A Play-Based Learning Approach to Teaching the Writing Outcomes of the 2019 Primary Language Curriculum in a Junior Infant Classroom

Thesis by

Aoife Kavanagh

Supervisor: Dr. Siobhán Cahillane-McGovern

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of the degree of Master in Education Studies (Early Childhood Education)

Date: June 2nd, 2020.
Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly.

This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. This work was completed under the guidance and support of Dr. Siobhán Cahillane-McGovern at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.

Aoife Kavanagh Date: 2nd June 2020
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLC</td>
<td>Primary Language Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBL</td>
<td>Play-Based Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCCA</td>
<td>National Council for Curriculum and Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NELP</td>
<td>National Early Literacy Panel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZPD</td>
<td>Zone of Proximal Development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

The Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) recommends that educators use a playful approach to teaching emergent literacy in infant classes (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2019). This study examines how a Play-Based Learning (PBL) approach can be used to meet the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019). This action research study was undertaken in a rural school and the twenty-three five- and six-year old participants were from the researcher’s junior infant class. Data was gathered using group interviews, observations and a reflection journal. The results of this study support the use of a play-based pedagogy to teach emergent writing. It suggests that using modelled play prior to open-ended play allows children to practice their emergent writing skills in a pressure free environment, while also providing opportunities for the children to be agentive in their learning. Furthermore, it indicates that educators should be mindful of the digital technologies that they use, as laptops/computers may be more suited to promoting writing development than iPads. Finally, the results conclude that a PBL approach to emergent writing is effective at evolving and changing the relational pedagogy that a teacher has with her pupils and the partnership that she has with their parents.

Keywords: Primary Language Curriculum, emergent writing, digital literacy, play-based learning, agency, voice, action research
Chapter 1

“It is almost universally accepted within the world of early years education that children learn through play” (Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson & Lander, 2009, p. 40). This is not a new phenomenon. The importance of play for children’s learning and development has long been recognised, evident from the work of eminent scholars and philanthropists such as Rousseau, Frobel and Pestalozzi (Walsh, 2017).

In 2019, the DES acknowledged the importance of play by embedding a play-based pedagogy into the PLC. This new Curriculum builds on the principles of the Aistear framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009) by stating that all outcomes in infant classes should be achieved through “appropriately playful learning experiences” (DES, 2019, p. 30). This Curriculum also reinforces the NCCA’s (2012a) previous recommendation that educators should provide “attention to the value of socio-dramatic/make-believe play” (p. 32). In theory this Curriculum sounds great, however, a study by Gray and Ryan (2016) highlights that only 28% of teachers feel confident organising PBL activities.

If educators are to revert to the literature for answers, they will find a wealth of evidence suggesting how teachers can use play to support children’s oral language development (Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013a) and emergent reading skills (Einarsdóttir, 2015; Rhoades, 2016). However, Rowe and Neitzel (2010) claim that we know very little about the ways young children participate in writing activities. This is verified by Puranik and Lonigan (2014) who testify that very few studies have focused on children’s emergent writing skills. This makes it difficult for infant teachers to implement the writing strand of the PLC (DES, 2019) successfully as there is a limited amount of research on the topic of writing and even less research on how play can be used to teach emergent writing.
Rationale for the Study

Prior to the development of the PLC (DES, 2015; 2019), Gray and Ryan (2016) point out that infant teachers faced the challenge of combining the mandated English Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education & Science, 1999) with the Aistear guidelines (NCCA, 2009). The Aistear framework (NCCA, 2009) has been recommending PBL for literacy development in infant classes for over a decade, however this is oppositional to direct teaching that has been traditionally found in formal schooling (Hedges & Cooper, 2018). The defining factor between PBL and direct teaching depends on who has control over the situation and who gets to decide where the learning will lead. In PBL, the child’s interests form the foundation and there is collaboration between the teacher and the student (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013b). This contrasts with direct instruction which perceives children “as passive recipients of pre-constituted and unquestionable knowledge transmitted by teachers with a privileged voice of authority and a privileged relation to the meaning of knowledge” (Dahlberg, 2009, p. 230).

The dichotomy between PBL and direct teaching for literacy instruction is a relatively new dilemma in Ireland, however, teachers internationally have been experiencing this problem for quite some time (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hedges & Cooper, 2018; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). In 1997, Goldstein wrote that primary teachers were caught between a rock-the knowledge that play is important for children’s learning and a hard place- “the norms, traditions and expectations of the school setting in which they work” (p. 4). This highlights the longevity of this issue.

In Ireland, the PLC (DES, 2019) was designed to alleviate the pressure on infant teachers as they navigate between direct instruction and play to nurture the literacy skills of young children. It recommends that teachers use a playful teaching approach for all three stands of the English Curriculum. However, this is particularly challenging for the writing
strand. Due to the limited research available on the use of PBL as a pedagogical strategy to teach writing, teachers must find their own way to implement this recommended approach.

Research Question

Ulvik (2014) advocates that action research can be used to meet the “needs, circumstances and opportunities of new times in which teachers constantly have to learn to teach in new ways and develop their practice” (p. 519). Through action research, this study aims to investigate how play can be used to teach emergent writing while adhering to developmentally appropriate practices such as voice and agency. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) explain that developmentally appropriate practices involve treating children as individuals with the ability to make choices about their educational experiences. Therefore, this study creates a “meaningful, challenging, responsive, and stimulating educational environment for all students, regardless of their locations on the developmental continua” (Goldstein, 1997, p. 4) within the socio-dramatic play area. The main questions that guide this study are:

- How can a play-based pedagogy be used to meet the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019) in accordance with the Progression Continua?
- Do children transfer the writing skills used in modelled play into their open-ended play?
- Do children prefer modelled play or open-ended play while engaging in writing activities?
- Do children show a preference for digital literacy skills over traditional literacy skills?

Structure of the Thesis

This research project consists of five distinct chapters. This first chapter introduces the link between play and the PLC (DES, 2019). It highlights the need for infant teachers to implement a play-based pedagogy to teach emergent writing and outlines the research questions and methodology that drive this dissertation.
Chapter two provides a critical review of the literate related to this study. It provides an in-depth analysis of the research literature on literacy, emergent writing and the writing scales that are available for assessment purposes. It examines the research literature on play, PBL, and the theoretical philosophies that are intertwined in PBL and emergent writing. Lastly, chapter two outlines the pedagogical strategies that teachers should consider when using a PBL approach to teach emergent writing.

Chapter three describes the methodological aspects of this research and provides a rationale for using action research. It draws the reader to the trustworthiness, ethical considerations and limitations of this study. Finally, it portrays the action research cycle that was created and the step by step process used for data collection and analysis.

Chapter four presents a detailed analysis of the findings of this action research project and examines these findings with reference to the research literature reviewed in chapter two.

Chapter five concludes with a summary of the main findings in relation to the research questions presented. The limitations of this study are addressed and recommendations for future policy and practice are delineated. Lastly, this thesis concludes with a reflective summary of the researcher’s experience whilst undertaking this study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The NCCA (2012a) reports that a “significant number of children experience writing difficulties” (p. 104) in school. This is concerning as emergent writing is one of the best predictors of later reading success (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008). As educators, we need to implement strategies for emergent writing that are developmentally appropriate for young children. However, this is a difficult task as a range of studies have shown that the literature on the nature and development of initial writing skills is sparse compared to the large volume of literature on the development and importance of early reading skills (NELP, 2008; Puranik & Lonigan, 2014; Rowe & Neitzel, 2010; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Yaden, Rowe, & MacGillivray, 1999).

Since 2009, educational documents state that play is the most effective strategy for developing emergent writing skills. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) advocates that emergent writing develops through “play and hands-on experience [where] children see and interact with print as they build an awareness of its functions and conventions” (p.54). More recently, the PLC (DES, 2019) states that each writing outcome should be achieved through a play-based pedagogy. However, previous studies have highlighted the issues of using play as a teaching methodology. Wallerstedt and Pramling (2012) have argued that the “relationship between play and learning in early childhood education is as controversial and unclear as the notion of play itself” (p. 8). Similarly, Fesseha and Pyle (2016) pointed out, that although most teachers agree that play is an effective teaching methodology, how this play is implemented lacks consistency and clarity.

This chapter examines the research literature on play and learning, concentrating primarily on the development of emergent writing skills. Firstly, research literature on literacy and emergent writing is discussed. Next, three writing scales are discussed focusing particularly on the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a). Then, the research literature on
play is addressed, identifying what play is and what types of play exist. Following this, research literature on PBL is discussed, the theoretical concepts underpinning PBL are outlined and two PBL frameworks are compared. Lastly, this chapter outlines the pedagogical strategies that teachers should consider when using a PBL approach to enhance emergent writing skills.

