly a view shared by the participant as the children are encouraged to share ideas and their contributions are valued in a warm, nurturing relationship.

Both the pre-observation interview and observations show the nurturing and encouraging relationship the participant has with the children in her class. The triangulation of the data from the interviews and observations show very clearly that there is a positive and respectful relationship between the children and their teacher. While the participant is nurturing towards the children it is difficult for her to support and encourage the large volume of children in the class alone. Opportunities for the

children to be encouraged or supported are being missed due to the high adult child ratio.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (2012) states that positive relationships support and encourage learning, the participant has a very positive relationship with the children in her class and this is evident in the observations. Positive relations between the participant and the children are clearly visible throughout the observations.

Involvement in play

Play is widely valued, (Hunter & Walsh, 2003; Walsh, 2017; Whitebread, 2012) but despite this, the current research states that teachers are not involved with the children during play time (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hayes & O’Flaherty, 1997, cited in Fallon, 2017b; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; Murphy, 2004a; Murphy, 2004b; OECD, 2004). In all of the observations in the research project, the participant was involved with the children during play. She was observed to be moving between groups and attempting to get to interact with most of the children during the play session (Observation 1, p.1, 1.20; 2, p.8, 1.18; 3, p.16, 1.23; 4, p.25, 1.6; 7, p.45, 1.1; 8, p.51, 1.5 & 10, p.63, 1.2). The participant interacted in role with the children in the small world and role play areas and in the sand, playdough and construction areas she conversed, questioned and extended the children’s learning. The participant interacted with the children individually, by chatting and supporting them (Observation 2, p.8, 1.19; 3, p.16, 1.1; 4, p.22, 1.9; 5, p.29, 1.9; 7, p.41, 1.11 & 9, p.55, 1.14), and in small groups, playfully (Observation 1, p.5, 1.10; 2, p.8, 1.9 & 7, p.41, 1.20). During each play session the participant interacted with each group at the various areas. Interactions should be playful to allow for learning (Walsh, 2017; Walsh et al., 2010). It is during play time when the children are engrossed in the activities they lead, that the participant has the

opportunity to interact playfully with all of the children in her class. She does so in a successful and systematic way attempting to get to each group in their play areas during the play session.

Although the participant was observed to be involved with the children during play in all of the observations, the researcher wondered to what extent was this because she was being observed. During the post-observation interview the researcher asked the participant had she behaved the same way she would have if she was not there observing. The participant stated that yes she did behave the same way and 'but then to be honest over the observation days I forgot you were there,' (Post-observation interview, p.4, l.14). The observation affect may have been at play during the observations and it is possible that when the participant is not being observed she may be involved to a lesser extent. However the children were accustomed to the participant's involvement during play time and this would suggest that she was regularly involved during play time.

In addition to being merely involved with the children in play, the participant played 'in role.' This allowed the participant to support, help, respect and interact with the children, as the NCCA (2009) recommends, during play. This was achieved in role and not as their teacher, she played with the children as a co-player. In Observation 9 (p.55, l.2), the participant invites a child to assist a group in the 'making the garden centre,' as the garden centre's manager. Another example of the participant playing in role is when the teacher speaks as another shop assistant to her 'colleagues,' about the shops appearance and that 'the customers will not like a messy shop,' (Observation 3, p.16, l.8). The participant playing in role enables the teacher to play alongside the children as an equal in a respectful environment. This environment of mutual respect, a phrase used by Brownlee and Berthelson (2006) when discussing relational pedagogy,

allows for the participant to support and help the children learn through play. The participant is effective in providing a respectful atmosphere where playing is respectful and supported and she plays with the children as a co-player.

Wood (2013) states the teachers role is to enrich and extend the children's play. It is through the teachers involvement that play can be extended and taken to the next level. During Observation 3 (p.15, l.13), the children discuss what type of shop they are making in the construction area after the teacher asked the question 'what kind of shop are you making?' The play develops and one of the children asked for an area to be built for the delivery truck. The participant wondered what route the delivery truck would take and this inspired lots of conversation about the various routes the truck may take. The participant was able to help develop the children's play scenario and extend their learning as she was involved. This is an example of Sustained Shared Thinking (SST), as defined by Sylva et al. (2004) where the narrative was extended and children were enabled to clarify what shop they had created. In addition to this, both the adult and children were contributing to this process. An opportunity for SST had arisen as the teacher was actively involved in the children's play. If the teacher had not been playing with the children this opportunity would have passed. Fallon (2013c) states that SST is more likely to happen when the teacher is involved in play. The teacher's involvement is vital during play to provide for opportunities of SST otherwise they may pass. The participant was involved and therefore was enabled to avail of this opportunity.

In this particular play episode (Observation3, p.15, l.18) the participant was also available to support a girl with English as an Additional Language (EAL), to be involved in the interaction by creating a game where the children decided which items go in which shops. Despite having little English, the girl was able to join in with her peers. After the participant had created the game to be accessible at the girls' level,

enabling her to be involved in the play, she extended the other children's learning by challenging them.

Teacher and children create a game where someone says an item and they say what type of shop it should be in. This allows EAL girl to join in. Conversation continues and teacher mentions items she requires. The children say they need to visit certain shops to retrieve the items; syrup, cream (Observation 3, p.15, 1.16).

In reality this girl may not have been able to participate fully in this interaction if the teacher had not been involved. The participant not only supported learning in this play episode but also supported the inclusion of a child and differentiated the task so the child was able to be successful.

During the same observation, (Observation 3, p.15, 1.9) there was an additional example of the children's learning being guided within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Santrock, 2007). The participant said 'oh no! There's no receipt. You might have to make a complaint,' to a customer in the clothes shop role-play area. The participant assisted one of the children explaining to another child, what a receipt was. Then she and the child who was explaining got some resources to make receipts. The children's play in turn developed by a customer making a complaint and receipts then being produced for every transaction. The participant stayed to support the children and when she was satisfied they could play independently she moved to another group of children. The participant moved the boundaries and guided the children's play to a higher and more advanced level, as Hakkarainen et al. (2013) describe. The participant has again been successful in guiding and extending the children's learning in this example. The reason this was successful was due to the participant's active involvement.

