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Title of Dissertation:

Pedagogy of Play in ECCE Settings

Student's Name:

Denise Roache

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Signed Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and effort and that it has not been submitted anywhere for any award. Where other sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged

Signature:

Date:

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Abstract

The aim of this research project was to explore the views and roles of childcare practitioners, with regards to the pedagogy of play, in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings. The objectives were to examine the practitioners' views on the context of play in the early childhood curriculum, and their role at work in the promotion of play. The second objective was to identify practitioners' perceptions of the impact for children who do not participate in play. This objective also reviewed the possible barriers that hinder play becoming part of a child's daily routine. The researcher chose to undertake the research project in order to obtain a greater understanding of what barriers existed in the early years that hinder play for children and what solutions, if any, could be put in place to prevent these barriers becoming a problem in the future. The specific method of research that was used in this study was by the means of structured interviews with a small number of childcare practitioners and managers in various early years settings. Overall, the results were conclusive that childcare practitioners do have a significant role which is essential to the development of play in the early years educational settings. However, it was evident that practitioners may lack the basic knowledge of the concept and importance of play due to the number of practitioners not being adequately qualified in the sector. It was also mentioned that play should be included in the curriculum as it is one of the main ways children learn. It was emphasised that play has many benefits to a child's overall development such as: learning practical life skills, it allows practitioners to identify a child's personality traits, supports children to advance their development and relationship with peers, helps children to learn about themselves and allows them to develop friendships with their fellow peers, aids children to develop particular skills, such as, language, and fine and gross motor skills. Secondly, a number of barriers were evident in the early years, which contribute to difficulties in participating in play these were: limited resources, materials, time and the vast amount of paperwork. It also included the daily tasks that are required to be accomplished by the practitioner such as cleaning, observations and weekly planners. Following on from this, lack of materials and not enough

freedom for children to choose their activities and time constraints were also considered possible barriers that hinder play as well as practitioners being under qualified and not understanding the importance of play. The transition from home to an early years' service was also a factor, practitioners undermining the value of play and finally the weather for outdoor play. It was apparent that these barriers could have implications on the child's development, such as: speech or physical activity, children can fail to interact with their peers or try new things and could affect their overall decision makings. It was noted that these barriers can lead to a lack of self confidence in children, affect relationships, and inhibits their response to emotions or feelings. Finally, it was noted that practitioners require more supports and training to ensure that play can be further developed.

Literature Review

Introduction

Section one deals with in-depth evaluation of research already undertaken. The aim of this research project is to explore the views and roles of childcare practitioners, with regards to the pedagogy of play, in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings. The objectives of the above aim are to examine the practitioners' views on the context of play in the early childhood curriculum, and their role at work in the promotion of play. The second objective is to identify practitioners' perceptions of the impact for children who do not participate in play. This objective also reviews the possible barriers that hinder play becoming part of a child's daily routine. In this section the author is going to firstly explain the concept of play. Following on from this, the importance and benefits of play in a child's daily routine will be discussed, highlighting evidence that it is essential for a child's development and wellbeing. Furthermore, the causes and consequences for children who don't participate in play and the negative impact that is associated with it will be examined.

What is Play?

According to Blair, et al., (2005), *'play is the universal language of childhood'*. *'It is through play that children understand each other and make sense of the world around them'* (Blair, et al., 2005, p. 1). Similarly, according to Beaver, et al., (2008), many theorists such as Maria Montessori and Piaget suggests that play is the work of children. Play can also be seen as a form of learning and development. It can be messy, fun and tiring which evolves over time as a child develops, such as from solitary to cooperative play (Beaver, et al., 2008). Children can have educational activities planned out for them or carry out their own with the encouragement from parents, practitioners or peers. Such as Vygotsky's *'scaffolding learning'* (McLeod, 2010, p. 3). Moreover, Hayes, (2006), states that, *'children should always be challenged by some activities that are just beyond them as this would motivate them and move their learning forward'* (Hayes, 2006, p. 43). Children begin to play at a very young age such as imitating different sounds they may hear around them. The process of play can be seen as more important than the end product of an activity.

As well as Vygotsky, Piaget also believed that play is the most important part of a child's development (Aqee & Awwad, 2013). Play encourages children to interact with others and develop their social competence skills (Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012). For Erikson, (1963), play allows children to understand more cultural roles through pretend play as well as integrating some of these roles into their own personalities. Erikson like Piaget also considers play to give children opportunities to help develop their social skills (Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012). It is important to note here that Vygotsky and Piaget are both top cognitive psychologists of their time, many theories and research that have been developed since, in this area have, advanced from their findings.

The process of play allows the child to be themselves (Frobose, 2008). Supporting participation, creativity, individuality, problem solving and focusing on gaining a lifetime skill rather than completing the end product which can be seen as role learning which, although supports child's memory it does not always allow for room of individuality, participation and meeting the child's needs (NCCA, 2009). Many theorists such as Vygotsky believe that play is at the centre of every child's development. For example, when children play they carry out activities such as pretend play, which they cannot carry out in real life. Play allows children to imagine and create as well as introduce their own symbols or signs which in turn develop their imagination, language and concrete thought (Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012).

Early Childhood Ireland is supporting a strong belief that play is essential to the learning and development of children. This is based largely on the work done by theorists such as Jean-Jacques, Rousseau, John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Freidrich Froebel, Margaret MacMillan and Rudolf Steiner. This has also been backed by more recent policy makers, researchers and practitioners. However, even with this strong evidence that play is crucial in a child's early years, its place in the curriculum is still problematic. What counts as play is often disputed, there are still deliberations about the relationship between playing, learning and teaching (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Two imperative documents to do with acquiring more play-based learning in the early years were launched in December 2011. These were firstly the National Strategic Plan 2011–2013 and then secondly the Early Childhood Care and Education. These two new documents

have been beneficial because it has kept the topic of play high on agendas, policies, research and practice.

Lawlor & Boyce (2012), state, 'that play is one of the key contexts for children's early learning, helping children to develop and demonstrate verbal communication, social and interaction skills, imaginative thinking, and problem-solving capacities' (Lawlor & Boyce, 2012, p. 65). This statement is further backed up by research conducted on a link between the complexity of socio-dramatic play and improvement in social responsibility. It consisted of thirty five children aged between three and eight years of age in special schools. The participants included nineteen children, ten of which had autism. Some children were offered a play intervention. These children took part in the '*Learn to Play Program*', which was held twice a week for one hour, over a six month period. The findings found that the children who were offered the intervention in comparison to the group who did not, displayed a substantial decrease in play deficits and became less socially disruptive and more socially connected with peers. This suggested that the program helped the children develop their social and language skills over the short period of time (Stagnitti, et al., 2011). This research is relatively recent. It was carried out by three lecturers in Australia, who all had a background in Health and Social Care. It is believed that they had a worthy understanding of the areas which they were researching.

Children are constantly active while at play, which means they are constantly '*thinking, exploring, discovering and communicating*' (Bettelheim, 2010, p. 88.). Children develop in all areas such as physical, cognitive, language and social skills (Donohoe & Gaynor, 2007). Play gives each child the opportunity for the brain to make connections between what they observed and learned about the world that they can make sense of. According to research, the majority of a child's brain will grow during the first five years of their life, which strengthens and supports these connections (French, 2013). This allows free reign to the imagination this is where children can then engage in new experiences, activities, roles and relationships (EarlyChildhoodIreland, 2013). Once children enter preschool, usually from the age of three, it is here they learn more complex and new information which is taught through structured activities such as numeracy, literacy and many more. Previous play experience can help this as they have

created the skill of problem solving through play opportunities (Kennedy, et al., 2012).

This can also be supported by Piaget's theory that children at play are '*active participants in their own learning*' (Beaver, et al., 2008, p. 197). He believed that children made assumptions based on experiences, he called this '*schemes*'. (Beaver, et al., 2008). Play allows them to understand these different subjects. At this stage children need to take their time and learn these skills at their own pace. Through play, children learn and develop real life skills which they need to set them up for the rest of their lives (Wallace, 2011). Children often re-enact what they have seen or what they know. Therefore play encourages children to broaden their knowledge, skills and understanding of the world around them (NCCA, 2009).