The broader picture of literacy is addressed first. This examines what literacy is and how an emergent literacy perspective evolved. This guides the reader into the literature on emergent writing.

**What is Literacy?**

Literacy can be described as the “capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media” (DES, 2011, p. 8). This definition highlights the influence of digital technologies on literacy. Yelland (2011) reports that “information and communication technologies have extended our capacities to be literate in many more forms and modalities” (p. 10). The surge of digital technologies available means that people not only read and write words on a piece of paper; but now “blog, podcast, text message, video-record, photo-edit, and otherwise manage complex combinations of print, sound, image, and animation as they send texts across vast social networks” (Wohlwend, 2015, p. 158). This is reiterated by Gleeson (2017) who highlights that the nature of literacy is changing in an online world of information and communication.

Digital literacy is intertwined into literacy, in the sense that it is not possible to separate written text, images, sounds and numbers in a society which is increasingly dependent on the ability to read screens. Marsh (2006) describes digital literacy as a social practice that involves reading, writing and multimodal meaning-making through a variety of digital technologies. She believes that digital literacy should be integrated into literacy
lessons in schools. Furthermore, Yelland (2011) warns that schools are in danger of becoming irrelevant if they do not make use of digital technologies to connect children’s home experiences with learning experiences. Wohlwend (2015) and Gleeson (2017) support the view that digital literacy is entangled in children’s lives as much as adults and therefore should be taught in schools. However, the question is, which forms of digital literacy should be prioritised in infant education? Schools should be mindful of the types of literacy and digital literacy that they choose to focus on as Street (2003) has noted that schools and education are the power stakeholders who ultimately legitimise different forms of literacy.

Society’s understanding of literacy has evolved in recent decades to incorporate socio-cultural influences such as digital literacy. Prior to this evolution, literacy was described as a set of specific skills that needed to be mastered to be able to read and write (Strickland, 1990; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). This reading readiness approach assumed that all children had no prior knowledge of literacy and must be manipulated and schooled by teachers in order to learn about literacy (Gillen & Hall, 2003). As a result, all children began on the same pre-reading tasks regardless of their understanding of print or letter knowledge. Street (2003) describes this as an autonomous view of literacy as it suggests that literacy has benign effects on everyone, regardless of their social and cultural experiences. This autonomous view saw literacy as a technical and natural skill rather than a social practice (Street, 2003).

Giles and Tunks (2015) claim that the concept of reading readiness began to decline in the 1980s and 1990s when teachers started to question the assumptions surrounding the necessity of skills acquisition in learning to read. At that time, constructs of childhood were changing and there was a move towards a socio-cultural theory of learning. Educators began to value the literacy knowledge that children were coming to school with and started noticing that children were already engaging in literacy behaviours prior to formal instruction. These engagements were described as emergent literacy. An emergent literacy perspective reflects
Street’s (2003) ideological view of literacy. This view sees literacy as a social practice that is largely based on cultural and contextual knowledge. He states that “the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being” (p. 77). Wohlwend (2015) and Marklund and Dunkels (2016) also support the view that literacy is a social practice that is influenced by both culture and time.

**Emergent literacy.** An emergent literacy perspective acknowledges that the concept of literacy is constantly evolving, and that literacy development is a life-long process that spans from ‘womb to tomb’ as people engage in new literacy experiences throughout their lives (Alexander, 1997). It includes a wide range of skills representing early reading and writing behaviours, knowledge, and interests that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing (Justice & Pullen, 2003; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). According to Giles and Tunks (2015), emergent literacy can be described as a child-centred, meaning-making approach to early literacy development.

A distinct element of an emergent literacy approach is that reading, writing and oral language are central and interdependent processes of literacy development (Clay, 2001; DES, 2019; Giles & Tunks, 2015; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Interesting however, Elbow (2004) draws attention to the phase ‘reading and writing’, highlighting that writing usually comes second to reading in literacy development just as it did historically. Several studies (NELP, 2008; Puranik & Lonigan, 2014; Rowe & Neitzel, 2010; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Yaden et al., 1999) validate his claim, indicating that recent research on early literacy skills has focused primarily on the strands of reading and oral language, at the expense of the writing strand. This is particularly evident in the NCCA’s (2012a) report on Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education which references reading 1,373 times while only mentioning writing 543 times.
Although reading and writing are interdependent processes, the key features separating the two are the agency and voice involved in the processes. While reading, children are expected to interpret the ideas, messages and thoughts of someone else (Ackerman, 2016). On the other hand, writing provides children with a platform to express their own voice (O’Toole, 2016). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child by law has the right to express themselves through writing (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2010a). Therefore, from a human rights perspective, writing can be viewed as the most important element of emergent literacy as it provides agency and voice to a child over both time and space, ensuring that their thoughts, beliefs and emotions are permanent (O’Toole, 2016).

While the research outlines the importance of writing for later reading success (NELP, 2008) and for providing agency (O’Toole, 2016), Puranik and Lonigan (2011) have argued that “a major shortcoming concerning knowledge of emergent writing is the lack of consensus on how it should be measured and quantified” (p. 570). This is in comparison to a vast array of assessment methods that can be used to measure and quantify children’s reading ability. Teachers can choose from simple running records to more complex standardised tests. While standardised tests are designed to assess literacy and numeracy, the literacy tests implemented in primary schools are the Drumcondra Primary Reading Test or the Mary Immaculate Reading Attainment Test, commonly known as the MICRA-T. Both these tests focus solely on reading, disregarding the importance of writing within literacy development. This makes it difficult for practitioners to provide a comprehensive assessment of children’s writing.

The next section will look at emergent writing and compare three writing scales that have been developed by Gentry (2005), Byington and Kim (2017) and the NCCA (2019a) to help educators track children’s emergent writing development.
Emergent Writing

Emergent writing can be described as the efforts made by young children to express meaning in written form before they can write or spell conventionally using a combination of scribbles, shapes, drawings, talk and gesture, letter-like symbols and invented spelling (Bodrova & Leong, 1998; Byington & Kim, 2017; Gentry, 1982; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Yaden et al., 1999). Educators view all efforts of mark making as valuable and try to create meaningful and engaging contexts for emergent writing to happen as often as possible (Gleeson, 2017).

Puranik and Lonigan (2011) testify that there is no one accepted theory of how children’s writing develops. There are however, currently two hypotheses: the unified hypothesis and the linearity hypothesis (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). The unified hypothesis predicts that children learn about general and language specific aspects of writing simultaneously and in no particular order, depending on their experiences with print (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011). In contrast to this theory, the linearity hypothesis states that young children learn to write through a progressive continuum of developmental characteristics (Gentry, 1982; Strickland & Schickendanz, 2004). Early features are mastered first which contribute to the acquisition of later developing skills. Although researchers do not agree on a particular hypothesis, they are consistent in their claims that children’s early writings exhibit certain developmental features (Graves, 2003; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011).

Researchers have created emergent writing scales that outline the different characteristics which children may present. These writing scales can be used to track children’s writing development. Gentry’s (2005) and Byington and Kim’s (2017) writing scales were published as part of theory forming articles to promote emergent writing and provide instruction techniques for educators to use, and the Progression Continua (NCCA,
2019a) was designed as a support resource for teachers using the PLC (DES, 2019). These three writing scales will be presented next.