Sustained Shared Thinking

The literature review considers the importance of episodes of Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) in early years' settings (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004; Wood, 2013). The research around SST states that these are not a frequent occurrence in infant classrooms (OECD, 2004; O'Kane & Hayes, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). However, there are many examples of SST throughout the observations in the participant's classroom (Observation 1, p.1, l.23; 2, p.10, l.12; 3, p.15, l.13; 6, p.39, l.1; 7, p.45, l.4 & 10, p.66, l.7). While there are examples of the participant engaging in SST with the children in her class the participant, a reflective practitioner (Mac Naughton, 2005), acknowledged in the post-observation interview (p.2, l.29) she would like to have more opportunities to engage in SST. She stated that she 'does [her] best,' but she finds 'it difficult to get to everyone,' as there are twenty five children. The participant added that she would 'love to be able to do it more.' Contrary to the research, there are SST interactions happening in the participants' classroom, she wishes that she could have more opportunities to engage in these interactions.

The participant was observed to be in many episodes of SST. During Observation 3 (p.17, l.11) there was an episode of SST between the participant and a group of children was observed in the role- play shop. A customer had fainted and the children incorporated knowledge from what they had learned during the doctors theme. The participant extended and challenged the children in this interaction and many higher order concepts were observed in the play. In Observation 4 (p.22, l.19), the participant and a child engaged in a playful interaction of SST with a hedgehog whom had an animal stuck in his mouth. This interaction was joined by some other children and knowledge from the previous theme, the vets, was demonstrated. During Observation 7 (p.41, l.11), there was an episode of SST between the participant and

another student who had brought in a creation he had made at home to show his teacher. They described and extended on how the creation worked and difficult concepts were discussed. While many episodes of SST were observed, the participant missed out on opportunities for extending the children's knowledge and engaging in SST. The large numbers of children in the classroom is a barrier to this as the participant cannot interact in SST with twenty five children alone or even with five groups of five children.

It is evident from these research extracts that the participant is actively involved during the children's play sessions. She aimed to interact with all of the children and also played in role, as a co-player with them. The participant also demonstrated how she extends and enriches the children's knowledge and engaged in episodes of SST. While the participant is involved with the children during play, she wants to continue to improve her practice by being involved in more SST episodes.

Agency

Early Childhood Australia (2015) describe agency as children being able to have control and have a sense of influence over things happening to them. The participant supports agency and encourages independence in her classroom.

French (2007) states that children construct their own learning and should be given freedom and choice where possible. On a Friday the children have 'Free Choice Friday,' where they are permitted to play in a play area of their choice (Observation 4, p.22, l.10 &8, p.48, l.1). The participant said that on Fridays 'children are allowed to choose to play wherever they like, they also don't have to stick to the theme,' (Observation 4, p.22, l.12). Free choice is manageable for the participant once a week.

The participant stated in the post-observation interview (p.3, l.36) that the reason she uses the play rota as opposed to free choice is due to the large class size of twenty five. The participant said ‘with the numbers, I need to have a rota,’ system as there are too many children. But ‘they can bring resources if they need,’ them from another area. Georgeson and Payler (2013) categorise children choosing where, how and what children play as a child-sized decision and the routine, resources and the environment as adult-sized decisions. While the children in the participants class are not able to chose where they play four days a week the children are permitted to choose how and what they play daily. The participant feels she is unable to allow the children to have more freedom with their choices due to the large class size. The OECD (2004, p.61) reported that large Irish class size is a barrier to quality in young children’s learning and this includes children’s choice. Lower class sizes would enable children to be able to have more choice and freedom within play. While the children are only allowed to choose where they play on a Friday they do have choice within their area. The participant stated in the post-observation interview (p.4, l.3) that the children ‘can decide themselves what they do in that area,’ and this was also visible in the observations.

Having a mixture of teacher and child led activities is an element of best practice (Fallon, 2017a; French, 2007; Sylva et al., 2010). When children are allowed to choose their own activities and how they play with the resources they are given a sense of agency. In the post-observation interview (p.1, l.20), the participant stated that she tries to keep adult led activities ‘to the minimum, but they have to be there,’ as the curriculum has to be taught. She added that she allows for child led activities ‘a lot throughout the day’ and allows them to ‘choose what resources they want to use for

activities,' where possible. Within the demands of the curriculum the participant allows as much choice as possible.

The participants approach to agency could be strengthened by having another day during the week where the children are free to choose the area they play in. If it is possible for the participant to allow choice on Fridays it may also be possible to agree to an additional free choice day, which would enable the children to feel a stronger sense of agency.

It has been found that Irish infant teachers use teacher-directed activities for the majority of the day (Fallon, 2013a; INTO, 2006; OECD, 2004). However Dunphy (2008) stated that in using play as a methodology for teaching and learning, teachers now have the opportunity to begin the change towards a child-centred approach. This is what the participant is trying to do by enabling the children to be as agentic as possible in conditions which are not ideal. The participant stated in the post-observation interview (p.2, l.30) how class size; the 'numbers in the class,' and child adult ratio 'just myself trying to interact with all the children,' are barriers. However, they are allowed to choose where possible whether it is within play areas or what resources to use during lessons.

The environment

For any learning to take place, the classroom must be prepared to engage the children in active learning opportunities. Siraj-Blatchfor et al. (2002) refer to this as 'pedagogical framing,' this includes the provision of resources, arrangement of space, daily routines, assessment and planning. Fallon (2017) states that this is to organise for play but not to control it.

Space and furniture should be arranged in child-sized areas as opposed to one large playing space (NCCA, 2009a). In the pre-observation interview (p.4, l.14) the participant described her classroom space:

‘So my classroom at the moment, I have the tables and chairs in the middle of the classroom. Around them, I have different areas that the children know where different activities are and where we play with different activities.’

The NCCA (2009a, p.30) recommend a carefully planned environment to allow for learning with ‘sufficient resources, time and space for all children to benefit from the experiences on offer.’ The participant described how her classroom environment is divided up into interest areas in the pre-observation interview (p.4, l.17).