Benefits of Play

Through play children set up real life scenarios which they practice and develop new skills. This helps them explore and think in new creative ways (NCCA, 2009). Support from parents as well as childcare practitioners is needed to ensure that any amount of time is given to the child to engage in play as it is very important for each child's development (Department of Education and Science, 2010). Ginsburg, (2007), states that play allows children to show their range of competencies as they are constantly working together and carrying out different activities with others around them. Children get to show their knowledge about different things through activities such as pretend play. Through pretend play children express their knowledge about people such as parents, pirates or even princesses by dressing up and talking and acting like them (EarlyChildhoodIreland, 2013). Symbolic play is another example where children pretend and re-enact roles and feelings from the past or future which allows them experience different types of development such as communication and well-being (NCCA, 2009).

A play based curriculum is one of the most widely used curriculums in preschools. This is supported by the Department of Education and National Curriculum Council. They fully support the fact that children have a right to play. A play based curriculum is structured to facilitate play and contains a large range

of activities as well as learning approaches both indoor and outdoor (Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012). By using a play based approach, this reflects how holistic development reflects how each child learns and grows. The ECCE scheme promotes children's learning through play as practitioners are encouraged to use the guidelines of Aistear and Síolta (NCCA, 2009). Children's play is the way a child learns and makes sense of the world around them, to do this, children need to have a suitable environment. For this reason they have ensured that a child's right to play is at the heart of the play based curriculum (Fox, 2008).

Many services are under financial pressures and feel that materials such as arts and crafts should be used sparingly. For this reason many early years' services are encouraging parents to bring in recyclable materials such as empty cardboard boxes, milk cartons and old tins. These are then used by the children and it enhances their imagination and also allows them to participate in free play, using their creative flair (Beaver, et al., 2008). Many different types of play help to develop different areas of a child. Therefore, identifying children's strengths and weaknesses can support the growth and development of the individual child at their different development rates (Donohoe & Gaynor, 2007). This could support the basis of an individual education plan in order for each child's needs to be met. Incorporating this into the curriculum will mean that each play activity carried out will help develop different skills in each child and develop any weakness that a child might have. It is noted that practitioners are the first educators of children apart from their parents and they see their role as facilitators who offer help without controlling a child's learning (Fiorentino & Clements, 2004).

It has been noted by researchers that play behavior has positive effects on the brain (Soledad & Anderson, 2008). Play encourages children to control their impulses and helps them to follow rules. As all play, even the wildest looking forms of play have rules. Through play, it urges children to manage their fear. Young children tend to participate in risky play, this form of play should be encouraged as the risks involved outweighed by the gains. Through risky play, children are introducing fear into their life and are learning to control this fear without panicking (Dewar, 2008). Landmark research conducted by Marion Diamond and her colleagues, in 1964, on rats, demonstrating how *'play improves memory and stimulates the growth of the cerebral cortex'* (Globus, et al., 1973, p.

176). For this experiment, the researchers measured the brain growth in rats. The first sample of rats, were raised in '*boring, solitary confinement*' and the second sample were placed in '*toy filled colonies*'. When the researchers inspected the rat's brains, they noted that the rats living in enriched environments had '*thicker cerebral cortices*' than the disadvantaged rats in sample one. Also, the rats living in the more active environment seemed to be smarter too. The researchers noted that these rats were able to find their way through a maze quicker than the deprived sample of rats (Greenough & Black, 1992). Following from this research, it is clear to see that rats raised in stimulating environments had more developed brains.

Barriers to Play in Early Years

In 2012 the European Commission had published their first Europe-wide study of the provision of school-age children, examining thirty three European countries. The findings showed that throughout Europe the provision of childcare for children from 0-6yrs is "*rather limited*", concluding that Ireland in particular is '*even more limited than elsewhere*' (StartStrong, 2014). Ireland was found to be right at the bottom of the table, losing out on last place to Spain. Ireland found themselves in this position due to their poor quality rating from lack of qualification requirements for practitioners. In comparison to countries such as Denmark and Sweden, where the majority of their childcare practitioners had a third level qualification, advancing them in areas such as pedagogy and play. This has brought around the urgent change by the government in the minimum requirements in the early years sector in Ireland (StartStrong, 2014).

As of September 2015, in Ireland, all childcare practitioners who are working in early years sector will be required to have a minimum qualification of Level 5 and all preschool (ECCE) Room Leaders will be required to have a Level 6. The Child Care Regulations 2006 (Pre-school Services, No.2) set out that a minimum of half of the staff working in the early years' service will have to have an appropriate qualification in care and development of children. In order for their qualification to meet the requirements it must include significant content such as: child development from 0-6 years, early childhood theory and practice. This would exempt qualifications such as secondary school teaching, as this

qualification would not cover the core areas required. Furthermore, the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (Free Pre-school Year), from June 2012, requires that a Play Leader in every room must have a FETAC Level 5 in Childcare (EarlyChildhoodIreland, 2015).

Children attending services need to be cared for by skilled, motivated and well-qualified practitioners. Having a qualification will ensure that the practitioners ultimately understand the importance of core areas such as play. They will be able to demonstrate expertise in a particular area and be innovative in challenging situations (Crooks & Buis, 2010). There is strong evidence to support that a child's experience in early years has a lasting effect on them. This evidence has also shown *'that positive outcomes depend on the quality of interactions between the young person and the practitioner caring for them'* (Strong, 2012, p. 4). A UK study conducted with over three thousand children, were assessed at the age of three, just as they started pre-school. Each of their development was monitored until they started in primary school around the age of five. When the children reached the age of sixteen the researchers went back to see how they were faring out. They were able to note that high quality pre-school services led to better outcomes for the children, in areas such as social and behavioral outcomes (Strong, 2012). This was a longitudinal study conducted by Start Strong who are aiming to advance children's early care and education in Ireland. This form of research allows for connections to be drawn over a long period of time, providing the researcher with more informed and accurate results than a cross sectional study would.

Crèche workers also have the added pressure of paperwork that they are required to complete on a daily basis. For example, they must complete observations on each child to ensure that they are reaching their developmental milestones. These are to be completed and backed up by activity sheets that the child has been participating in. This type of paperwork is taking practitioners away from the quality time they require. This worrying trend is also seen when inspectors visit an early years centre, according to a study conducted it was noted that early years inspectorates spend ninety percent of their time in the office ensuring that the paperwork is correct and only ten percent of their time observing the childcare practitioners and children. Research has also found that there is approximately

twenty two hours of paperwork involved for each child attending a facility (Moore, 2013).

The outdoor environment provides children with numerous opportunities to learn and develop, they can explore and release energy in a way that the indoor environment prevents. The open air gives children the freedom to scream, run and they are more encouraged to be enthusiastic and energetic. Outdoor play helps enhance motor skill development in children (Pettersen, 2012). *'It also allows them to experience the world in which they live through sensory, hands-on interaction, and there is rich evidence in the literature to support the view that outdoor play can enhance both the psychological and emotional well-being of children. They expend energy, exercise their bodies, use their senses, learn, grow and develop'* (Pettersen, 2012, p. 58). In addition, Beaver, et al. (2001), proposes a similar argument that regular physical activity is vital in the early years, as young children need to develop and perfect their physical skills.

In Ireland, outdoor activities in early childhood services are regulated by the pre-school regulations 2006. They state that, *'children in part-time of full-time day care services should have access to the outdoors on a daily basis, weather permitting'* (Beaver, et al., 2008, p. 98). In recent years, it has come to light the potential benefits that regular play outdoors can have on a child's intellectual and cognitive development. This has been documented through the Bunkeflo Education Project in Sweden (Pettersen, 2012). This study was aimed at observing the effects increased physical activity has on motor skills and school performance. Children who grew up and developed in a *'physically active environment, rich in sensorimotor experiences, where they climb, hang crawl and balance'*, achieved higher academically than that of the controlled group (Ericsson & Karlsson, 2009, p. 278). It is suggested that physically active teachers are more inclined to introduce more physical activity into the classroom. Lepi, 2014 adds that: *'Introducing physical activity to the school day can not only keep kids healthy, but also increase attention, behaviour, and positive attitudes leading to improved academic performance'* (Lepi, 2014, p. 2).