**Emergent writing scales.** Gentry (2005) presents an emergent writing scale that involves five stages. These stages are presented in Table 1 with a description of what a child’s writing and spelling should look like at each stage. He recommends that educators use a writing scale such as this to measure and quantify the writing of the children in their care.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Writing level description</th>
<th>Invented spelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-alphabetic writing</td>
<td>Writing presented by marks, scribbles, and pictures. Child does not grasp how the system works.</td>
<td>Spellings are not yet invented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1: Pre-alphabetic writing</td>
<td>Child begins to show some control of letters. Letters used by writer do not represent sounds.</td>
<td>Messages are spelled in strings of letters but there are no sound/letter matches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2: Partial alphabetic writing</td>
<td>Writer does not provide complete phonemic representation. Writer often abbreviates, using one to three letters or uses a few letter/sound matches mixed with random letters.</td>
<td>Prominent sounds spelled with letter/sound matches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3: Full alphabetic writing</td>
<td>Writer provides full phonemic representation in novel words using a letter for each sound.</td>
<td>Speller provides a letter for each word in a novel word. Virtually all the sounds in the word are represented, including vowels.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, Byington and Kim (2017) outline an emergent writing scale that educators can use for assessment purposes; this is shown in Figure 1. The stages in this scale correspond to the stages presented by Gentry (2005). However, the additional benefit of Byington and Kim’s (2017) scale is that they provide a real-life example of what a child’s writing might look like at each stage. Furthermore, Byington and Kim’s (2017) scale moves
beyond a basic word level shown in Gentry’s (2005) writing scale to indicate when children might use phrases, sentences and punctuation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>Drawings that represent writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scribbling</td>
<td>Marks or scribbles the child intends to be writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wavy scribbles or mock handwriting</td>
<td>Wavy scribbles that imitate cursive writing and have a left-to-right progression; child pretends to write words</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter-like forms or mock letters</td>
<td>Letters and marks that resemble letter-like shapes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter strings</td>
<td>Strings of letters that do not create words, written left to right, including uppercase and lowercase letters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional writing</td>
<td>Letters with spaces in between to resemble words; letters/words copied from environmental print; letters often reversed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invented or phonetic spelling</td>
<td>Different ways to represent the sounds in words; the first letter of the word or beginning and ending sounds represent the entire word</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning word and phrase writing</td>
<td>Words with beginning, middle, and ending letter sounds; short phrases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional spelling and sentence writing</td>
<td>Correct spelling of words, generally the child’s name and words such as mom and dad; sentences with punctuation and correct use of uppercase and lowercase letters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Stages of emergent writing (Byington & Kim, 2017). Retrieved from https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/nov2017/emergent-writing*

One major critique of Gentry’s (2005) writing scale and that of Byington and Kim (2017) is that neither discusses the purpose of writing from a socio-cultural and emergent
literacy perspective. From a socio-cultural view, neither scale mentions how writing is a social practice that enables children to find, develop and express their own unique voice to others (Ackerman, 2016). Similarly, from an emergent literacy perspective, both scales ignore the stages that children progress through as they begin to identify as writers. Bearne (2005) recommends that there should be an emphasis on the children’s identity as writers in the classroom as this will give children a positive mindset, embrace their backgrounds and boost their confidence in writing. This is reiterated by Kennedy (2008) who states that “children’s self-confidence and beliefs influence how they will approach the act of writing” (p. 88).

The Progression Continua outlined by the NCCA (2019a) provide a writing scale that incorporates the children’s identity as writers and acknowledges the socio-cultural nature of writing development. The Progression Continua emphasis that writing provides voice and agency to young children. Outcome 6 progression step ‘c’ states, that children begin to share thoughts, knowledge and experiences for a particular purpose and audience using marks, drawings and some letters (NCCA, 2019a). Similarly, Outcome 2 progression step ‘c’ states that children play with a range of implements and materials to create texts on a topic of their choice. This makes the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) a better choice for assessment purposes than the two scales above, as they incorporate when the children should express their voice and agency within their writing development.

The Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) also provide a more detailed writing scale than Gentry’s (2005) and Byington and Kim’s (2017) as they describe the overarching knowledge that young children demonstrate while writing. These are conceptual knowledge, procedural knowledge, and generative knowledge. Table 2 shows examples of these skills within the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a).
Table 2

*Examples of Conceptual Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge and Generative Knowledge within the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing skills</th>
<th>Examples within the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Conceptual knowledge| Learning Outcome 4: Spelling and word study  
Progression step b: The child creates shapes in mark-making to communicate meaning. |
| Procedural knowledge| Learning Outcome 3: Conventions of print and sentence structure  
Progression step e: The child uses some correct word order, sentence structure and letters, spaces, words, sentences, full-stops, and begins to use capital letters appropriately. |
| Generative Knowledge| Learning Outcome 6: Purpose, genre, and voice  
Progression step d: The child writes and draws for a particular purpose and audience while sharing thoughts, knowledge and experiences. |

The Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) is evidently the most detailed writing scale as they build on from the steps outlined in the previous two writing scales. Table 3 highlights how the steps in the Progression Continua correlate to the different stages outlined by both Gentry (2005) and Byington and Kim (2017).

Table 3

*Corresponding Descriptions between the Three Writing Scales Presented*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-alphabetic</td>
<td>Drawing, scribbling, wavy</td>
<td>Progression steps ‘a’ and ‘b’ e.g. creates shapes in mark</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>scribbles or mock handwriting</td>
<td>making.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or mock letter-like forms or</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mock letters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-alphabetic</td>
<td>Letter strings</td>
<td>Progression step ‘c’ e.g. recognises some letters in</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>familiar words and uses these and other symbols to represent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>text.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-phonetic</td>
<td>Transitional writing, invented</td>
<td>Progression step ‘d’ e.g. connects the letter symbol to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or phonetic spelling</td>
<td>the sound for some upper and lower-case letters.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phonic spelling | Beginning word and phrase writing | Progression step ‘e’  
e.g. uses some phonetically correct letters, common letter patterns and familiar words.

Transitional | Conventional spelling and sentence structure | Progression step ‘f’  
e.g. sounds and names all upper and lower-case letters.

The biggest advantage of using the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) as a writing scale is that they highlight how the stages should be achieved. They state that each stage should be achieved through “appropriately playful learning experiences” (DES, 2019, p. 30). The importance of play for writing instruction was first acknowledged by the DES in their review of the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 2005; 2008). These reviews were shortly followed by other publications that emphasised the need for a playful and interactive approach to literacy in infant classes. These were the Aistear framework (NCCA, 2009), the Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life strategy (DES, 2011) and the three research reports (NCCA, 2012a; 2012b; 2012c) carried out on the oral language and literacy development of children in Ireland. Together, these documents contributed to play being an essential component of the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) and to the overall PLC (DES, 2019).

The next section examines the research literature on play and PBL. Different types of play will be discussed, two PBL frameworks will be presented and the theoretical underpinnings of PBL will be outlined and compared to the principles of emergent writing.

**Play**

Play is a quintessential childhood activity and has been described as the most important ‘work’ of being a child (Piaget, 2007). Play is the medium through which children can learn and develop in a holistic manner. There is a wealth of evidence spanning three decades confirming that young children learn most effectively through a play-based
pedagogy including Moyles (1989), Bruce (2001), Kernan (2007), Macintyre (2012), Mraz, Porcelli and Tyler (2016) and Hedges and Cooper (2018). Yet, Morrow and Schickedanz (2006) have claimed that we lack evidence on the relationship between play and literacy and that this is mainly due to the limitations of research and to the shifting theories of the role of the adult in play. In order to examine the relationship between play and literacy, and more specifically writing, we must first look at what play is and what types of play exist.

Eberle (2014) reports that “scholars conventionally find play difficult to define because the concept is complex and ambiguous” (p. 214). Similarly, Wallerstedt and Pramling (2012) previously said that there are considerable disagreements regarding what play is and how it impacts learning and development. Eberle (2014) argues that this is because “play is a roomy subject that varies over time and place and accommodates pursuits as diverse as peekaboo… to scuba diving” (p. 214).

Aistear simply describes play as a “way of doing things” (NCCA, 2009, p. 53). Aistear breaks the broad ideology of play down into five areas: creative, games with rules, language, physical and pretend (NCCA, 2009). However, Aistear acknowledges that within these five areas “there are many different types of play and children can be involved in more than one type at any time” (p. 53).

**Types of play.** According to Weisberg et al. (2013b), distinguishing one type of play from another is usually a matter of identifying who is involved in the play and what level of involvement each partaker has. Some researchers argue that play should be relatively free from adult participation (Soler & Miller, 2003; Wood, 2014). Others suggest that teachers should have some involvement in play, to guide children towards specific learning goals (Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011; Stephen, 2010; Weisberg et al., 2013b; Yelland, 2011). Two views of play are evident here. Although both are child-directed, the first can be
described as open-ended play or ‘true play’ according to Kuschner (2012), whereas the latter can be described as guided play.

**Open-ended play.** Kuschner (2012) describes true play as “the play of children that lives outside the directing goals of the curriculum and the controlling eyes of adults” (p. 248). Although Kuschner (2012) believes that this type of play might not lead to the intended learning objectives, he argues that teachers must still allow time for this type of play and provide the materials needed for it as open-ended play provides agency to a child. King (1987) also wrote that open-ended play offers children the opportunity to express some autonomy within a controlling school structure. The emphasis here is on the word *some* as Wood (2014) claims that open-ended play is never truly ‘free’ as “adults usually define what choices are available; what degrees of freedom are allowed; and what institutional rules and boundaries need to be placed on free play, free choice and behaviour” (p. 15). This limits the amount of autonomy that children really get during open-ended play.