‘So I have a construction area. I have....my sandpit would be up in another end of the room. I have a role play area. I have a small world area. And then we have a box for our junk [art] that’s brought to one of the tables when we need that. And playdough and that again is in the box and that’s brought out to the table.’

Each of these interest areas were clearly visible during the observations (Observations 1, p.1, l.1; 2, p.8, l.1; 3, p.15, l.1; 4, p.22, l.1; 5, p.29, l.1; 6, p.34, l.1; 7, p.41, l.1; 8, p.48, l.1; 9, p.55, l.1 & 10, p.62, l.1).

Teachers have been found to have made changes to their classroom environment following CPD courses on using Aistear in the primary school (Hough & Foster, 2013, cited in O’Kane, 2017; NCCA, 2013). This participant also did the same in her classroom. She does not give tables priority as O’Kane (2017) suggests is the norm in many infant classrooms. Rather the areas around the room are the main concern.

The NCCA (2009a) recommend a planned environment which allows equipment and materials to be available to the children. In the participants classroom all of the resources are accessible to the children and have a specific place, the children know the environment and routine well and are able to locate resources when required. During Observation 2 (p.9, 10) the participant ‘supervises the tidy up and children set to work returning the resources to locations.’ In Observation 3 (p.15, 1.11) the children require paper and pens to make receipts and the child knows exactly where to find the paper. A similar example is in Observation 4 (p.22, 1.15) when a girl needs the vet’s equipment, she locates it easily. On many occasions during the observations the children were able to find the resources they needed independently. The classroom is very well organised into areas and the resources in these areas are mainly labelled and all accessible to the children. There are enough resources and toys for each group working in the various areas and it is clear the participant has worked hard to ensure the space is well resources, with easy access to resources and promotes independence.

The resources are mainly generic and open-ended and there are also theme related resources. In Observation 1 (p.1, 1.1) the participant had provided for and resourced five areas: playdough, construction, role-play, small world and junk art. The playdough area encompassed playdough clothes mats, playdough, some commercial cutting implements as well as kitchen utensils, there were also lollypop sticks and sequences. Apart from the playdough mats and the commercial cutters the resources were open-ended and the children could use them any way they saw fit. The playdough clothes mats were a theme related resource.

Carr (2000, cited in Fallon, 2017a) describes affordance as the various ways in which a resource can be used. High quality resources can impact positively on the

quality of the play experiences (Fallon, 2017a; Marshall, 2013; Moyles, 2005; Walsh, 2017).

Fallon (2017a) suggests that a resources affordance can be extended by observing and reflecting on how the children use resources. This is what the participant does daily as she is involved in the children's play. During Observation 5 (p.29, l.2) the participant was recording 'observations about what the children are doing.' She also recorded some of the quotes the children said. This formal record on what the children are doing can help the teacher reflect on resources affordance in addition to her daily involvement in play. The resources that the teacher provides are ever evolving and she adds to these herself and also allows the children to do the same when they request to do so. In Observation 6 (p.36, l.6) the participant allows the child to bring sand resources into the bead construction box as they would be suitable there too. During the post-observation interview (p.3, l.16) the participant said she likes to use resources that are familiar to the children and also relevant and theme related, she stated that she likes to use the resources during adult directed, class activities too.

The participant also told the researcher during the post-observation interview (p.3, l.20) that she encourages the 'children to bring in,' resources and this reinforces the partnership between children and teacher. It is widely believed that working partnerships with parents strengthens the home-school link (Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Huggins, 2013; NCCA, 1999; NCCA, 2009; NCCA, 2015; OECD, 2017; White, 2016). Learning and child development is enhanced when educators work with parents and can lead to positive learning outcomes (French, 2007; NCCA, 2009b; OECD, 2017). Bringing in and sharing resources encourages partnership with parents and children. It also gives children the opportunity to discuss at home what they are doing in school. Further endorsement of this partnership of sharing resources would strengthen the home

school link while also enabling the participant to resources her classroom freely, as she had mentioned in the post-observation interview (p.3, l.16) that cost is a factor in resource selection.

Where possible the participant tries to use open-ended and real resources. These resources encourage the children to use their imagination and creativity which lead to symbolic play (Brodie, 2014; Broadhead, 2004, as cited in Moyles, 2005; Chesworth, 2016; Fallon, 2013b; Fallon, 2017a; Marshall, 2013; NCCA, 1999; NCCA, 2009; Odegard, 2012; Walsh, 2017). During Observation 3 (p.15, l.12) the children are equipped with real clothes and coins in the role play shop. In Observation 9 (p.55, l.24) the children asked the participant, in the garden centre ‘are they real pots?’ and she replied ‘they sure are.’ In the post-observation interview (p.3, l.22) the participant said sometimes she ‘would only use [an open-ended resource] for one thing and the children find another use for it.’

In Observation 10 (p.62, l.3) the children get some tubing from the junk art area to use as a hose in the garden centre. The children are confident in moving resources from areas and simply inform the teacher of their intention. In Observation 6 (p.36, l.8) the children ask the participant if they can move a resource to their area and she asks ‘why?’ The child gives a reason and is given the ‘nod,’ to move the resource. This suggests they are used to doing so and it is in a routine manner, this is also an example of giving the children agency and reinforcing the idea of partnership.

In the creation of enjoyable yet challenging activities the participant must create learning experiences which are both ‘interesting and enjoyable, yet appropriately purposeful and challenging,’ (Barrett, 2005, p.162). As the participant is involved with the children during play this is manageable for her as she knows what the children enjoy and what they can do. An example of this is in Observation 3 (p.16, l.8), in the

role-play clothes shop, where the shop is untidy and the participant challenges the children, in role, to tidy up the shop. The participant facilitated 'the folding and suggests how to fold more difficult items.' The researcher noticed the next day that there were more clothes the following day in the shop, to be folded and displayed. This is an example of an interesting, enjoyable and challenging experience.