A study conducted by Early Childhood Ireland and the Institute of Technology Sligo, in 2010, has suggested that Irish parents do value the great outcomes of

play, however, due to the Irish weather eighty- eight percent of children play outside less in winter and seventy four percent of children don't get the opportunity to play outdoors when it's raining. Compared to the Scandinavian countries, the children dressed in appropriate clothing for the weather and have the opportunity to play outdoors a lot more; these children tend to have lower levels of obesity also. This study has also pointed out that children who play outdoors are less likely to get sick, become stressed and aggressive (Louv, 2010). In most of the Scandinavian preschools, children spend most of their day outside, including the winter months, their main aim is to emphasise the value of play, unlike Ireland where our main priority is setting goals and monitoring the progress of each child. This was a recent study conducted in Ireland, by Early Childhood Ireland, who would have a great emphasis on the development and care of children. Together with Institute of Technology Sligo, who would also advocate for the best interests of the child. This research will hopefully highlight the importance to other childcare providers and parents of children receiving their outdoor physical activity, whatever the weather.

According to Zollinger (2013), who conducted a UK survey on '*How active are our children?*' It surveyed six thousand five hundred children and found that only half of the children reached the recommended hour of physical activity each day. Close on forty percent of girls were far less active, with boys achieving a little over sixty percent (Zollinger, 2013). The study revealed that the average British child receives their first mobile phone aged twelve. But 1 in 10 children has one by the age of five. This suggests that children who receive phones for communicating or playing games at an early age, is causing them to become less active (Zollinger, 2013).

Fromme (2003), argues, that there is no evidence that suggests technology is damaging to their lifestyle (2003 cited Downey, et al., 2004, p. 11). They found that children who engaged frequently with technology do not give up other activities and hobbies such as sport and outdoor physical activity. Fleming (1996), suggested that children who play with toys, whether it was a toy car or a Nintendo, it helps them to make sense of the world around them and is essential to their development (1996 cited Downey, et al., 2004, p.9). With conflicting arguments here, it somewhat seems to be a grey area. Particularly, with

technology becoming a greater part of our everyday life. More so now, than when the research above was conducted. The author believes that further research is required to advance the body of knowledge on the effects technology could have on the fundamental development of children.

Consequences of Inadequate Play

Lack of play can cause *'physical, intellectual, social and emotional harm to children'* (Hammond, 2010, p. 2). Without sufficient play children will fail to be creative or imaginative. As well as this, children will fail to have vital skills such as curiosity, social skills, resiliency and the ability to assess risk. The lack of play in children will cause them to fail to learn to work in groups, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and speak up for themselves. The lack of these skills can have dramatic long- term effects on them. These children who are deprived of play will show increased problems with social interactions, including a *'higher risk of coming in conflict with the law by young adulthood'* (Hammond, 2010, p. 2). Children without regular play can face increased behavioural problems, including *'violence and emotional outbursts'*. They will show a lack of ability to interact with practitioners parents. As mentioned earlier in the long- term play deprivation can have serious consequences. To add to this, physician, psychiatrist, and clinical researcher Stuart Brown, studied more than six thousand criminals and *'found that ninety percent of convicted murderers lacked "play features" in their childhoods'* (Tartakovsky, 2012, p. 1). This is a startling discovery and it proves the importance of play in a child's future.

Justification

The aim of this research project is to explore the views and roles of childcare practitioners, with regards to the pedagogy of play, in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings. The objectives of the above aim are to examine the practitioners' views on the context of play in the early childhood curriculum, and their role at work in the promotion of play. The second objective will identify practitioners' perceptions of the impact for children who don't participate in play. This research project was supported by research highlighted throughout the literature review by gathering data from practitioners in early years child care services in the west of Ireland. The data gathered aims to support these and future

practitioners to build their knowledge of play and ensure that they incorporate it into their everyday routine and policies within the setting. The researcher chose to undertake the research project in order to obtain a greater understanding of what barriers existed in the early years that hinder play for children and what solutions, if any, could be put in place to prevent these barriers becoming a problem in the future. Furthermore, the researcher believed they had a good understanding in the area of early childhood care and education and was interested to identify problematic areas within the west of Ireland and if possible help these facilities overcome these barriers.

To conclude, from reading this essay, it is clear to see the importance play is in a child's early years. It supports the development of fine and gross motor skills. It encourages physical activity which is essential to the emotional development and also to the child's physical development. In addition, it has been acknowledged that children who are active achieve higher academically in school. Technology is becoming one of the biggest barriers for children missing out on play. With technology growing fast, education surrounding the importance of play needs to be educated to parents and childcare practitioners. Furthermore, it was noted by researcher Stuart Brown, that many convicted murder criminals lacked play in their early development, highlighting the overall importance of play in childhood.

Method Section

Introduction

This section outlines the rationale used, to decide the particular type of method, best suited to gathering the required data for this study. Firstly, the research design indicates how the author conducted their overall research and explain its rationale for choosing this method. It will then describe the profile of the participants and will outline the salient characteristics of the sample including age, gender or other relevant factors, as well as an explanation of how and why they were selected. From this, a brief description of materials used in the study will be outlined. Finally, the procedure section, describes the step by step process followed in the original research. It will include a consideration of informed consent and other relevant ethical issues.

Research Design

One important factor that needs to be considered before undertaking your research is to identify which framework is best suited for the study. There are three approaches that can be considered, quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods of research. Creswell (2003), suggests '*the choice of which approach to use is based on the research aims and objectives*' (Creswell, 2003, p. 59). The main aim of this research project was to explore the views and roles of childcare practitioners with regards to the pedagogy of play, in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings. The first objective examined the practitioners' views on the context of play in the early childhood curriculum, and their role at work in the promotion of play. The second objective identified practitioners' perceptions of the possible barriers and impact for children who do not participate in play.

There are two methods of collecting data that can be used by the author. These are qualitative or quantitative. Punch (2002), states that '*quantitative research collects facts and studies the relationship of one set of facts against another*' (Punch, 2000, p. 103). It focuses on larger samples. This uses a technique that quantifies and if possible generalises the results (Bell, 1993). Qualitative research focuses on smaller samples than quantitative research. The sampling group chosen generally have some characteristic of interest to the researcher and the research project (Punch, 2000). According to Hogan, et al. (2009) qualitative

research is concerned with '*collecting and analysing information in many forms, chiefly non-numeric*' (Hogan, et al., 2009, p. 26).

Based on the aforementioned aim and objectives a qualitative research design was deemed the most appropriate method and was applied to this research project.

The specific method of research that was used in this study was by the means of structured interviews with a small number of childcare practitioners and managers in various early years settings. The structure of an interview allows the researcher to obtain a more in-depth insight into the knowledge and role of childcare practitioners with regard to play. It is assumed due to their experience that these participants will have an understanding of the topic presented to them. As the researcher was looking to obtain the practitioners individual experiences and views this qualitative method is again presumed to be the best suited. It will also allow the researcher to clarify any questions that may not be correctly interpreted by the practitioners. However, qualitative research can be very time consuming, as the researcher has to make contact with potential participants, interview them, transcribe the data and then work with the material that was shared and take what they have learned from it. However, Seidman (1998), highlights, '*that any method of research will take time and energy*' (Seidman, 1998, P. 98).

Participants

The sample group the researcher selected comprised of childcare practitioners and managers. The researcher selected this niche of people, as it is believed that they have the knowledge needed for this research project, as they are working with children in the early years sector. It was decided that six interviews would be conducted within three different childcare services (of which the researcher has not worked in), the participants included one manager from each service and one employee, in an effort to attain a broader range of views and more informative result. However, it was noted by the researcher that the managers spent very little time in the crèche observing the children. This information was communicated to the researcher prior to the interviews. Due to this fact, it was agreed upon that the room leaders would be interviewed instead of the managers. From this, each manager then selected the employees to participate in the interview process. Overall, this left the sample at six participants, three room leaders and three

employees. The average age of those participating was 31, and they were all females that participated. The interviews all took place in the west of Ireland at a time that was convenient for the participants. The qualifications ranged from FETAC Level 5 to Honors Degree Level 8 in Childcare. All participants were Irish that participated.

Materials

With regards to the research plan of investigation, firstly, a draft of questions (see Appendix 1) was compiled to ensure questions were clear, relevant to my topic area and ensured that the research aims and objectives were addressed. Secondly, a pilot interview was conducted with fellow peers, to help eliminate any confusion or errors regarding the questions and to determine the length of the interviews. Following this, the final questions (see Appendix 1) were drawn up and forwarded to all participants after the initial and consultation prior to the interviews. This gave them time to prepare for the interview session. It was accompanied by the consent form (see Appendix 2) and information sheet (see Appendix 3) that assured to protect the participant's information and identification. The forms included the venue, time and date of the interview session. They also included my contact details, this allowed the participants the opportunity to contact me with any queries prior to the research being conducted. The consent forms as directed in my correspondence, was collected from participants on the day of the interviews before they are conducted. On completion of the interview, results were analysed and discussed.