Educators must be mindful that if free play is given priority over other types of play, children will have limited opportunities to “choose activities alongside adults, in which they can share interests and intentions, through flexible and responsive engagement” (Wood, 2014, p. 5). Open-ended play does not allow for the co-construction of knowledge between teachers and students and can therefore hinder the formation of a reciprocal relationship as teachers are not given the opportunity to be culturally responsive to the children’s interests. Open-ended play also limits the dialogue that can exist between teachers and pupils providing less opportunity for children’s voices to be heard.

In terms of literacy, Christie and Enz (1992) studied the effects of introducing literacy resources to both children’s free play and adult supported play. They found that although children’s literacy engagements increased in both cases, adult involvement was more effective at increasing children’s literacy experiences than the materials alone. Similarly,
Clark and Kragler (2005) conclude that simply providing additional literacy materials to open-ended play areas did not bring about a significant increase in early literacy activities. They echo that adult involvement is necessary in play to support children’s understanding and use of print. This causes a dilemma for teachers as they are stuck between the benefits of free play as a means to provide agency and the knowledge that teacher involved play is more efficient at developing literacy skills such as writing.

**Guided play.** “Guided play lies midway between direct instruction and free play, presenting a learning goal, and scaffolding the environment while allowing children to maintain a large degree of control over their learning” (Weisberg et al., 2013b, p. 104). In contrast to open-ended play, Weisberg et al. (2013b) contend that the adult has a more active role in guided play and must intentionally create a purposeful play environment. The teacher in this scenario must be very careful not to direct the play within that context, rather s/he follows the child’s lead while carefully guiding the child towards a specific learning outcome (Rogoff, 2003). In this way the adult is still providing agency to the child by following their lead, while also actively extending their play to meet a desired academic outcome (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

Contradictory, Yelland (2011) formerly recommended that we should stop focusing primarily on the ideology of child-led play and consider instead the concept of ‘playful explorations’. She states that this shift will allow practitioners to articulate learning outcomes and incorporate adult participation and scaffolding. Yelland claimed that “rethinking play as playful explorations in which experimentations and meaning-making are scaffolded and extended by a teacher has the potential to provide a much richer learning environment for young children” (p. 6). Yelland’s recommendation is consistent with Dunphy’s earlier (2008) view that teachers should employ a playful pedagogy so that children will have frequent opportunities to engage in a wide range of play activities. Both Yelland and Dunphy’s ideas
resemble what other researchers now call Play-Based Learning, more commonly referred to as PBL.

**Play-Based Learning**

Weisberg et al. (2013b) describe PBL as a pedagogical approach involving engaging and playful activities, with some child-led elements along with varying degrees of adult guidance and scaffolded curriculum objectives. Arguably this definition is flawed, as it does not reference children’s development, interests and abilities. Pyle and Danniels (2017) offer a more child-focused definition, describing PBL as entirely child-centred, that teaches academic concepts by “expanding on children’s interests, and utilising play-based strategies that match children’s abilities” (p. 286). Debatably, this definition could also be faulted as it does not mention the role of the adult. A more comprehensive definition might describe PBL as an engaging and playful child-centred approach to teaching with various levels of adult involvement that stems from the children’s capabilities and interests.

One critique of PBL is that it assumes that teachers are fully cognisant of children’s interests and abilities and can therefore provide a differentiated child-centred approach to learning. Realistically, this is unlikely as one in five children in Ireland are taught in classes of 30 or more pupils (Irish National Teachers Organisation, 2019). High teacher-pupil ratios limit the amount of time and opportunities that children and teachers can work together on tasks (Kragh-Muller as cited by Clausen, 2015). In addition, the National Council for Special Education (2016) reveal that 28,714 primary school children in the Republic of Ireland have some form of disability or educational need.

In PBL, the role of the adult varies depending on the type of play being used and the level of scaffolding needed to meet the proposed learning outcome. This highlights a key difference between play and PBL. Play is usually considered to be child-led with the child exhibiting all the power (Eberle, 2014) in comparison to PBL which involves a combination
of child-led and adult-led activities (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2013a; Weisberg et al., 2013b) meaning that either the child or the adult can be in control depending on the activity. Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) and Martlew et al. (2011) recommend that educators use a blend of child-led and teacher-led activities to ensure that there is a balance of power between both the child and the teacher.

Pyle and Danniels (2017) present a continuum of PBL, shown in Figure 2, that highlights how both child-led play and adult-directed play can be used. Free play can be placed at one end of the continuum with very little adult involvement while adult-directed play can be found at the other end.

![Figure 2. A continuum of PBL (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).](image)

Pyle and Danniels (2017) explain that the expanded definition of PBL presented in their continuum of PBL moves beyond a binary distinction between play and learning as it “incorporates varying levels of adult involvement that can support the teaching of academic skills in a playful manner” (p. 286). They contend that there are five stages on the continuum of PBL that allow for both child-led and teacher-led activities. They argue that a continuum of PBL is necessary as viewing free play and direct instruction with guided play as a middle ground between the two, is too restricting.
Edwards, Cutter-Mackenzie, Moore and Boyd (2017) propose a pedagogical play-framework that differs from Pyle and Danniels (2017) continuum of PBL. Edwards et al. (2017) group the five types of play listed by Pyle and Danniels (2017) into three distinct headings based on the level of adult involvement, as shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. A pedagogical play-framework (Edwards et al., 2017).](image)

This framework places open-ended play at one end of the continuum, modelled play in the middle of the continuum and purposefully-framed play at the adult-directed end of the continuum. Edwards (2017) contends that all three types of play are of equal value and can be used for various learning purposes. Like Figure 2, this play-framework highlights how a balance of power can be given to children and teachers as they work towards specific learning outcomes.

Four theoretical principles are essential for a PBL framework such as the two mentioned above, to be successful. These principles are:

- Theories of how children learn and develop
- Children as citizens
• Relational pedagogy
• Funds of knowledge

According to Freire, all forms of pedagogy represent a particular way of understanding society and a specific commitment to the future (as cited by Giroux, 2010). A PBL approach encompasses the changing views of childhood and the evolutionary advances from constructivism to socio-culturalism into its four principles. These four underpinnings will be discussed first, then, comparisons will be drawn between these principles and an emergent writing perspective. This will highlight the philosophical connections between PBL and emergent writing.

Theories of how children learn and develop. Evolutionary advances in childhood development are evident in PBL. This change saw constructivist theories of learning replaced by socio-cultural theories that emphasise the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning. Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986) theories of learning and development form the roots of the socio-cultural views that are present in PBL.

Vygotsky (1986) argues that children’s learning and development occurs first as a social process and later becomes internalised into thought through dynamic and dialogic participation in common experiences with their families. Vygotsky (2004) states that children learn from these experiences in two ways: reproductive activity and combinatorial activity. The first occurs when children learn to respond to their environment by reproducing what they experience, whereas the latter can be described as a form of imagination in which the children draw from their own experiences to create new ideas (Edwards, 2017).

PBL uses the principles of reproductive activity and combinatorial activity to facilitate learning. Teachers encourage reproductive activity by creating play contexts that the children are familiar with, for example, a doctor’s surgery or a Post Office. Teachers then involve themselves in the play context to help children connect new and existing knowledge
(Edwards, 2017). This leads to the development of academic concepts or mature concepts, as Vygotsky (1986) called them.

During PBL, children connect everyday experiences to mature concepts by working within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD can be described as the difference between what a child can do or understand alone, compared to what they are able to do with the support of a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1987). Vygotsky (1978) previously stated that once the child understands the process, it then becomes internalised so that they can complete the process independently. Therefore, a teacher acting as the more knowledgeable other, can scaffold the child’s learning and slowly relinquish support as the child learns the new concept.

**Children as citizens.** PBL encompasses the view that children are active citizens that have opinions and the right to a choice. This agentic view developed due to a paradigm shift in society’s understanding of childhood. Since recorded history, children were perceived as having ‘no voice’ and were under the dominance and power of adults (Sorin & Galloway, 2006). A child was considered a ‘tabula rasa’ or blank slate which needed to be filled with knowledge and skills by an omniscient adult (Smith, 2011). However, as far back as 1992, Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This legally binding document gave children the same comprehensive human and citizenship rights as adults, positioning them as entitled to autonomy, and to fully participate in, and influence matters that concern them (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2010a). This led to the era of the ‘agentic child’ and a growing interest in children’s agency (Clark & Moss, 2001).