When there was a change in theme during the observation period, resources and areas were changed accordingly. In Observation 9 (p.55, l.1), the role-play area was being changed into a garden centre and the sand pit was being filled with soil and gardening tools were introduced. These were mainly every day, real resources introduced which included spades, rakes, shovels, pots, bulbs, compost, soil and various types of gloves.

It is of significance that during the post-observation interview (p.2, l.12) the participant described how the Garden Centre theme was introduced following one of the children's interests. She stated that a child had brought in snails the previous day as their pets. From this the children did a mini-art project on snails and this led the teacher to thinking about a planting theme. Children are motivated to learn when they are interested (Chesworth, 2016; Hedges, 2014; NCCA & ECI, 2013; Walsh, 2017). The children's monthly theme was derived from one of the children's interests as they are encouraged to bring items in. The environment is designed to promote choice and this includes the children's interests and choosing the themes in which the play areas are based.

Reggio Emilia describes the environment as the third teacher (Wood & Attfield, 2008). It was clear from the interviews and observations that the participant engages in pedagogical framing on a regular basis. The participants' classroom was well resourced

and the area and space was arranged well, there was a well established routine and there was evidence of planning and assessment. The children were enabled to be challenged by the environment which is resourced and planned by the teacher. She also changes it regularly, dependent on the children's interests or monthly theme.

Partnership in play

A partnership approach to teaching and learning allows for the forming of relationships and supports quality interactions (NCCA, 2009a). There have been many examples of the nurturing relationship the participant has with her class. The following paragraphs deal with partnership in play separately as being an element of a nurturing relationship. Partnership in play is influenced by reciprocity and dialogism (Boyd et al., 2006; White, 2016).

White (2016) states dialogism is where there is more than one voice is heard and the teacher is no longer viewed as an expert. The children's voices are as important as the teachers. The teacher is regarded as a facilitator rather than a dictator. The participant suggests rather than orders and reminds children rather than instructing them to do things. In Observation 2 (p.8, l.3), the participant 'supports children in role play without being prescriptive.' In Observation 3 (p.15, l.22), a boy is making a hat and the participant 'talks briefly to the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) about what suggestions,' she could make to the boy. This shows partnership with the SNA and also how they are respectful of the boy's own ideas. The suggestions rather than instructions illustrate the equality in the relationships. There is also a culture of the participant reminding students about the rules or previous similar incidences instead of instructing them to do or not to do things. In Observation 4 (p.22, l.15), the participant 'reminds the boys what happens if they use too much glue.' In Observation 5 (p.29, l.12), a child was 'reminded

to put his own toy away during play time,' as this was one of the rules the children had made themselves. The way in which the children are reminded rather than ordered also highlights the partnership in play in their relationship.

The children are partners and active contributors to their own learning (Neylon, 2014). The children come to the participant with ideas and their own interests and in turn the teacher reports that they 'work with [her] to do things,' (Post-observation Interview, p.2, l.15). The participant embraces that the children are partners and values their contribution by using their interests to form themes and ideas for their learning.

Partnerships in play underpin Walsh's (2017) caring and nurturing relationships. There was an episode of SST, in Observation 4 (p.22, l.27), when a girl found a toy with a hedgehog stuck in his mouth. The participant 'follows the child's lead and stretches out the frog's mouth as directed by the girl.' In Observation 9 (p.55, l.1), the children help the participant in the creation of the new garden centre area. Their opinions and ideas are equal to the participant's and the area is created in partnership. In the same observation, during recall time the other children are invited to share their ideas and these are recorded to add to the area the following day (Observation 9, p.56, l.13). This partnership approach is the type endorsed by Boyd et al. (2006) in relational pedagogy and White's (2016) dialogism.

The participant works and plays in partnership with the children. Gray and Ryan (2006) describe the reciprocal role teachers and students should aim to have. In Observation 2 (p.8, l.12), two of the children knocked down the house that the others were building. The participant said 'Oh my goodness! What happened?' She talked to the boys as a co-player and not a figure of authority. Following this the boys helped their friends to build the house again. In Observation 8 (p.48, l.4), the teacher encourages the children to use vocabulary they have learned during their lessons in the

garden centre, she does not instruct them to use the new words but rather encourages in a discreet manner. But rather models the words and provides a print rich environment where much of the vocabulary is displayed on the wall or on the resources. Both are incidents where the children are treated as partners and equals in a relationship encompassing reciprocity.

From the observations it is obvious that the participant works in partnership with the children in her classroom. She values their opinions and ideas. As Lansdowne (2011) describes, the children are encouraged to speak and have a voice. The children are treated with respect and they work together with each other and their teacher.

Encouraging interactions

There have been many studies showing that overly formal pedagogy is inappropriate for young children (Alexander, 2009; Bennett, 2005; Wylie & Hodgen, 2007).

Traditionally Irish teachers have been didactic, directive and formal in their teaching (Dunphy, 2008; Moyles, 2005; OECD, 2005; Walsh, 2017). Research suggests that many teachers are still didactic and traditional in their teaching approach (Fallon, 2013a; Hunter & Walsh, 2013). However the participant was observed to be using practices which are ‘observed and theoretically underpinned,’ such as ‘exploratory learning,’ hands on tasks and activities supporting agency,’ (OECD, 2004, p.58).

In contrast to what the literature refers to as overly formal pedagogy, the participant encourages interactions (Fallon, 2013a; OECD, 2004). The encouragement of interactions is the opposite of the traditional, didactic, one voice type of teaching the above research suggests is happening in Irish infant classrooms. In Observation 9 (p.55, 1.31), the participant joins a ‘conversation with [a] boy talking about seeds,’ talks with another boy about his weekend (p.55, 1.4) and with a girl about the ‘sticky situation,’

the girl finds herself in when some of the children's work is stuck together (p.55, l.11). These are just three of the thirty interactions with children during the course of this observation. As mentioned previously in the involvement and play section, the participant aims to interact with all of the children at some stage during play time. Positive interactions in play are not a typical formal student teacher questions and answer sessions, but rather a two way conversation.