Procedure

Firstly, the researcher phoned the managers of the three childcare facilities in the west of Ireland, she introduced herself as a student from AIT and discussed her intended research topic. The managers seem interested with what the researcher proposed and she arranged a meeting with each manager to discuss the research further. During the initial meetings the researcher explained in more depth what the research project was about and answered any questions. The researcher ascertained whether the managers felt that their staff may be interested in participating in the research. The researcher then left consent forms (see Appendix 2) and information sheets (see Appendix 3) for the manager to pass on

to the childcare practitioners, once they had been consulted on the matter. These forms explained what the research project is about and what their role would entail if they chose to participate in the interview and my contact details. The researcher made it clear that their participation was voluntary, also she informed the interviewees on the structure of the interview.

The prospective participants were given a number of days to decide whether or not to take part in the research study. The researcher believed this would give them an opportunity to think about their decision and discuss it with fellow peers and their line manager. The researcher followed up with a phone call to each crèche to organise the interviews at a time that is convenient for the interested staff. The researcher ensured following consultation with their manager that the interviews would not be conducted around the children or when the participants should be physically working with the children. The participants agreed to conduct the interviews in a designated quiet room in the facility when they had finished their shift. For this study, the researcher was operating from the Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2011. She will adhere to all of the guidelines. Before the interview was conducted the researcher asked each participant not to mention any specific names of people, children or facilities in the interview. If any issues relating to risk were to arise, the researcher would liaise with the relevant managers and adhere to the Children First Guideline procedures. The researcher informed the participants that questions would only be asked upon the topic of play. The participants were once again ensured that their participation was voluntary and they could stop the interview process at any time if they felt uncomfortable. No payment or incentive for participation was given. However, the researcher offered to provide them with a copy of the findings of the research once finalised, examined and marks have been received.

On the consent form, there is a specific question asking the participant if s/he want the interview to be taped. Also, on the information sheet, it was explained that if the participant does not want to be taped, the researcher will take notes instead. This would ensure that the participants would not feel uncomfortable. It was communicated to each participant that the tapes would be destroyed after the findings had been written, presented and no longer required for examination

purposes. The written transcripts will be held for a period of time (as dictated by college policy) and, tapes or recordings will be destroyed soon after the completion of the study. It is important to the researcher that promises of confidentiality are adhered to. Files will only be accessible to student, supervisor and the external examiner. The raw data will be stored on a password protected file on the computer. The researcher will keep any records and data until September 2015, ensuring that confidentiality is not breached. The interviews were thirty to forty five minutes in duration.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues are slowly becoming an important area in social research, particularly when concerning vulnerable groups or people where English is not their first language. Ethical issues are important elements in assessing the impact of validity (Charleton, 2014). Ethical considerations for the interviews were applied during this research.

Participants will be fully aware of the purpose of the research. The researcher will ensure to safeguard against anything that could cause harm to the participants taking part. If for any reason a situation develops the researcher will discontinue the interview session. As mentioned above, the researcher would follow guidelines from the Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children 2011.

The researcher will ensure that records are coded and secure on password protected computer, ensuring that the participant's identity is not revealed. Permission will be sought to use quotations for the research project and caution will be used as to not reveal the identity of the person or business.

Confidentiality will be assured to all participants. Participants will have time to read and reread the cover letter and questions before giving their consent to take part. The researcher has the full responsibility to ensure that all information received is kept confidential. If a situation arises where the researcher feels that the participant is a danger to themselves or others the researcher will ensure that the participant is referred to the appropriate services to receive the help they need.

The researcher will ensure that the participants are informed of the nature of the study. However, due to the openness of the questionnaires it is not always possible for the researcher to provide a complete picture of the study. It will be outlined that participants can withdraw from the study at any time without any questions asked. The researcher will ensure that they provide a non-judgmental and trusting environment (Charleton, 2014).

Delimitations

One of the aim constraints the researcher had was ensuring a benchmark for quality. To ensure this is achieved, she followed the eight criteria for quality highlighted by Tracy (2010). These included: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical and meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). By following this criteria, it allowed the researcher to ensure quality throughout the research and in particular in relation to the questions put to the participants.

Secondly the researcher found that she needed to be aware of and understand power and emotional labour to ensure that they she does not make the participant feel uncomfortable in any way (Hoffman, 2007). The researcher knew it was important here to not make the interviewee feel the researcher has all the power as this may affect the results. The interviewer apparently may have more power than the interviewee, but the interviewees have control over what they say and how they say it, which is the most crucial part of the conversation. The researcher found that they had to “*deliberately take a less powerful role or abandon some of his or her power*”, to ensure that they got the right balance and that the interviewee doesn’t feel threatened, to ensure the results are not affected (Hoffman, 2007, p. 321).

Finally, it was important for the researcher to avoid a situation where the participants think that they are friends as this could affect the information that was being provided (Charleton, 2014).

Results

Introduction

This chapter will identify the key findings of the study. The information in this section is gathered from the structured interviews conducted with six childcare practitioners from the early years, comprising of three childcare practitioners and three room leaders. The interview had three different sections which are linked to the main aim and objectives of the study. They are as follows:

Section A – General demographic information of the participants

Section B – The practitioners' views on the context of play in the early childhood curriculum, and their role at work in the promotion of play.

Section C – The practitioners' perceptions of the impact for children who do not participate in play.

The key themes identified within this research were:

- ✓ The practitioner's role an important element in promoting play:
 - The practitioner's role as facilitators.
 - The practitioner's role in providing an active and stimulating environment.
- ✓ Lack of qualifications in the sector.
- ✓ The Importance of Play in a Child's Daily Routine:
 - Play acts as a learning tool for children.
 - Play enables children to develop life skills.
- ✓ Barriers to Play:
 - Practitioner's perception of play.
 - The weather.
 - Limited resources and paper work.
 - Structure of environment.
- ✓ Consequences of Children not Playing:
 - Negative effects on their development.

Method of Analysis

The method chosen to analyse the data was by means of thematic analysis. “*Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data*” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). In this section the results were categorised into three sections and the themes that developed in each section were discussed.

Results

Section A of the interview looked at the demographic profile of the practitioners and aimed to obtain general characteristics about them. This gave the author an insight into the participant’s work experience, their qualifications and their age. The questions included in this section are: age, gender, work experience and qualifications. The average age of those participating was 31, and they were all females that participated. The interviews all took place in the west of Ireland at a time that was convenient for the participants. The qualifications ranged from FETAC Level 5 to Honours Degree Level 8 in Childcare. All participants were Irish that participated.

Section B of the interview examined the practitioners’ views on the context of play in the early childhood curriculum, and their role at work in the promotion of play. In this section the childcare practitioners were probed in relation to: their role surrounding children’s play, the benefits of play, whether it is important to ensure play is included in the curriculum and if there is enough education on the importance of play for childcare practitioners and parents. The key findings from this section found that practitioners believe that they have a fundamental role surrounding the core elements of play to a child’s development. However, the results found that, due to the lack of qualifications in the sector, there is a lack of education surrounding the importance of play within the role of a childcare practitioner. It also came to light that practitioners feel that parents undervalue the importance of play. The relevant themes that emerged were as follows:

The practitioner’s role an important element in promoting play

Under this theme, the childcare practitioners were questioned on their role surrounding the children’s play in the early years setting and what they felt their

role entailed. The key findings indicated the importance of their role in the promotion of play as follows:

The practitioner's role as facilitators:

Childcare Practitioner A:

‘I feel that early years’ practitioners have a very important role in facilitating meaningful play experiences and in planning activities in which reflect the needs and interests of each of the children in their care.’

Room Leader A:

‘Absolutely, I think practitioners have an extremely important role when it comes to play. Childcare practitioners act as facilitators for children’s play and the amount of play and the types of play all depends on the childcare practitioner’s views and values surrounding play. So I think a childcare practitioner’s role in relation to play is to one facilitate it and making it possible for children to do so and to provide stimulating and appropriate play materials and opportunities for the children.’