Agency can be defined as “children’s capacity to make autonomous decisions and choices in all matters affecting them according to their dispositions” (Katsiada, Roufidou, Wainwright & Angeli, 2018, p. 937). Similarly, Wood (2014) previously described agency as an “expression of individual identities and peer cultures, interests and self-interests and a
testing ground for whose freedom, power and control can be exercised” (p. 16). Agency is an underpinning factor in PBL approaches today.

**Funds of knowledge.** Children’s interests and experiences are central to PBL. Philosophers have emphasised the importance of working from children’s experiences long before socio-cultural theory became prominent. Freire’s (1972) theory of situated learning highlighted the importance of working from what people already knew. Freire believed that educators must look for teachable moments in the lived experiences of the participants. Similarly, Dewey (1998) called for education to be grounded in real experience. Hedges and Cullen (2012) describe these experiences as funds of knowledge. They explain that “funds of knowledge is a concept that positions the knowledge people develop in their families and communities as intuitive sources of cultural and cognitive resources that can be utilised in educational settings” (p. 932). In PBL, children’s funds of knowledge form the foundation for all learning.

**Relational pedagogy.** In addition to working from the children’s funds of knowledge, relational pedagogy is also central to a PBL approach. Both Vygotsky and Bruner state that children’s interactions with people and their environment are crucial to their growth and development (Flood & Hardy, 2013a). Similarly, French (2007) verified the importance of relational pedagogy when she stated that learning and development occurs when children are “regularly engaged in meaningful experiences over time with adults and other children” (p. 34). Hedges and Cooper (2018) state that relational pedagogy includes “reciprocity, joint involvement, intuition, wisdom, trust, providing learning that connects with children’s interests, respecting children’s ideas and emphasising meaning-making rather than knowledge construction” (p. 372). Furthermore, Quillinan, MacPhail, Dempsey and McEvoy (2019) state that this approach may require educators to “challenge the somewhat limited ‘engaged practice’ that is evident in Irish education systems” (p. 246). They state a relational
pedagogy can be achieved by introducing culturally responsive teaching and learning approaches that involve children in the co-construction of their learning experiences. From these descriptions, relational pedagogy connects the four main principles of PBL. It acknowledges the importance of children’s interactions with others, ensures that children are active citizens, utilises modern theories of how children learn and emphasises the importance of working from children’s lived experiences.

Dialogue is an essential part of relational pedagogy. Dialogue can be described as “communication with the intent to reach mutual understanding and acts as meta-communication to uncover the problems in communication” (Pietrykowski, 1996, p. 84). Pietrykowski (1996) states that teachers using relational pedagogy should engage in dialogue that is at a child’s level for it to be effective. Similarly, Dunphy (2008) advocates that dialogue with and between children should occur in joint activity contexts that promote dialogic enquiry and knowledge building. Dunphy believes that this will lead to new learning. Gleeson (2017) reinforces the idea that dialogue leads to new learning as “teachers and children act as co-enquirers, collaboratively engaging in a generation and evaluation of new interpretations of texts in order to gain a deeper appreciation of the world and themselves” (p. 114).

**Theoretical principles of PBL and emergent literacy.** Although Morrow and Schickedanz (2006) point out that there is a lack of literature on the relationship between play and writing, Table 4 shows that several comparisons can be drawn between the theoretical underpinning of PBL and emergent writing highlighting how the two are philosophically compatible.
Table 4
*The Theoretical Principles of PBL and the Corresponding Elements within Emergent Writing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical principles of PBL</th>
<th>Corresponding Elements within Emergent Writing</th>
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| Socio-cultural theories of how children learn and develop       | • Working within the children’s ZPD  
• Creating print-rich learning environments that the children are familiar with  
• Encouraging the children to connect new and existing literacy knowledge |
| Children as citizens                                            | • Providing voice and agency to the children in their writing experiences  
• Viewing all mark-making efforts as valid |
| Relational pedagogy                                             | • Reciprocal dialogue between teacher and child regarding their writing |
| Funds of knowledge                                              | • Working from the children’s interests and experiences of literacy |

Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory contributes largely to both PBL and emergent writing. This theory portrays that children’s literacy knowledge is influenced by their interactions with materials, people and the environment (Justice & Pullen, 2003). This highlights the necessity of relational pedagogy in the teaching of emergent writing. It emphasises the importance of working from children’s funds of knowledge, as their previous experiences with literacy will inevitably affect their current understanding of writing. An emergent writing approach values all mark-making efforts that children make, contributing to the idea of children as citizens. Therefore, the theoretical underpinnings of theories of development, children as citizens, relational pedagogy and funds of knowledge apply to both PBL and emergent writing.

While the research literature illustrates that PBL and emergent writing are theoretically suited, the next section discusses the pedagogical strategies that educators
should consider when using a PBL approach to teach emergent writing in Irish classrooms and the benefits that an approach such as this would have.

**Pedagogical Strategies for a Play-Based Learning Approach to Emergent Writing**

There are four pedagogical strategies that practitioners should consider when implementing a PBL approach to emergent writing. These are the play context, the classroom environment and the models or frameworks which can be used for teaching and assessing the children’s writing skills. If teachers can successfully use a PBL approach to emergent writing, not only will they be adhering to the developmentally appropriate practice of providing voice and agency to young children, but they may also meet the changing interests of children and potentially increase literacy engagements overall.

Firstly, educators should consider the play context that they create. The NCCA (2012a) recommends that educators provide “attention to the value of socio-dramatic/make-believe play” (p. 32) when creating meaningful contexts for writing. Socio-dramatic/make-believe play allows educators to create play scenarios that are in line with the children’s funds of knowledge. Within these play scenarios, practitioners can enhance the writing experiences of children through scaffolding and working within their ZPD (Bodrova & Leong, 1998). The NCCA (2019b) verifies that play can provide “wonderful opportunities for writing” (p. 31). This reinforces Williams and Rash’s (2003) and Kennedy’s (2008) views that the meaningful contexts offered through play give children a sense of audience and purpose for their writing and can be a powerful motivator.

While play provides a context for children to develop their writing skills, the overall classroom environment must also be considered. The DES (2019) states that “the learning environment influences what and how children learn” (p. 9). The importance of the classroom environment has also been emphasised by several researchers (Einarsdóttir, 1996; Justice & Pullen, 2003; Morrow, 1990; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) who claim that print rich play
settings that are highly contextualised, meaningful and familiar to children can be used to scaffold emergent literacy skills. Morrow (1990) states that teachers can facilitate literacy interactions and possibly enhance cognitive development by providing well-designed classrooms. This is reiterated by Einarsson (1996), who agrees that classrooms should include print rich play areas with literacy materials to encourage writing exploration.

In addition to the play context and the classroom environment, practitioners should also consider the model or framework that they use to teach writing. Today, the NCCA (2019b) recommends that teachers use the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model to scaffold children’s emergent writing. This model begins with modelled writing by the teacher, followed by shared writing, guided writing and lastly independent writing by the child. Through this model, the “responsibility is gradually reduced while supporting and guiding the children to the independent writing stage” (NCCA, 2019b, p. 34). This model provides agency to the child as it allows the teacher to transfer control of the writing over to the child as they become more competent.

Although no research literature suggests using the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model within play, it could be argued that this Model corresponds with the PBL framework proposed by Edwards et al. (2017) outlined earlier in Figure 3. Through modelled play within the socio-dramatic/make-believe play area, a teacher could demonstrate a specific writing skill using shared and interactive writing. The teacher could slowly withdraw the support as the child is able to complete the writing skill independently. By leaving this socio-dramatic play area in place, children could use their new skill within their open-ended play. In this way, the PBL framework outlined by Edwards et al. (2017) could potentially be used to meet the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019) and provide a balance of power between the adult and the child.
Practitioners must also consider the framework that they use for assessing children’s emergent writing skills. The Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) is the most comprehensive writing scale available and is the recommended assessment scale for teachers implementing the PLC (DES, 2019). When using the Progression Continua, educators must be mindful that “children may be in different places on the Continua for different learning outcomes” (DES, 2019, p.52). Similarly, other researchers (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) have previously stated that children may present different writing skills when engaging in different types of play and may go back and forth between various stages of writing depending on the task at hand. Therefore, assessing children’s emergent writing development can be a difficult task. By using a writing scale such as the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a), educators can track their pupils’ progress across several progression steps for each writing outcome.