The concept of open and dialogic interactions is quite new; traditionally in school the teacher's interactions were directive and closed. In Observation 1 (p.1, l.23), there is an episode of SST where the participant and child discuss in detail what could be added to the coat made of playdough the boy had created. In Observation 7 (p.41, l.11), there is an interaction between the participant and a boy about the creation he had made at home with his dad. 'He describe[d] it in detail with support and prompting. Teacher [was] very enthusiastic.' These quality interactions with children are made possible by the elements of relational pedagogy (NCCA, 2009a). Both examples show quality interactions where the child is encouraged to speak and the participant supports and helps to extend the learning in a natural, informal way. The acknowledgment of the relationships with the children and their active contribution to learning enables these seamless interactions.

The importance of interactions between adults and children and children and their peers is acknowledged in relational and dialogic pedagogy. The adult's key role is emphasised in this reciprocal relationship (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hayes, 2007; Kernan, 2007; NCCA, 2009b). It is important to note that quality interactions are not only important with adults but are also crucial with other children (NCCA, 2009b). In all of the observations the participant was observed to be encouraging interactions and speaking, not only with her the teacher, but with each other. In essence the children

were all speaking and interacting with each other for forty five minutes every day during play time.

As is the case with SST, there are times when the participant misses out on interactions with the children or engages very briefly with the children. The amount of children in the class and the fact that there is only one teacher in the classroom are factors involved. Many interactions which could lead to higher order thinking or enhance relationships are overlooked. The participant aims to interact with each group during the play session and this ensures that the children are interacted with however these interactions could be strengthened should the participant be able to offer more time to them.

In situations where a child is not interacting with the other children the participant supports them in becoming involved in play. In Observation 1 (p.5, l.10), the participant is involved in an ‘imaginative discussion about hotels, elevators and stairs.’ She invites a child who has been playing alone to join this conversation and when the child has moved over to the group to join in, she moves on. Also in Observation 1 (p.4, l.9), the participant supported an ‘EAL child to name the clothes, she also named them in Irish.’ The girl was included with the children in the playdough game following this. In Observation 2 (p.11, l.1), the researcher noted the participant encouraged the children ‘to constantly talk to each other.’ In Observation 6 (p.36, l.11), the participant was observed helping a ‘girl join into a game,’ before leaving the girl to play with her peers. There were countless more interactions observed where the participant supported children to interact with their peers (NCCA, 2009b).

Hall (2015, p.43) warns that building reciprocal relationships can be difficult as they require adults who are ‘confident and knowledgeable enough to allow children independence and yet offer reassuring guidance,’ in the participant’s classroom this is

not an issue. She is confident in allowing children to be independent whilst also being there to support them when necessary. For example in Observation 2 (p.8, 1.4), the participant ‘hovers to support the negotiation of which child is next to use the cash register.’ The participant was available but was not needed in this instance. In Observation 3 (p.15, 1.26), the participant ‘checks back in with a girl who needed help with scissors,’ earlier, she continues to support her while also being inclusive of the other children in the group.

The importance of interactions in the context of play pedagogy is widely recognised (Hayes, 2007; NCCA, 2009a; NCCA, 2015; Walsh, 2017). Interactions between children in the participant’s classroom are encouraged and the children engage in these with their teacher and peers. The adult’s role is recognised and it is the partnership approach and nurturing relationship the children have with the participant that causes these interactions to occur.

Surprising findings

Much of the research suggest that Irish infant teachers require additional training in play-based methodologies (Dunphy, 2008; Fallon, 2017a; Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hollingsworth, 2017; Hunter & Walsh, 2013; INTO, 2006; O’Kane & Hayes, 2007; Walsh et al., 2013). In the pre-observation interview (p.2, 1.24) the participant said that following participation in a CPD course on Aistear she knew how to ‘utilise,’ play ‘within the classroom.’ This echo’s the NCCA’s (2013) findings that following training in play-based methodologies teachers changed their practice and the layout of their classroom.

Conclusion

Following the data collected in the research project from the ten observations and the pre-observation and post-observation interviews, being analysed under Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis, the main findings from the case study are:

- That the participant has a nurturing relationship with the children in her class.
- The participant is involved with the children during play.
- Agency and independence are promoted and encouraged in the participants' classroom.
- The classroom environment is well resourced and organised.
- The children are considered partners in their learning and play.
- Interactions are encouraged in participants' classroom.

The participant has a nurturing relationship with the children in her class and this improves children's emotional and social development. The children are respected and praised and their contribution is valued in their classroom.

Contrary to what much of the research indicates on interactions during play, the participant is involved with the children during play, interacting with all the children during the play session and typically playing with them in role. The children's learning is enhanced and extended through this involvement.

The research regarding SST also suggests that it is not a common practice in infant classrooms. However the participant has been observed to engage in this type of interactions and even identifying that she wishes there was time for more. Large class size is seen as a barrier to this.

Agency and independence are promoted and encouraged. In order for children to construct their own learning, choice and freedom are essential. The participant acknowledges that more choice is possible for the children however due to practicalities, such as large class size and teacher pupil ratio, these are restricted. Nevertheless, she allows children to be agentic and make choice were possible.

The participants' classroom is well organised and resourced. The space is planned to allow play and playful learning to take place. Interest areas are given priority rather than furniture and here are ample resources accessible to the children. The way in which they are organised ensures the children are able to retrieve and return the resources. The resources provided are real and open-ended, when possible. The participant, and even the children as the participant pointed out during the post-observation interview, recognise their affordance. The resources are also changed monthly with the integrated theme or with the children's interests.

The children are considered partners in their own learning. It is widely recognised that a partnerships approach leads to forming relationships and provides for quality interactions. As was mentioned previously, the children have a nurturing relationship with the participant, with the participant viewing them as partners and contributors to their own learning. The partnership approach encompasses elements of dialogism and relational pedagogy where the children are heard and the relationship acknowledged.

Interactions are encouraged within the classroom environment; both interactions with the participant and the other children are included. Children are encouraged to interact with each other and the participant supports children who require help with this, she also attempts to interact with all children during play.