The practitioner's role in providing an active and stimulating environment:

Childcare Practitioner B:

‘I do think practitioners play an important role in children's play in an early years setting. Giving a caring and positive response to children during play is a must, talking and listening to children during play and becoming involved with role play etc. it's also important to provide a positive attitude, when practitioners provide this attitude children will express themselves even more as they will be comfortable in the setting’

Childcare Practitioner C:

‘Yes, I believe they do have an important role as play is a child’s way of learning and as practitioners, they must ensure that the activities stimulate children’s learning, it is important that they provide play activities that incorporate learning in a fun way.’

Room Leader B:

‘‘Yes, childcare practitioners are very important to the child’s everyday play activities as well as identity and well-being in everyday life. Their roles include engaging in age appropriate play plan simple lessons, organise outings, and create a warm safe structured environment for the children.’’

Room Leader C:

‘‘I do think childcare workers play a very important role in a child’s life at such a young age. I think we are their first educator apart from the parent’s role, particularly when it comes to certain aspects like play.’’

It is evident the practitioners mutually agree that they have a crucial role in the child’s overall play in the early years sector, through acting as a facilitator and providing a stimulating environment with the materials that are readily available to the children ensuring that it reflects the child’s needs and interests. Moreover, practitioners need to lead by example and engage with the children in a fun and appropriate manner, while all the time creating a positive environment for the children to freely express themselves.

Lack of qualifications in the sector

Under this theme, the participants were asked if they believed childcare practitioners were educated enough around the area of play. The key findings were:

Childcare Practitioner A:

‘‘I feel that early years practitioners could be educated more on the importance of play and maybe new play approaches and how to facilitate these new ideas. I also think from experience that newly qualified early years practitioners (as in the last 5-7 years) have more of an understanding of the importance of play and allowing children to play freely instead of having more structured play.’’

Childcare Practitioner B:

‘‘I don’t feel that all practitioners are educated enough on the importance of play.’’

Childcare Practitioner C:

“I do not think all practitioners are educated on the importance of play, as working with five other child care workers they do not see the benefits that play have as they feel that a separation between play and ‘work’ is necessary.”

Room Leader A:

“In general, from my experience I don’t think most early years professionals value play enough and have a lack of education surrounding play, however, I do feel that this is due to the workforce being under qualified.”

Room Leader C:

“When I first started college, I didn't think we were educated enough on the importance of play, but, by my 3rd and 4th year I found that the main focus was on the importance of play and how it benefits a child. So I think it is important that child care workers are educated.”

The childcare practitioners shared their views on how they believe that practitioners fail to understand the importance of play and believe that it is important for them to be qualified to develop new approaches to facilitate play in the early years and to ensure that they have an understanding of core areas such as play.

The importance of play in a child’s daily routine

Under this theme, childcare practitioners were questioned on how important it was to ensure play was included in the early years curriculum. The findings were as follows:

Play acts as a learning tool for children:

Childcare Practitioner A:

“Play is extremely important in any early years curriculum as this is the way that children learn.”

“Play is a vital part of children’s life and it is how they learn about themselves and the world. The benefits are numerous, play helps the development of

children. I feel the main benefits are that it allows children to socialise with others and it allows them to work out rules like sharing or conflict over toys.’’

Childcare Practitioner B:

‘‘Play is a vital part of children's education. It allows them to be creative while using imagination, physical, cognitive and emotional strength. Without play, children would not know how to communicate and adapt to the world around them.’’

Room Leader A:

‘‘If you look at how children learn the most effective learning tool is play therefore it must be incorporated into the daily curriculum. Even if you look at Aistear's curriculum framework play is of huge importance and rightly so.’’

‘‘Play acts as a learning tool for children. This enables them to guide and influence how and what they learn. If children get a choice in relation to their own learning they will be more inclined to want to learn as opposed to being told what to do, when to do it and how to do it.’’

Play enables children to develop life skills:

Childcare Practitioner B:

‘‘The function of play helps children to recognise emotion, communicate with the world around them, play can be used to work out problems and experiment with different solutions, children act out real life situations during play in a deep way, practice language skills, develop fine and gross motor skills.’’

Childcare Practitioner C:

‘‘Play being included in the daily curriculum is very important as the different types of play introduces new learning for children. As risky play, messy play and free play for example, offer children different learning opportunities.’’

‘‘Physical development is increased along with social development during play as it encourages children to build relationships and helps children's vitamin D intake, if they are outside, and stimulates their cognitive development.’’

Room Leader A:

‘‘Also play encourages the development of so many communication and social skills which is so important. I feel as a childcare professional that if children have the right start in life regarding social and communication skills along with practical life skills this will be of huge benefit to them throughout life. I would rather that children whom I care for leave my care knowing how to communicate and socialise effectively and be able to do things like zip up their jackets and open yoghurt pots etc. rather than be able to count backwards from 1000. This is why I feel play is so important it allows for co-constructive learning.’’

Room Leader B:

‘‘It is vital children learn and develop through play every day. ‘‘

‘‘The benefits of play include, encourage communication and interactions with peers and staff. Allows staff to observe children's likes and dislikes.’’

Room Leader C:

‘‘I think it is very important for play to be included in the curriculum as it gives the children the independence to choose and progress their own development as they decided what they play and helps with their social, emotion, and physical development.’’

‘‘I think the functions of play are to provide the child with a choice to allow them the independence of free choice, social skills to be involved with peers in their class and physical skills, gross motor and fine motor skills and well-being as children become more aware of boundaries when giving the freedom.’’

It was noted that play is extremely important to include in the daily curriculum. It acts as a learning tool and allows children to develop skill that are essential to their everyday development, such as: recognise emotion, communicate with the world around them, work out problems, experiment with different solutions, develop practice language skills, fine and gross motor skills, build relationships, helps children’s vitamin D intake, stimulates their cognitive development, also allows staff to observe children's likes and dislikes, helps with social, emotion, and physical development, children become more aware of boundaries when

giving the freedom, furthermore, it helps them make sense of the world around them.

Section C of the interview examined the practitioners' perceptions of the impact and barriers for children who don't participate in play. In this section of the interview the practitioners were consulted in relation to barriers that they face when incorporating play into the daily curriculum. The key findings in this section were, firstly, that barriers do exist in the early years settings. It was highlighted here that this can arise from the massive amount of paperwork childcare practitioners are required to fill out. Secondly, another common theme which arose was the limited resources, materials and time constraints that practitioners had to deal with which also contributed to barriers to play. The weather in Ireland was a factor for children not getting to play outdoors often and it was also noted that children can be at risk of losing out on many life skills if they are deprived from play, and it can have an impact on their overall development.

Barriers to Play

Under this theme, the childcare practitioners were consulted in relation to barriers to play that they feel are evident and can prevent children from partaking in play. The findings were as follows:

Practitioner's perception of play:

Childcare Practitioner A:

"I feel there are some barriers to play."

Childcare practitioner C:

"One barrier would be people's perception of play, as many people feel that for children to learn, it must be more academically orientated and that play is just fun. One way this could be overcome through educating more people about the importance of play."

The weather:

Childcare practitioner C:

‘Another barrier to outdoor play in particular in Ireland, is the weather. Many children do not get to play outdoors during the winter months due to the weather. A way to overcome this would be to have suitable outdoor clothing for the children, such as wet suits and wellies.’

Limited resources and paper work:

Room Leader A:

‘To a certain degree I feel that play can be limited due to equipment, materials and resources available at times, but children can find a way to play even in an empty room and I think that the biggest barrier to play in early years settings is practitioners rigidity to routine and paperwork.

Also, I feel that the obligations on childcare practitioners to do so much paperwork (observations, cleaning schedules, learning reviews, weekly plans etc...) hinders the opportunities for play to happen. I think that practitioners need to stop worrying about these things as much and focus on the play children are getting. I believe that some sort of a system should be in place to help practitioners overcome the vast amount of paperwork as it is becoming a major concern. We chose this profession to work with children and not to spend all our time dedicated to paperwork.’

Structure of environment:

Room Leader B:

‘Maybe not enough freedom of choice to play and possibly materials not always been available to the children.’

Room Leader C:

‘I found in some facility's I have worked in were for very strict with structure and how they liked to do things with the kids and only allowing 30-45 min free play and not knowing the importance of play. I think childcare workers need to be more educated on the importance of play for the child.’

It is clear to see that barriers do exist in the early years. These barriers vary from external and internal constraints such as daily tasks that are required by the

childcare practitioners to undertake, such as paperwork, materials not readily available and strict structure within facilities and finally the weather. These were all barriers highlighted by the practitioners.