**Benefits of using PBL to teach emergent writing.** A play-based pedagogy allows teachers to find new playful activities for emergent writing that meet the changing interests of children. One of these interests is technology. Teachers must accept that children’s play is changing due to technological advances (Edwards, 2015; Yelland, 2011). The NCCA (2012a) says that digital technologies can support writing development through “experimentation and expression with regard to the generation and construction of a message or story; the encoding or transcription of that message or story; and the process of producing the message or story” (p. 169). However, the NCCA (2012a) also claims that there are a “limited number of [Irish] studies exploring the uses of digital technologies to support writing development in the early years’ classroom” (p. 169). Therefore, infant teachers may need to experiment with various digital technologies during PBL to assess which devices best support their pupils’ emergent writing skills.
As well as providing an opportunity to integrate digital technology, a play-based pedagogy can also help teachers differentiate emergent writing skills to meet the needs of the children in their care. The Central Statistics Office (2016) reports that 48,123 primary school children are from outside of Ireland, making it difficult for educators to provide contextual writing lessons. Through a PBL approach to writing, teachers can provide culturally responsive writing lessons that meet the different backgrounds of their students.

Kennedy (2008) points out that teachers should structure literacy tasks so that children experience success, yet, provide enough of a challenge to motivate them. This can be achieved through PBL. Through different types of play, children can develop the writing skills that they are ‘ready’ to learn at that time without the pressures of meeting the standards of others around them (Flood & Hardy, 2013a; Moyles, 1989; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Play cannot be wrong, so children are more likely to take risks with their learning. The children’s efforts are usually rewarding to them, therefore boosting their self-esteem and self-confidence (Flood & Hardy, 2013b), and potentially improving their attitude and understanding of writing. This is essential as approximately 10% of all Irish children have literacy problems with the figure reaching almost 50% in some areas designed as disadvantaged (DES, 2020).

Conclusion

Socio-cultural theory and the age of the agentic child have influenced society’s understanding of literacy. Literacy is no longer seen as simply the ability to read and write. Young children are regarded as literate beings and their early engagements with literacy experiences are respected. These early engagements encompass both emergent reading and emergent writing. Unfortunately, most of the research literature to date has focused primarily on emergent reading, disregarding the importance of emergent writing for later reading success.
The PLC (DES, 2019) recommends that educators use appropriately playful learning experiences to enable children to meet each writing outcome. However, this chapter highlights that there is a gap in the research literature on how this can be achieved. This means that educators must find their own way to effectively combine PBL and emergent writing, while adhering to the theoretical principles that underpin them both.

This chapter proposes that through socio-dramatic play, educators could teach emergent writing by combining the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model with the PBL framework proposed by Edwards et al. (2017) to scaffold children’s emergent writing. This model could potentially provide agency to young children as it passes the responsibility of writing from the teacher to the children and allows them to develop their writing skills in the pressure-free environment of open-ended play. Through this model, teachers could use the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) to assess the children’s emergent writing skills in accordance with the writing outcomes outlined in the PLC (DES, 2019). This model would also enable practitioners to introduce digital technologies into socio-dramatic play to meet the changing interests of children and could improve children’s overall writing abilities.

A critical review of the literature has given rise to the following research questions:

• How can a play-based pedagogy be used to meet the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019) in accordance with the Progression Continua?
• Do children transfer the writing skills used in modelled play into their open-ended play?
• Do children prefer modelled play or open-ended play while engaging in writing activities?
• Do children show a preference for digital literacy skills over traditional literacy skills?

The following chapter will outline the format and measures undertaken in this research study to address these questions. It will discuss the rationale behind the selected methodology and explain why a participatory approach was adapted.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological research approach used to answer the questions that arose from the literature review. Firstly, this chapter addresses the philosophical paradigms of research and provides a rationale for using action research. Next, it outlines the trustworthiness, researcher positionality and reflexivity, ethical considerations, and limitations of this study. Finally, it explicates the action research cycle that was followed, the participants who were involved and the step by step process used for data collection and analysis.

Philosophical Paradigms of Research

McAteer (2013) states that research is a “continuum of approaches, with scientific, or positivistic research at one end, and the more naturalistic and interpretive approaches at the other” (p. 12). Quantitative research lies at the positivistic end of the continuum where knowledge comes from numerical data (Iacono, Brown & Holtham, 2009). However, Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2011) have argued that quantitative research is too restrictive to allow for individual interpretations of experiences as it regards human behaviours as passive. In opposition to this, qualitative research accepts that there is no absolute truth. In the qualitative paradigm, “reality is subjective, and the social world has no objective existence independent of individual’s views, perceptions and behaviours” (Basit, 2010, p. 16). Qualitative methodology allows the researcher to work within the context being studied and allows the researcher to observe participants in their naturalistic setting (Iacono et al., 2009). Qualitative research is arguably more suited to educational research than quantitative research and was selected for this research.

Cohen et al. (2011) illustrate that there are several types of qualitative research, such as case study, action research, grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography. Within
these research designs, there are several methods that can be chosen such as interviews, questionnaires, surveys, observations and active participation.

Action research was chosen for this study over the other research types as it “empowers teachers to find their own answers to their own questions” (Aberdeen, 2011, p. 45). Action research reflected the teacher’s interest in finding a playful way to meet the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019). Interviews and active participation were chosen as the methods as these were suitable for young children and enabled the researcher to provide agency and voice to the children in her class.

**Action research.** There is no one neat widely accepted definition of action research (Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). Instead, Huang (2010) describes action research as an “umbrella term that represents a ‘family’ of practices” (p. 94). Altrichter et al. (2002) stated that the practices in action research are a form of collective, self-reflective inquiry that participants in social situations undertake to improve their practices. In this way, action research is a form of continuing professional development (Cain & Milovic, 2010) as practitioners investigate their own practices to find ways to teach more fully in the direction of their educational values (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

Action research reflected the researcher’s values of agency. It is a participatory process, meaning that both the researcher and the participants are responsible for the production of knowledge and the improvement of practice (Huang, 2010; McTaggart, 1991). This corresponds with the theoretical principle of children as citizens seen in PBL and emergent writing. Corsaro (2017) verifies that including children as active contributors to the research “reflects a direct concern with capturing children’s voices, perceptions, interests, and rights as citizens” (p. 62). Throughout this study the children were given autonomy, as the learners’ voice was one of the main aspects of this action research process.
McAteer (2013) confirms that action research falls into the paradigm of qualitative research as it is located at the end of the continuum where data collection methods are more qualitative and tackle research through exploration, explanations and description of practice. During action research, data is collected from more than one source to achieve results that are closest to the reality of practice. Data is analysed throughout the process as well as at the final stage of the research (Burns, 2010). This provides a fuller picture of the setting and ensures credibility of the results. Although various sources of data are gathered, the purpose of this type of research is to achieve depth rather than breadth.

**Trustworthiness of the Study**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest four characteristics to ensure the rigour of research in qualitative paradigms: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These characteristics replace the conventional constructs of positivist research: internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. Basit (2010) verifies that as action research falls into the qualitative research paradigm, reliability cannot be considered. This is because “qualitative research is unique and particular to a setting and does not seek duplication to claim reliability” (Basit, 2010, p. 70). Although validity, reliability and objectivity are not considered in action research, Blair (2010) reports that teacher-researchers can be confident that the answers they find are valid as they represent the truth of the situation being studied.

**Credibility.** Credibility can be promoted by being specific with every procedure in the research. Stringer (2013) advises that the credibility of a study can be enhanced through triangulation, when information is extracted from a variety of sources. Following this recommendation, data for this study was gathered through group interviews, observations, work samples and reflective journal entries ensuring that data came from both the teacher as researcher and the children in the class. These data sources ensured that every effort was made to provide a voice to all participants as recommended by Coghlan and Brannick (2014).
**Transferability.** Transferability can be promoted by providing a detailed description of the social setting of the study. The school context, age and gender profile of the participants are outlined in the data collection and analysis section for this purpose. Through a focus on possible transferability, other researchers can compare the context and setting of this study with other contexts and situations and decide whether this study can be transferable to their own contexts. However, unlike quantitative research studies, the aim of action research is not to provide generalisable data. This study recognises that the findings presented in the following chapter are specific to the participants and context of this research.

**Dependability.** Dependability derives from the extent to which a reader of the research can depend on the results. The detailed description of the stages and procedures followed in this research project ensures dependability as the reader can see how each set of data was gathered and analysed.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability can be achieved by analysing the data and reflecting and reporting its findings in a way that enables readers to confirm that the researcher has understood the situation under investigation. The detailed description of the action research cycle and staged process of data analysis used, verifies that the researcher understood the context and aims of this research project.