The next chapter includes the recommendations and conclusions from the findings and discussion of the research project. It also includes recommendations for future research as well as the personal learning of the researcher.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The research project set out to answer the question; what practices in play pedagogy do primary teachers engage in, in their classrooms? Current research discloses (Dunphy, 2008; Fallon, 2017; Fallon, 2013a; Hunter & Walsh, 2013; Moyles, 2005; OECD, 2004; Walsh, 2017) the practices teachers do not engage in, however in the Irish context there is little evidence of what teachers actually do.

Chapter 1 set the research study in context by detailing the relevant background information for the case study. It also gave a brief description and summary of each chapter in the case study.

A trawl of the literature, in Chapter 2, suggested that while Irish primary school teachers do value play they lack skill in providing quality learning experiences for the children in their classrooms (Brodie, 2014; Fallon, 2017a; Gray & Ryan, 2016; INTO, 2006; O’Kane & Hayes, 2007; Walsh et al., 2013). Contemporary research on play pedagogy was examined using Walsh’s framework (2017). She describes Three Pillars of Practice for Playful Teaching and Learning which are:

1. Establishing Caring yet Nurturing Relationships
2. Enjoy Playful yet Skilful Interactions
3. Create Enjoyable Yet Challenging Opportunities (Walsh, 2017, p.48).

Play pedagogy includes elements of Relational Pedagogy. Relational Pedagogy places respectful and egalitarian relationships at the centre of the educator-learner relationship (Boyd, MacNeill & Sullivan, 2006; MacNeill & Silcox, 2006).

In Chapter 3, the methodology of the case study was described in great detail. A clear and precise description was given of the research design. The pre-observation

interview and post-observation interviews were described, as well as the ten observations.

In Chapter 4, the main findings of the research study were presented, analysed and discussed. The data was processed under Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis. The main findings were:

- That the participant has a nurturing relationship with the children in her class.
- The participant is involved with the children during play.
- Some episodes of Sustained Shared Thinking were observed.
- Agency and independence are promoted and encouraged in the participants' classroom, where possible.
- The classroom environment is well resourced and organised.
- The children are considered partners in their learning and play.
- Interactions are encouraged in participants' classroom.

In the chapter, Chapter 5, even though the findings are not generalisable, recommendations for further research are made. In addition to this the implications and conclusion drawn from the research study are discussed below.

Conclusions

The research highlighted that the participant of the case study had nurturing relationships and took a partnership approach with the children in her class. She was very involved with the children during play and promoted agency and independence, where possible. The participant's classroom was well resourced and accessible to the children. She encouraged talking and interactions in her classroom.

Relationships

The participant was observed to have a positive, caring yet nurturing relationship with the children. The children were regarded as experts in their own learning in and were encouraged and supported to be independent. The existing research (Boyd et al., 2006; Dunphy, 2008; EYFS, 2012; Farquhar, 2013; Ferholt, 2015; Neylon, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Walsh, 2017) describes how the relationship between children and their teacher should be, but there is little research, especially in the Irish context to show how this relationship is. The participant's relationship with the children is caring and nurturing and thus the children's well-being and social and emotional development is enhanced.

Involvement of the teacher in play

The participant values play and this is in line with what the current research says about the importance of play (Kernan, 2007; Moyles, 2010; Whitebread, 2012). She plays in role and as a co-player with the children. Their learning is enriched and extended within their Zone of Proximal Development in an environment of mutual respect. The participant also ensures that all children are included during play.

Findings from this case study demonstrate that the teacher is actively involved with the children in her classroom during play. This finding is contrary to other contemporary research that found educators tended not to be actively involved with children during play (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hayes & O'Flaherty, 1997, cited in Fallon, 2017b; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; Murphy, 2004a). The participant is confident in interacting with the children without taking over. Her involvement during the play sessions with the children, as well as changing the areas in keeping with the children's interests and themes, ensures that the children's play is not static and is ever evolving.

By being involved in the children's play the participant is aware of the children's interests and able to plan for their learning accordingly.

Sustained Shared Thinking

Sustained Shared Thinking is regarded in early childhood education as a crucial element of play pedagogy (Hayes, 2006, cited in NCCA, 2009b). The participant engages in SST interactions with the children where possible while also supervising the class. However due to the large number of children in the class opportunities for SST are often missed or learning is not extended to its full potential.

Agency

In the participant's classroom the children are encourage to be as agentic as possible. They are encouraged to be independent and to have a sense of control. The participant acknowledges that she is limited in the amount of choice she can give the children during play time due to her large class and for practical reasons uses a play rota. However she attempts to compensate for restriction of choice by allowing the children to choose what they do in their assigned area daily and choose the area they play in on Fridays. While the children are afforded the opportunity to choose their play areas on Friday, perhaps this choice could be extended to an additional day or days during the week.

There is also a combination of child and adult-led activities during the day. During adult-led activities the participant aims, where possible, to offer some choice to the children.

The environment

From observing in the participant's classroom over the period of the case study it became apparent that she engages in pedagogical framing. Her classroom is arranged for playful learning and is well resourced and accessible to the children. The researcher observed the children retrieving and returning the resources they needed to develop their play, with ease (Fallon, 2017a; NCCA, 2009a). These resources have multiple affordances; they are open-ended and real, as appropriate. The children are also encouraged to share resources from home and this reinforces the partnership approach the participant has with the children.

If the participant were to develop this home-school link, building on the children's funds of knowledge (Chesworth, 2016), where children share their resources from home with the class, further she may find it easier to resource the classroom with theme related resources. This would strengthen the partnership approach and the participant would benefit from the resources being shared while the children would be creating a home school link. A welcome consequence of this would be the attendant reduction in costs.

The environment the participant has created invites the children to engage in enjoyable and challenging play opportunities. The participant's classroom environment encourages agency and could be described, as it is in Reggio Emilia, (Wood & Attfield, 2008) as the children's third teacher.

Partners in play

The participant takes a partnership approach with the children. There is a suspension of didactic whole class teaching, where there is only one voice heard, instead the children are partners and active contributors in the relationship. This

relationship is reciprocal and equal and this is evident in how the participant interacts with and treats the children. This equal relationship is demonstrated when the teacher plays with the children as a co-player (Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). The relationship the participant has with the children is at the opposite end of the continuum from where teachers are directive and formal with the children in their class (Hakkarainen et al., 2013).