Consequences of children not playing

Under this theme, childcare practitioners were asked to highlight possible consequences of children not playing enough in their early years. The findings were as follows:

Negative effects on their development:

Childcare Practitioner A:

“There can be consequences of children not playing enough, or at all in their early years settings. I have seen from experience that some children who have a difficult time separating from their parents in the settling in period and the first few weeks or even months spend most of the day or their time in childcare facilities receiving comfort from practitioners miss out on a lot of time to play and socialise with their peers and in my opinion, those children seem to need that time for play more than others and tend to be behind developmentally than others whether it be speech or physical ability to carry out a task.”

Childcare Practitioner B:

“Children will become unaware and lack understanding of how the world works. They will lack social, emotional skills and fail to respond or express to emotions and feelings.”

Childcare Practitioner C:

If children do not get to play they may not be able to interact with their peers and relate to them if they are not playing enough, they don't take risks to try new things.

Room Leader A:

“I feel children lose out on many skills by not being provided with enough play within their days. Communication skills, physical skills, literacy skills, numeracy

skills, social skills, life skills etc. Also, they are bound to get bored and act up if they cannot play. At the end of the day they are children! They have a need to play.’’

Room Leader B:

‘‘No relationships with people their own age, lack of confidence and social life skills.’’

Room Leader C:

‘‘I think the negative of not having play on the early years curriculum is it can affect a child's development, as they won't be as outgoing and socialising with peers in their class. It can affect their physical development, emotional and well-being as I think the child will be too sheltered and shy and afraid to make decisions for themselves.’’

It is evident here that practitioners believe that children whom miss out on play will begin to lack an understanding of the world and it will have lasting consequences on their overall development, such as: they will lack social, emotional skills, fail to respond or express to emotions and feelings, they may not be able to interact with their peers and relate to them, become afraid to try new things, lose out on communication skills, physical skills, literacy skills, numeracy skills, become bored and act up, fail to make relationships with people their own age, lack of confidence and they won't be as outgoing and socialising with peers in their class.

Overall Summary of Results

Overall the results in section B were conclusive that childcare practitioners do have a significant role which is essential to the development of play in the early years educational settings, by means of facilitating play in a stimulating environment. However, it was noted that practitioners may lack the basic knowledge of the concept and importance of play due to the number of practitioners not being adequately qualified. It was also noted that play should be included in the curriculum as it is one of the main ways children learn. It was emphasised that play has many benefits to a child's overall development such as

learning practical life skills, it allows practitioners to identify a child's personality traits, supports children to advance their development and relationship with peers, helps children to learn about themselves and allows them to develop friendships with their fellow peers, aids children to develop particular skills, such as, language, and fine and gross motor skills.

Secondly, section C found that a number of barriers were evident in the early years, which contribute to difficulties in participating in play these were: limited resources, materials, time and the vast amount of paperwork. It also included the daily tasks that are required to be accomplished by the practitioner such as cleaning, observations and weekly planners. Following on from this, lack of materials and not enough freedom for children to choose their activities, time constraints were also considered possible barriers that hinder play as well as practitioners being under qualified and not understanding the importance of play. The transition from home to an early years' service was also a factor, practitioners undermining the value of play and finally the weather for outdoor play. It was noted that these barriers could have implications on their development such as speech or physical activity, children can fail to interact with their peers or try new things and could affect their overall decision makings. It was noted that these barriers can lead to a lack of self confidence in children and affect relationships, and inhibits their response to emotions or feelings. Overall, however, the practitioners feel that all play is beneficial to the child. Finally, it was noted that practitioners require more supports and training to ensure that play can be further developed.

Discussion

Introduction

This section analyses the findings of the research study that have been recorded by means of structured interviews. The results are compared with findings from relevant reports reviewed earlier in the literature review. Trends, similarities and differences in the aforementioned studies and current research study are discussed. The aim of this research project was to explore the researcher's initial aims and objectives.

Aim of the research project

To explore the views and roles of childcare practitioners, with regards to the pedagogy of play, in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings.

Objectives:

The first objective was to examine the practitioners' views on the context of play in the early childhood curriculum, and their role at work in the promotion of play.

The second objective identified practitioners' perceptions of the impact for children who do not participate in play. This objective also reviewed the possible barriers that hinder play becoming part of a child's daily routine.

Brief Summary of Findings from the Results Section

Overall the results in section B were conclusive that childcare practitioners believe that they do have a significant role, which is essential to the development of play in the early years educational settings. However, it was evident that practitioners may lack the basic knowledge of the underlying concept and importance of play due to a number of practitioners not being adequately qualified and trained in the sector. It was also mentioned that play should be included in the curriculum as it is one of the main ways children learn. It was emphasised that play has many benefits to a child's overall development. Secondly, section C found that a number of barriers were evident in the early years, which contribute to difficulties in participating in play. It was apparent that these barriers could have implications on the child's development. Finally, it was

noted that practitioners require more supports and training to ensure that play can be further developed.

Discussion of Findings

This study found a mutual theme emerged among the participants. Each participant believed that they had a crucial role to undertake with regards to teaching the fundamental elements of play and providing a stimulating environment to help challenge the children which they care for. *“Yes, childcare practitioners are very important to the child’s everyday play activities, as well as identity and well-being in everyday life”*. This similarly corresponds to another practitioner who suggests, *“Absolutely, I think practitioners have an extremely important role when it comes to play. Childcare practitioners act as facilitators for children’s play and the amount of play.”* This is the predominant theme that corresponds across all of the feedback from participants that were interviewed. When you review these findings in relation to the literature, there are notably similar findings, Fox (2008), notes that children’s play is the way a child learns and makes sense of the world around them, to do this children need to have a suitable environment. For this reason practitioners are encouraged to demonstrate their knowledge of play and ensure a fun and stimulating environment for the children, it is also for this reason practitioners are crucial to the quality of play children receive. It is evident here that there is a strong link between the feedback from the practitioners interviewed and research in the literature, to back up the important role practitioners have to undertake in a child’s play in the early years. It is imperative that practitioners understand the important role which they have to contribute.

The practitioners similarly believed that their roles consisted of, *“facilitating play and making it possible for children to do so and, to provide stimulating and appropriate play materials and opportunities for the children”*. While another practitioner alike states that their role includes, *“engaging in age appropriate play plan simple lessons, organise outings, and create a warm, safe, structured environment for the children.”* This was supported by Fiorentino & Clements, (2004), who states that practitioners are the first educators of children apart from their parents and they see their role as facilitators who offer help without

controlling a child's learning. One of the practitioners similarly echoed this response, *"I think we are their first educator apart from the parent's role, particularly when it comes to certain aspects like play."* This approach will help children shape their own learning based on their own particular interests, desires, likes and dislikes. Also, through observing these traits, it will allow the practitioners to recognise the children's individual personalities.

Benefits of Play

It was noted throughout the literature the numerous benefits that are associated with play. As suggested by Mhathúna & Taylor (2012), play allows children to understand more cultural roles through pretend play as well as integrating some of these roles into their own personalities. Furthermore, Erikson like Piaget, also considers play to give children opportunities to help develop their social skills (Erikson, 1963). Moreover, it was also highlighted by the practitioners from this study, these benefits were that, *"play acts as a learning tool for children, which enables them to guide and influence what and how they learn."* This can also be supported by Piaget's theory that children at play are active participants in their own learning. He believed that children made assumptions based on experiences. Which one of the practitioners also suggested *"play encourages the development of so many skills such as communication and social skills"*. This is further backed by Donoghue and Gaynor 2007, who suggest children develop in all areas such as physical, cognitive, language and social skills.

Moreover, Lawlor & Boyce (2012), state, that play is one of the key contexts for children's early learning, helping children to develop and demonstrate verbal communication, social and interaction skills, imaginative thinking, and problem-solving capacities. This statement is further strengthened by research conducted by Stagnitti, et al., (2011), on a link between the complexity of socio-dramatic play and improvement in social responsibility. The children who didn't receive the play intervention displayed a substantial decrease in play deficits and became less socially disruptive and more socially connected with peers. Moreover, this can be further backed by research conducted by Marion Diamond and her colleagues, in 1964, on rats, demonstrating how *'play improves memory and stimulates the growth of the cerebral cortex'* (Globus, et al., 1973). One sample

of rats were brought up in *'toy filled colonies'*, while the other sample were raised in, *'boring solitary confinement'*. When the researchers inspected the rat's brains, they noted that the rats living in enriched environments had *'thicker cerebral cortices'* than the disadvantaged rats in sample one. Also, the rats living in the more active environment seemed to be smarter too. The researchers noted that these rats were able to find their way through a maze quicker than the deprived sample of rats (Greenough & Black, 1992). Following from this research, it is clear to see that rats raised in stimulating environments had more developed brains. From this, it is evident that play will also help to stimulate children's brains, which proves essential to providing solutions to problematic situations.