McNiff and Whitehead (2011) advise that confirmability of research can be increased by having critical friends to discuss a thesis with. The researcher’s supervisor and colleagues acted as her critical friends. Her colleagues used the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) to assess work samples that she provided; their results were cross examined with the researchers to ensure that all analyses of emergent writing were consistent.

**Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity**

The researcher has spent seven years teaching in infant settings in rural schools. She has experienced first-hand the benefits of play for children’s oral language development and
has run workshops in her school on how to implement a PBL approach. The researcher is an advocate of the Aistear framework (NCCA, 2009) and is firmly committed to providing voice and agency to all children.

Reflexivity can be described as “a self-conscious awareness of the effects that the participants-as-practitioners-and-researchers are having on the research process, how their values, attitudes, perceptions, opinions, actions, feelings, etc. are feeding into the situation being studied” (Cohen et al., 2011). Reflexivity was central to this study as the researcher was the class teacher. This may have had some influence on the data that was collected. The researcher remained mindful of this potential bias at every stage of the research process. Through group interviews and ongoing dialogue, the researcher ensured that the children’s perspectives were equally as valid as hers and that all participants had a voice in the research process.

**Ethical Considerations**

Basit (2010) warns that “ethical considerations are extremely important in educational research” (p. 56) and McNiff and Whitehead (2011) caution that involving children requires special attention. Cohen et al. (2011) inform us that all participants have the right to privacy; therefore, numbers were used for each child to ensure confidentiality. Ethics approval was granted by the Marino Institute of Education Ethics Committee and informed consent was sought from the board of management, school principal and parents of the participants (see Appendix A for letters of consent).

From a play-based pedagogical perspective, children are seen as having agency, meaning that they can reflect upon and make decisions about things that concern them (Skånfors, 2009). Agency was a key aspect of this research; therefore, each child was issued with an infant friendly assent form (see Appendix B). As assent is an ongoing process, the researcher explained to the children that they could withdraw their assent at any time by
placing an X across their form displayed on the wall, without any consequence (Pyle & Danniels, 2016). Following Skånfors (2009) recommendation, the researcher used her ‘ethical radar’ to watch for any indications that a child might want to withdraw from the research, even if they did not express it verbally.

**Limitations**

All studies carry some limitations and this study was no exception. The limitations of this study are outlined below so that the research findings can be relied upon and trusted.

The instruments used in this study account for some limitations. Cohen et al. (2011) advocate that “observation can be a powerful research tool, but it is not without its difficulties” (p.457). The researcher was limited by the speed and accuracy with which it was possible to observe and record events that she witnessed (Denscombe, 2007). The researcher was also restricted by time when taking observation notes as she was a teacher-researcher and occasionally needed to attend to issues in different play areas. Observation and interviews can be prone to biases and distortions, especially when there is a power imbalance present (Cohen et al., 2011). To overcome this issue, the researcher ensured to report the findings within the context that they occurred as recommended by Basit (2010). Observations and reflections were also recorded shortly after the events to avoid distortion of information (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

**Limitations of working with children.** As action research represents a participatory approach, the children were heavily involved in this study and regularly expressed their agency. When playtime was over, the children sometimes said no it was not and continued to play in the Post Office meaning that some groups got more time than others. To ensure fair and equal results were gathered for each group, the researcher stopped gathering data after the first 50 minutes of each session. The children also expressed their voice and agency in the
group interviews. Several of the children wanted to discuss other things during the interviews such as their toys at home. This resulted in the interviews being longer than expected.

Another limitation of working with children is that they change their mind quite often. Two children stated that they did not want to be involved in the group interviews as they did not want to meet Ms. Bird (teacher-in-role), however, on the day both children asked if they could join in. Similarly, all children stated in their assent forms that the researcher could use samples of their work for her college homework, however, when the children completed the cards and posters, most of them wanted to take their work home to show their parents. To overcome this issue, they all agreed that the researcher could photograph their work each day rather than collect it.

Having addressed the limitations of the methodology, the next section will outline how data was gathered and scrutinised during the action research process. It will outline the action research cycle that was followed and the six stages that were involved in the data analysis process.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Zuber-Skerritt (2001) explains action research using a diagrammatical model containing spirals of cycles. Each cycle consists of four phases: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Denscombe (2007) states that each cycle involves a feedback loop in which initial findings generate possibilities for change which are then implemented and evaluated as a precursor to further studies. For the purpose of this research, Zuber-Skerritt’s (2001) action research cycle was adapted to include the stages that were involved in this research. The adapted cycle shown in Figure 4, provided the theoretical framework for this study. Appendix C outlines the steps that were involved in each cycle of this action research process. These steps allowed for clear and concise data to be gathered.
1a. Plan: Choose an area of interest, create a timeframe and choose a sample

1b. Act: Conduct a literature review and group interviews

1c. Observe: Observe the children in open-ended play. Assess researcher’s own teaching

1d. Reflect: What mark-making are the children doing during open-ended play? Does the researcher’s practice reflect the literature and the children’s interests?

2a. Revised Plan: Create a plan using the information from the group interviews, observations and reflections

2b. Act: Engage in modelled play to direct the children towards the 3 selected writing outcomes

2c. Observe: Observe open-ended play to see if the children using the modelled strategies from the week before to meet the 3 writing outcomes

2d. Reflect: Did the children use the strategies modelled in their open-ended play? Which writing strategies were the children most interested in?

3a. Revised Plan: Create a revised plan using the information from cycle 2

3b. Act: Engage in modelled play to direct the children towards the 3 selected writing outcomes

3c. Observe: Observe open-ended play to see if the children using the modelled strategies to meet the 3 writing outcomes

3d. Reflect: Complete group interviews to listen to the children’s experiences, analyse the data and draw conclusions
Sample and participants. Non-probability convenience sampling was used within the researcher’s own classroom. This occurred in a medium sized rural school with eight single stream classes. All the parents consented to their child being involved in the research and all the children provided their assent. This resulted in 23 participants from the researcher’s junior infant class; 14 girls and 9 boys. The participants ranged in age from 5 years 0 months to 6 years and 3 months, with the mean age being 5 years 5 months. Four groups were created; three groups of six children and one group of five. This ensured that each group observation could be cross analysed with each group interview.

Data collection. Altrichter et al. (2002) state that “part of doing research is researching research, as the research task is inherently epistemic” (p. 128). This is further supported by Ulvik (2014) who recommends that it is important to get new perspectives from the literature and from dialogues with others in order to move into a spiral as opposed to a circle in the development process. Following Ulvik’s advice, an in-depth literature review was completed, and group interviews were conducted to engage in dialogue with the participants at the beginning and end of the research period. The group interviews allowed the researcher to “understand the world of children through their own eyes rather than the lens of the adult” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 433).

Group interviews were chosen rather than individual interviews as Cohen et al. (2011) say that group interviewing with children enables them to challenge each other and participate in a way that may not happen in a one-to-one setting. The interview schedules (see Appendix D) contained open-ended questions as “answers to open-ended questions are usually more accurate than answers to closed questions” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 433). However, McNiff and Whitehead (2011) caution that “open-ended questions that allow for
personal responses are more difficult to analyse” (p. 144). To overcome this issue, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis approach was used. This framework is outlined in the data analysis section of this chapter.

Cohen at al. (2011) advise that having the interview as part of a routine activity can help make it less daunting for the children. They also report that using a projection technique is a good strategy for interviewing children. A recent study by Harkin (2019) confirms that using a projection technique works effectively with children. The children in this study enjoyed ‘teacher-in-role’ activities during drama lessons so this projection technique was used for the group interviews as it met the interests of the pupils.

Puranik and Lonigan (2011) contend that it can be difficult to measure and quantify children’s writing. To overcome this issue, the researcher used the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) to track the children’s progress. Three writing outcomes were selected, one from each element of the PLC (DES, 2019). A description of the chosen learning outcomes and their corresponding progression steps is outlined in Appendix E. These outcomes along with four of their corresponding progression steps were incorporated into the researcher’s observation checklist.

The researcher piloted the observation checklist for three days as Cohen et al. (2011) state that a pilot study increases the reliability, validity and practicability of research. The pilot study highlighted that the four progression steps listed were not at the correct level for the children and that more headings were needed on the observation checklist e.g. number of texts created. The pre-pilot and post-pilot observation checklists are shown in Appendix F.

The researcher used the post-pilot checklist each day during modelled play (see Appendix G for sample lesson plan) and open-ended play in the play Post Office (see Figure 5) to assess if the children were meeting the three selected learning outcomes, transferring the
skills shown in modelled play into their open-ended play, and to record if the children were more interested in traditional or digital literacy.