Encourages interactions

It is clear that the participant's pedagogical approach is not a formal one and she encourages the children to talk and interact with their peers as well as with her. The conversations the children have with the participant are open and many of them are conducted in the context of play. They illustrate the reciprocal relationship the participant has with the children. While interactions between children and their peers are important, interactions between teachers and children are equally important (NCCA, 2015). It is important to note that interactions between the participant and the children are missed or not extended to their full potential due to the large number of children in the class, as was the case with SST.

Recommendations

- A more favourable adult/child ratio would support teachers forming nurturing relationships with the children, where the children are partners in their learning. Another adult in the classroom would help supervise, extend the children's learning further and possibly allow for more SST interactions. This would also ease the pressure on the teacher to interact with all of the children.
- Lower infant class sizes will make it possible for teachers to be involved during play. While the participant of this research study was involved with the children

during play, she acknowledged that opportunities for SST are limited and interactions where she could extend the children's learning are missed due to the large class size. The Department of Education and Skills (2018) stated that 24.7 was the average class size in mainstream school in Ireland in the school year 2016/17. It is difficult for one individual teacher to interact cognitively with this amount of children. If the government departments are endorsing play pedagogy (NCCA, 2015; NCCA, 2009a) it is imperative that class sizes are lowered.

- In order for children to be agentic and challenged during playful learning, (Siraj-Blactchford et al., 2002) the environment should be resourced and arranged for play. Teachers must be equipped with adequate space and resources. Limited tables and furniture would enable teachers to set up an environment similar to that of the participant, to allow resources to be accessible to the children. This has cost implications and schools must be prepared to resource the infant classrooms for learning through play and not focusing solely on literacy, numeracy and other subjects. The creation of a home and school partnership to share resources for play would also be beneficial and cost effective.
- As noted in the methodology the participant has taken part in two CPD courses on playful learning and as a result of this training her practice demonstrates changes she has made. Pre-service training in play pedagogy for teachers in college and CPD for teachers in playful learning, are a recommendation from this case study.

Recommendations for future research

As the research project was small scale and focused on one case alone the findings are not generalisable. However the research project could be carried out on a large scale

basis to examine practices in play pedagogy in infant classrooms at a local or national level. This would create an accurate picture of what practices Irish infant teachers employ in play pedagogy.

The research design could also be adapted to observe and discuss only SST interactions. As a crucial element of early childhood education it would be interesting to research these interactions and see how they look in infant classrooms.

Researcher's reflection

In undertaking this case study I was concerned that issues may arise as I work with the participant, who is a trusted and respected colleague. I was concerned about the perceived power relations during the course of the research as I deliver CPD in the area of play pedagogy. However we both learned from the research in an environment of mutual respect, as detailed in the literature (Brownlee & Berthelson, 2006). I was enabled to complete my research while the participant stated in the post-observation interview that she was glad to receive feedback which helped 'a lot.'

Conclusion

This case study has explored and portrayed the practices in play pedagogy an infant teacher uses in her classroom. Research suggests that the children should be learning through play in an environment where they have a nurturing relationship with their teacher. The teacher is expected to engage in enjoyable and skilful interactions with the children and create opportunities for them that are enjoyable and challenging (Walsh, 2017). It is apparent that the participant does the above in her classroom.

While the participant has acknowledged problems in practice and areas that need to be worked on, she is in essence playing with the children using theoretically

underpinned play practices. She has been observed to be successfully providing for teaching and learning through play. To conclude in Papert's (1996, p.162) words 'learning can be fun,' and this is evident in the participants classroom.

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Appendix 1: Initial interview schedule

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

1. How many years are you teaching?
2. What is your current job title?
3. Please describe your qualifications to teach primary school children, including any CPD that you might have done.
4. How many years are you teaching infants? Do you notice any changes in your teaching approaches over your years of teaching infants or have you always taught much as you teach now?
5. Do the children have a variety of learning experiences during the day? For example, teacher led work, child-led work, whole group work, small group, pair work?
6. What is your opinion on the role of play in your classroom?
7. How do you view your role in the children's play? (Planning, playing, reviewing)
8. What are the types of play and playful learning which occur in your classroom? (For example: play, games with rules, activities)
9. What training have you received to facilitate children's learning through play?
10. How would you describe your relationship with the children in your class?
11. In your classroom, who are there partnerships with (Give examples of what you mean here. Parents? SNA? Student teachers? Caretaker? School bus driver?...
12. How do these partnerships benefit the children?
13. How would you describe Sustained Shared Thinking in your classroom?
14. How do you develop learning through play?

15. Do you link the children's play during play sessions to the curriculum or the curriculum to the children's play? (If yes, please detail how)
16. What influences your planning for the children's play?
17. Describe your classroom environment and the use of space in the classroom.
18. When choosing resources for the children, what do you consider?

Thank you for your participation in this interview. I look forward to observing you in your classroom.

Appendix 2: Post-interview schedule

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for allowing me into your classroom to observe you during the children's play time or as you call it 'activity time.' It has been a very interesting experience for me and really appreciate your co-operation.

The following questions are things I want to follow up on from the initial interview.

1. In your school day you said you had a variety of learning experiences. Can you please tell me which ones happen in your classroom, how often they occur and how they look? (Whole class teaching, small group teaching, station teaching, adult led activities, child led activities and pair work)
2. You have described your relationships with the children as 'good' that they can come and share things with you and you get along very well. What other words come to mind when describing your relationship with the children?
3. Do you view the children as partners in their own learning?
The next few questions stem from my observations in your classroom.
4. How would you describe a quality interaction with a child or the children?
5. In relation to Sustained Shared Thinking; which involves children and educators working together in conversations which provide opportunities to discuss and think about problems or challenges in a serious, extended way (Touhill, 2010, p.1). Do you feel you have enough opportunities during play time and throughout the school day?
6. What conditions allow/don't allow for SST?
7. Regarding children's interests, where do you get the ideas for your themes?
8. How often do you change themes?
9. How do you link play and the curriculum or curriculum and play?
10. How do you choose resources? Do you consider any of the following: how many ways it can be use, if it is open-ended, theme related, real life resources?