The researcher believes that one of the practitioner's made an interesting point: *'I would rather that children whom I care for, leave my care knowing how to communicate and socialise effectively and be able to do things like zip up their jackets and open yoghurt pots etc. rather than be able to count backwards from 1000. This is why I feel play is so important, it allows for co-constructive learning.'* This goes to show that play is essential for a child's overall development and that the practitioners interviewed are aware of the potential benefits. They understand play as a child's main approach to learning and understanding their surrounding environment.

Finally, however, even with the strong evidence that play is crucial in a child's early years, it was noted within the literature by Wood & Attfield, (2005), that its place in the curriculum is still problematic. What counts as play is often disputed, there are still deliberations about the relationship between playing, learning and teaching. Similarly, as noted by the Department of Education and Science, (2010), that, support from parents as well as childcare practitioners is needed to ensure that any amount of time is given to the child to engage in play as it is very important for each child's development. The practitioners interviewed also seem to share this view, with one suggesting that, *'I do not think all practitioners are educated on the importance of play, as working with five other child care workers they do not see the benefits that play have as they feel that a separation between 'play' and 'work' is necessary.'* Similarly another practitioner mentioned, *'I found in some facility's I have worked in were very strict with structure and how they liked to do things with the kids and only allowing 30-45 min free play and*

not knowing the importance of play. I think childcare workers need to be more educated on the importance of play for the child.'' Followed by, *'One barrier would be people's perception of play, as many people feel that for children to learn, it must be more 'academically orientated' and that play is just fun. One way this could be overcome through educating more people about the importance of play''*. However, an interesting point was made by one of the practitioners interviewed, she felt that *''the amount of play and the types of play all depends on the childcare practitioner's views and values surrounding play''*. Which directly corresponds with Lepi (2004), who suggested that physically active practitioners are more inclined to introduce more physical activity into the classroom. This goes to show that the amount of play and physical activity a child gets to take part in can vary, depending on the interests of the practitioner. However, with the introduction of the National Strategic Plan 2011–2013 and then secondly the Early Childhood Care and Education. These documents will keep the topic of play high on agendas, policies, research and practice (Wood & Attfield, 2005).

Barriers to Play

It was noted by the practitioners and the relevant literature that many barriers existed in early years services that could prevent children from participating in play on a daily basis. The first of these barriers mentioned was *''lack of equipment, materials and resources available''*. Many services are under financial pressures and feel that materials such as arts and crafts should be used sparingly. However, as mentioned by one of the practitioners *''children can find a way to play even in an empty room''*. For this reason, as mentioned in the literature review by Donohoe & Gaynor, (2007), many early years services now encourage parents to bring in recyclable materials such as empty cardboard boxes, milk cartons and old tins. These are then used by the children and it enhances their imagination and also allows them to participate in free play, using their creative flair. Furthermore, it allowed children to re-enact situations that are unfolding in their home life. One of the practitioners provide the researcher with an example she experienced in the facility which she worked: *''a children's mother had recently had a new baby and she would everyday play in the doll area, while there she would look for things that her mother would have for her baby brother like bottles, soothers, blankets, cot and buggies among other things,*

we as practitioners noticed that we didn't have a lot of that material and noticed her improvising with other materials that were readily available to her'. This showcases the child expressing their feelings and recreating what they observe at home. Practitioners can observe this form of play and identify if children are coping with situations which they are facing. Similar to the scenario above, where the child had a change in her home life, with the arrival of their new sibling.

Another barrier mentioned is the *'practitioners rigidity to routine and paperwork'*, this also corresponds to the literature. As noted by Moore (2005), early years inspectorates spend ninety percent of their time in the office ensuring that the paperwork is correct and only ten percent of their time observing the childcare practitioners and children. This is a worrying trend as it takes the focus off the quality of care children receive in the early years services, as practitioners aim to ensure that their paperwork is in order. It was also noted that for each child that the practitioner cares for there is approximately two hours paperwork required, through observations and daily logs that's mandatory. It was suggested that *'some sort of a system should be in place to help practitioners overcome the vast amount of paperwork as it is becoming a major concern.'* Practitioners are obviously getting frustrated at this fact as one practitioner noted that *'we chose this profession to work with children and not to spend all our time dedicated to paperwork!'* It seems that practitioners need some form of intervention to help them deal with the vast amount of paperwork that's required from them or they could see themselves becoming overloaded with all that's required from them and reaching burnout.

Furthermore, another barrier that the early years sector faces is the qualifications of the practitioners. As noted by Room Leader A: *'In general, from my experience I don't think most early years professionals value play enough and have a lack of education surrounding play, however, I do feel that this is due to the workforce being under qualified.'* In comparison to Denmark and Sweden, whose early years sector practitioners has third level qualifications. Ireland was seen at the bottom of the table, with early years qualifications were not a requirement for the sector. This has brought around the urgent change by the government in the minimum requirements in the early years sector in Ireland which are discussed below. One of the practitioners highlighted the importance of

continuing her education. As she progressed through education she learned about the core areas such as play: *‘When I first started college, I didn't think we were educated enough on the importance of play, but, by my 3rd and 4th year I found that the main focus was on the importance of play and how it benefits a child. So I think it is important that child care workers are educated.’* In light of this, as of September 2015 all child care practitioners working in early years services will be required to have a minimum qualification of Level 5 and all preschool (ECCE) Room Leaders will be required to have a Level 6. This new requirement will see the quality of services being provided in the early years improving as practitioners become qualified and more advanced in particular areas of a child's development, care and education (EarlyChildhoodIreland, 2015).

As noted by one of the practitioners, Irish weather is seen as another barrier that prevents children participating in play, *‘one barrier to play in particular in Ireland, is the weather.’* Backed up by the literature, the majority of children don't get to play outdoors when it's raining. When you compare this to the research from Scandinavian countries (Louv, 2005), where they spend most of their day outside, including the winter months. It is clear to see that they have more of an emphasis on play, whereas in Ireland, they are concerned with setting goals and monitoring children's progress. According to one of the practitioners *‘one way to overcome this would be to have suitable outdoor clothing for the children, such as wet suits and wellies’*. This is further backed up by the Scandinavian countries as their recommendation is for services to provide appropriate rain gear for the children, particularly in the harsh winter months. This would ensure that the children wouldn't miss out on their outdoor play, especially when it is raining outside.

One particular finding that stood out from one of the practitioners interviewed was, the fact that they believed that no barriers existed in the early years. However, they believed that the same could not be said for the home in which children lived: *‘I don't think or feel there is any barriers in child care settings, but in the home the use of iPads, TVs, laptops, phones etc. These are a common barrier for their opportunity to learn through play.’* There is strong evidence to support this fact, a UK survey suggested that children receive their first mobile

phone by the age of five.;n this survey it was noted by Zollinger (2103), *“children who receive phones for communicating or playing games at an early age, is causing them to become less active”*. However, it is argued by Fromme (2003), that there is no evidence that suggests technology is damaging to their lifestyle. This is further backed up by Fleming (1996), which he suggests that *“children who play with toys, whether it was a toy car or a Nintendo, it helps them to make sense of the world around them and is essential to their development”*. With technology becoming a bigger part of our lifestyle than ever, it is evident that this topic needs to be researched further to assess the affects it could have on children’s development.