11. How do you decide whether to use free play or structured play, as per the play rota in class?
12. What is the reason for choosing to mainly use the play rota as opposed to free choice?

The final questions are about your feelings during the observations.

13. How did you feel being observed? Were you sorry that you had signed up for it or did you feel you performed the same way you would have normally?
14. Did you benefit in any way from the observations?

Thank you very much for being the participant in my case study. I am grateful for the time you have given me and for allowing me into your classroom. It has been a great experience.

Appendix 3: Adapted Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being

Self-regulation and social development
Agree boundaries with children, expectations around behaviour, pre-empt difficulties, shows empathy for children, differentiates, re-direct in appropriate behaviour, congratulate children when they follow rules, engage children in resolving disputes and problem solving

Encouraging choices and independent play
Allow children to act independently, no unnecessary interference; provide necessary resources, toys and books accessible to children. Include children in planning for play, teacher observes children at play to see what they do in play and if concepts discussed find their way into play

Supporting social-emotional well-being

Empathy with children, children encouraged to express what they feel and teacher helps children deal with their feelings, teacher responsive to children's needs, encouraging children to talk with others, children allowed to speak whenever possible, children are encouraged to turn-take in verbal interactions, teacher encourages children to talk by playing alongside them and following their cues, teacher provides running commentary on activities.

Teacher actively listens to children and encourages other children to listen

Encourages language use, teacher allows long pauses to give time for children to think, teacher encourages children to talk and listen by suggesting children tell another person, teachers responds to verbal signs from children, teacher models rich language, teacher varies tone, recasts rather than corrects.

Sensitive responsiveness

Focus on small groups and individuals, listen out and responds, praise generally, individually attention, praise and encouragement when appropriate, individual attention

Supporting curiosity and problem-solving

Planning shows visitors are common in class, eg: the guard, nurse etc; lots of resources available to children, teacher supports metacognition by talking aloud thoughts and reviewing activities.

Encouraging SST in investigation and exploration and through sharing books

Supporting cognitive development and higher-order thinking

2. Please answer the following questions in relation to your proposed research. Questions (b), (c) or (d) will require detailed explanations if answered 'yes' and will be referred for additional scrutiny by the MERC. Answering 'Yes' to	Please tick	
	Yes	No
a. Does the research involve work with children (under-18) or vulnerable adults? If 'Yes', has appropriate Garda clearance (or equivalent) been obtained (include details)? Please provide the date of issue on the Certificate of Garda Vetting.		
b. Could any aspect of the research give rise to any form of harm to participants, including the researcher(s)?		
c. Could any aspect of the research produce information that could lead to criminal prosecution of the participants or others?		
d. Is deception of the participants planned in any aspect of the research? If yes, provide details.		
e. Does any aspect of the research involve patients (or their relatives or carers) or other users of health and social care services, the premises or facilities of such services, access to personal records or the participation of health or social care		

3. (a) Who are the proposed participants, e.g. teachers; students?

(b) What is your relationship with them? (If you are in a position of authority, for example, indicate how you will deal with the potential influences of such a relationship.)

4. (a) How will you recruit participants?

(b) Please detail any ethical aspects that must be considered, including the proposed use of any incentives.

5. (a) What is the location(s) at which the data collection will be undertaken?

(b) Describe any circumstances that might give rise to security concerns for participants or researchers?

6. Please indicate how informed consent of all participants will be gained. For participants under the age of 18, indicate how the informed consent of both the participant and the participant's parent/guardian will be gained. (Draft consent forms MUST be attached – see question 8 for guidance.)

7. (a) Please indicate how the participants' rights to privacy (inc. confidentiality and anonymity) and the privacy of their data will be protected. Highlight potential limitations of confidentiality in the ethics form and information sheets for participants (e.g. for small samples or insider research and how this will be addressed).

8. Please complete the checklist below to confirm you have considered all ethical aspects of consent.	Please tick
(Note that the consent forms that must accompany this application; any omission or inadequacy in detail will result in a request for amendments).	
I have attached (an) appropriate consent form(s) which include the freedom to withdraw at any stage without having to offer a reason.	
Each consent form has full contact details of the researcher to enable prospective participants to make follow-up inquiries	
Each consent form has full details, in plain non-technical language, of the purpose of the research and the proposed role of the person being invited to participate	
Each consent form has full details of the purposes to which the data (in all their forms: text, oral, video, imagery etc) will be put, including for research dissemination	
Each consent form explains how the privacy of the participants and their data will be protected, including the storage and ultimate destruction of the data as appropriate	
Each consent form gives assurances that the data collection (questionnaires, interviews, tests etc) will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner, and that the participant has the right to cease participation at any time and without the need to provide a reason	
Please include here any other comments you wish to make about the consent form(s)	

Has your proposal been submitted to any other Research Ethics Committee? Yes / No If yes, please provide details:

Declaration by All Proposers:

I have read and understood Marino Institute of Education's policy on ethics in educational research: and the Trinity College Dublin Good Research Practice Policies:

I declare that the details above reflect accurately my research proposal and I undertake to seek updated approval if substantive changes are proposed after this submission. I have consulted an authoritative set of educational research guidelines.

Signed: **Date**

(Students Only) My proposals are based on consultation with my supervisor(s).

Signed: **Date**

Supervisor's Signature: **(Student Proposal Only**, first supervisor only if there are two)

Signed: **Date**

In instances where supervisors feel that their specialised expertise may be important information for the MERC to take into account (e.g.in relation in researching highly sensitive areas such as trauma/abuse), please submit an additional page with any relevant information.

Final Approval Signed-Off by Research Ethics Committee

Signed: Date

Appendix 3

LIST OF RESEARCH METHODS THAT DO NOT TYPICALLY REQUIRE ETHICS APPROVAL

- Historical research in education
- Research that uses pre-existing data in the public domain (e.g. data from the Growing up in Ireland study)

- Review of literature or research
- Document analysis

Appendix 4

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND USEFUL READING RE. ETHICS IN RESEARCH

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