Consequences of Inadequate Play

It has been noted by practitioners and throughout the literature that there are consequences for children who don’t participate in play. Firstly, one of the practitioners that *“it can affect a child's development, as they won't be as outgoing and socialising with peers in their class. It can affect their physical development, emotional and well-being as I think the child will be too sheltered and shy and afraid to make decisions for themselves.”* Which is similar to Hammond, (2010) thoughts, as he/she suggested, lack of play can cause *“physical, intellectual, social and emotional harm to children”*. Without sufficient play children will fail to be creative or imaginative. As well as this, children will fail to have vital skills such as curiosity, social skills, resiliency and the ability to assess risk. The lack of play in children will cause them to fail to learn to work in groups, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and speak up for themselves. It has also been noted that children who lack play will miss out on many life skills. Such as the ones mentioned by childcare practitioner C *“if children do not get to play they may not be able to interact with their peers and relate to them if they are not playing enough”*. This is further backed by Hammon (2010) who states, children will show a *“lack of ability to interact with practitioners and peers alike”*. Finally, one of the practitioners suggests that, *“I strongly believe that the quality of education they receive now, will stand to them in the future.”* This also coincides with researcher undertaken by Tartakocsky (2012), who suggests that *“play deprivation can have serious consequences.”* A study conducted on six thousand criminals, found that ninety percent of convicted

murderers lacked “*play features*”. This is a startling fact that really highlights the importance of play, particularly from an early age.

Evaluation of method and suggestions for future research

The method of research conducted for this research project allowed the researcher to obtain good quality information from participants who are working in the area of interest to her. Also, it allowed the researcher to obtain the information within the time frame to complete the research project. However, one of the downfalls the researcher encountered was that there was only a one gender perspective. The researcher is aware that the childcare sector has an extremely low representation of men working in the sector. Though, it would have been interesting to have gained a male perspective on the topic.

One of the main weaknesses of interviewing is that the participants could respond differently depending on how they perceived the interviewer. It was important for the researcher to be aware of this, particularly as some of the participants could have felt threatened being interviewed by a student studying for their masters. It is for this reason the researcher ensured that she was eager to hear their thoughts and opinions on the topic. Furthermore, another weakness the researcher had to overcome was identifying if the participants were expressing their own views, thoughts and feelings, or if they were saying what they believed the researcher wanted to hear.

One of the participants highlighted an interesting and unexpected finding that was not previously considered by the researcher. This was that they perceived technology as a barrier to play, particularly within the home setting. As noted above technology is quickly becoming part of our everyday life. Furthermore, there was conflicting evidence by Fromme (2003) and Fleming (1996) about the effects technology can have on a child, particularly when it comes to their development. The researcher believes that this area could be explored in more depth in further research. However, it was noted by the researcher that the above research is outdated. Due to the fact that technology has become more advanced, particularly over the last few years.

Overall Summary for Discussion Section

One of the main themes which emerged, that was mutually agreed upon was that practitioners had an important role with regards to the fundamental elements of play. This was observed in both the literature and through each of the participants. Furthermore, it was identified that their role consisted of being the facilitator, providing a stimulating environment, appropriate play materials and opportunities, engaging in age appropriate play plan simple lessons, organise outings, and create a warm, safe, structured environment for the children without controlling the child's learning. There were a number of benefits that were associated with play, play acts as a learning tool for children. Which children are active participants in their own learning. It helps children to develop in all areas such as physical, cognitive, language and social skills, also to demonstrate verbal communication, interaction skills, imaginative thinking, and problem-solving capacities. However a number of barriers were noted. These consisted of, lack of equipment, materials and resources available, the practitioner's rigidity to routine and paperwork, the low level of qualifications of the practitioners and the Irish weather was seen as another barrier. One of the practitioners didn't associate any barriers to hinder play in the early years, but they believed that electronic devices at home were prominent barriers that children faced at home, such as TV's, I pads and phones. Finally, the consequences for children who don't participate in play were discussed. It was noted that inadequate play can affect a child's development, as they won't be as outgoing or socialising with peers in their class. It can affect their physical development, emotional and well-being as I think the child will be too sheltered and shy and afraid to make decisions for themselves. Furthermore it was established that lack of play can cause physical, intellectual, social and emotional harm to children.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that practitioners understand that they have a significant role in the child's overall play in the early years setting. Which is also similar to the findings in the literature review. Furthermore, they are clear on what their role consists of and are able to ensure that the children are getting the best out of their environment, while all the time ensuring that they are not controlling how the children learn. Further down the benefits were identified and discussed including evidence from research conducted previously. The researcher also highlighted

unexpected and interesting findings that came to light. This led the researcher on to review the consequences of children not participating in play. The final element of the discussion section enabled the author to suggest areas for further research and included strengths and weaknesses that were faced by the researcher throughout this research project.

Recommendations

One of the main recommendations that come through the findings of the study is the need for more qualified staff with relevant qualifications for the early years industry. Ireland has progressed in this area, however, if you look at the Scandinavian countries in comparison to Ireland, it is evident that Ireland has a long way to go to meet these standards.

Secondly, it is evident that there are many barriers that prevent play becoming a part of the child's daily routine. It is recommended here that early years services should take the time to assess their facility and identify the barriers that exist. Following on from this, the manager should do all that is reasonable to remove these barriers, with the help of their staff to ensure that the children can partake in play.

Unfortunately, as experienced by the author conducting this study, the majority of research in this area of work that has been published, tends to come from small scale studies which may not appeal to practitioners or policy makers to act upon with regards to their findings. Childcare settings should advocate for funding for more advanced and up-to-date research in the early years. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are recommended here, to assess the possible consequences, both short and long term for children. This will allow for connections to be drawn over a long period of time, which may not be possible to pinpoint in a cross sectional study as this particular study only provides the researcher with a once of snapshot.

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Appendices

Appendix One: Interview Questions

Aim of the research project:

To explore the views and roles of childcare practitioners, with regards to the pedagogy of play, in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings.

Objectives:

The first objective will examine the practitioners' views on the context of play in the early childhood curriculum, and their role at work in the promotion of play.

The second objective will identify practitioners' perceptions of the impact for children who don't participate in play. This objective will also review the possible barriers that hinder play becoming part of a child's daily routine.

Interview Questions:

Section A – Demographic profile:

1. 1Gender?
2. 2Age?
3. 3What level of qualification do you have?
4. 4How many years are you working with children?

Section B – The practitioners' views on the context of play in the early childhood curriculum, and their role at work in the promotion of play.

5. Do you think child care practitioners have an important role surrounding the children's overall play in the early years setting and what would you consider these roles to be?
6. Are early years practitioners educated enough on the importance of play?
7. How important is it to ensure play included in the curriculum?
8. What are the functions and benefits of children's play?
9. Can child care facilities provide more time for play?
10. Are parents educated enough on the importance of play and are there opportunities for parents to engage in play at the crèche?

11. Are you aware of any theories that explore the concept of play?
12. Does your setting have a policy on play & What does the crèche do to facilitate play?
13. What activities, areas, toys, and materials do the children and yourself as the child care practitioner use most often in play inside and outside? Why?
14. How would you encourage and support all children in their play, boys and girls, younger and older children, children from different backgrounds and cultures, and children with special educational needs?

Section C – The practitioners’ perceptions of the impact for children who don’t participate in play.

15. Would you consider any barriers to play in the early years setting & how do you think these barriers can be overcome?
16. What are the possible consequences of children not playing enough in their early years?
17. Is play that happens in child care facilities different from play that happens elsewhere at other times?
18. Do you have any further views with regards to play in ECCE settings?

Appendix Two: Consent Form



Consent Form

I _____ agree to take part in the following interview with regards to the study of..... Denise has explained the study in detail to me prior to the interview. I understand it is a voluntary interview and I do not have to participate if I choose not to. I understand that my name will be kept anonymous. Also, I have been made aware that my interview is confidential. This means that my responses will only be used for the purpose of the research. I'm aware that I can withdraw my participation in this research at any stage of the process. *Your signature below indicates that you have read the above information and that you agree to participate in the study.*

Printed name

Signature

Date

Is it OK with you to have the session taped? YES____ NO____

Signed _____ Date _____

Appendix Three: Information Sheet



To whom it concerns:

I am inviting you to participate in my research project that I am undertaking for my college course in Athlone Institute of Technology. This study seeks to explore Childcare practitioners' awareness of the importance of play in early years. You have been asked because you have the knowledge and understanding of the topic.

If this is something you would be interested in taking part in, I will interview you about this (see attached interview questions). The interview will last for no more than one hour and will take place in the community centre. I would like to record the interview by means of a Dictaphone, if you would feel uncomfortable about the recording aspect, I will take notes instead. You can stop the interview at any time and you can withdraw from the research at any stage of the process. With regards to confidentiality, your name and the names of the children will not be in the report. The name of your childcare facility will not be in the report, but will be kept secure for examination purposes. If you would like to take part, please read the consent form below and sign your name. If you have any questions you can contact me, Denise Roache at (087)-1017179.

Thank you.