Figure 5. Photograph of the play Post Office that was created for this study.

Photographs were taken of the texts that the children created in the Post Office to support the teacher’s assessments and as evidence of their progress. If a child produced two or more texts that indicated they were at different steps on the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a), the higher step was counted. For the purpose of this research, a text was defined as any product of language use, that was written, visual, electronic or digital. This definition was adapted from the PLC (DES, 2019). Texts created on blank paper, templates, post-its, and on envelopes were counted as traditional literacy texts, whereas texts created on the laptop or iPad were counted as digital texts.

As action research is a self-critical inquiry (Basit, 2010), a reflection journal was used throughout the research period. The researcher followed Gibbs’ (1988) reflection cycle shown in Figure 6, to ensure that she was thinking systematically about each daily event. Altrichter et al. (2002) states that “action research is about people reflecting upon and
improving their own practices by tightly inter-linking their reflection and action” (p. 128). The journal provided evidence of the researcher’s learning and highlighted areas that needed to be adjusted for the next action research cycle.


**Figure 6.** Gibbs (1988) reflection cycle. Retrieved from

Data analysis. Burns (2010) states that “analysing action research data is a continuing process of reducing information to find explanations and patterns” (p. 104). In this study, data was continually scrutinised and reflected upon in each cycle and at the end of the three cycles, the whole data set shown in Table 5 was analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis approach. Each of the phases in this approach were crucial to the process. These are described next.
Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Texts Created</th>
<th>Group Interviews</th>
<th>Journal Reflections</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red group</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green group</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow group</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue group</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher/researcher</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phase 1: Familiarise yourself with the data. The researcher immersed herself in the data from the three cycles of the action research process. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that “immersion usually involves ‘repeated reading’ of the data and reading the data in an active way searching for meanings, patterns and so on” (p. 87). Usually during qualitative research, interviews are transcribed during this initial phase; however, as this was action research, the interviews from cycle 1 were transcribed during cycle 1 to feed into the planning of cycle 2. The researcher re-listened to the interview recordings, reviewed all the texts that the children created and re-read the interview transcripts, observation checklists and journal reflection entries. The researcher began noting ideas for codes.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes. Following the advice of Braun and Clarke (2006), the researcher worked systematically through the entire data set, giving full and equal attention to each data item. She manually coded her data by writing notes on the texts she was analysing, using coloured pens to indicate potential patterns.

Phase 3: Searching for themes. The researcher sorted her 30 codes into 5 potential themes and gathered all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes. The researcher reviewed the 5 potential themes and collapsed them into 3 final themes. These were evidence of emergent writing, digital technology for writing purposes and the teacher’s role. The researcher reviewed all her data again and coded any additional data within themes that had been missed in earlier coding.
stages as Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight that “the need for re-coding from the data set is to be expected as coding is an ongoing organic process” (p. 91).

**Phase 5: Defining and naming themes.** The researcher divided her three final themes into sub-themes as shown in Figure 7.

![Figure 7. Representation of the three final themes divided into their sub-themes.](image)

**Phase 6: Producing the report.** Altrichter et al. (2002) state that part of the action research process is making the experiences public to other people. Following this advice, the researcher drew the findings and analysis of this action research process together into chapter four for others to read. This involved “weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts to tell the reader a coherent and persuasive story about the data and contextualising it in relation to existing literature” (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 121).

**Conclusion**

This chapter described action research and outlined why it was used for this study. It detailed the trustworthiness, ethical considerations and limitations of this study. After, it
presented the action research cycle that was followed, and the procedure used for data analysis so that the research findings presented in the next chapter can be examined and considered comprehensively.
Chapter 4: Findings, Analysis and Discussion

This study aimed to investigate how PBL can be used to meet the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019). It also aimed to examine if young children were interested in digital technologies such as iPads and laptops for digital literacy purposes. Through the three cycles of action research, this study strived to incorporate each child’s voice and provide agency while adhering to the philosophies of PBL and emergent writing. Table 6 illustrates a brief summary of the stages that were involved in the first cycle of the action research process. A more detailed description of each cycle is presented in Appendix C, as mentioned in chapter 3.

Table 6
The Stages Involved in Cycle 1 of the Action Research Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Steps involved in cycle 1 of the action research process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plan</td>
<td>• A research sample was selected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td>• An in-depth literature review was completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Four group interviews were conducted using the projection technique teacher-in-role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The children engaged in dialogic reading sessions of the story The Jolly Postman, visited the local Post Office and interviewed a postman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A play Post Office was created in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe</td>
<td>• The observation checklist was piloted for three days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The children were observed in open-ended play in the Post Office.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect</td>
<td>• The researcher reflected daily on her own teaching practices using a reflection journal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Cycles 2 and 3, the researcher engaged in modelled play for 50 minutes per day with each group of children. She incorporated digital literacy by modelling how to type and print a card/poster on a laptop and iPad. After, the researcher gathered ‘live’ data (Cohen et al., 2011) of what was happening through structured observations of open-ended play. She
assessed if the children were meeting the three selected learning outcomes, transferring the skills shown in modelled play into their open-ended play, and recorded if the children were more interested in traditional or digital literacy. Group interviews were conducted again at the end of cycle 3.

This chapter will now present, analyse and discuss the findings that emerged from the three cycles of action research using the themes: evidence of emergent writing, digital technology for writing purposes and the teacher’s role. These themes will address the overall aims of this study. Evidence is presented in the form of tables, graphs, figures and reflections and this is used to support the findings and discussion. The findings are analysed critically with reference to the research literature reviewed in chapter two.

**Emergent Writing, Play-Based Learning and the Progression Continua**

The children’s understandings of writing and their writing development over this research period formed the basis for this theme. This section will discuss the children’s emergent writing perspectives, their achievements in each learning outcome and the researcher’s experience of using the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a).

**Emergent writing perspective.** The children’s understanding of writing reflected some elements of an emergent literacy perspective promoted in the PLC (DES, 2019). All the children identified as writers, and viewed writing and drawing as equal, reading and writing as co-dependent processes, and writing as a social process. However, the children did not see writing as a form of self-expression nor did they view writing as a process that happens both inside and outside of school. The findings of each of these views will be addressed next.

During the initial group interviews and throughout the study, the children referred to themselves as writers reflecting an emergent literacy perspective. All twenty-three participants commented that they enjoy writing, supporting Bearne’s (2005) and Kennedy’s
view that children will have a positive mindset and more confidence writing if they identify as writers.

In line with an emergent literacy perspective, most children demonstrated that drawings were indistinguishable to the writing process. When asked what they like to write, one child replied, “I like to write unicorns” (Interview 1, p. 2) while another said “I write dinosaurs” (Interview 4, p. 3). Further evidence of this was seen in week two when a child drew the three bears cottage on an envelope for the postman rather than writing an address as the teacher had modelled (see Figure 8). This upholds the perspective that children make meaning in written form through drawings and scribbles before they can formally write (Byington & Kim, 2017).

![Figure 8. An addressed envelope for the three bears cottage in the forest.](image)

The children in this study identified that reading and writing were co-dependent and often viewed their writing as meaningless or “nothing” (Observation 21, Week 2) if they were not able to read it back. At the end of every session the researcher asked the children what they had written; the children who had typed or written random strings of letters usually tried to phonetically blend together the sounds before answering that it had no purpose or that it was “nothing, because it doesn’t make any real words” (Observation 8, Week 3). The
children did not accept the idea that emergent writing can include invented spelling (Bodrova & Leong, 1998; Byington & Kim, 2017; Gentry, 1982; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Yaden et al., 1999). This reflects the children’s understanding of phonics and the process of encoding and decoding that is taught daily in this class. This illustrates that the children’s view of writing and reading as an interdependent process (Clay, 2001; DES, 2019; Giles & Tunks, 2015; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) is heavily influenced by the ways in which literacy is being taught.

The children upheld the view that writing is a social practice (Marklund & Dunkels, 2016). They had knowledge of writing to other people mainly through cards. However, this conversation was prompted by the teacher rather than the children in all four interviews highlighting that the children did not initially think of discussing the writing that they do or see at home. Birthday cards, Christmas cards, Valentine’s day cards, Mass cards and Get Well Soon cards were all mentioned in the group interviews. Although the children did not know the official names for some of these cards, there was a clear understanding of what they were for. One child described a Get Well Soon card as a “card for if someone is sick” (Interview 1, p. 4). While another child defined a Mass card as “a card for if someone went to heaven” (Interview 2, p. 4). In addition to cards, some children mentioned invitations, letters to Santa and postcards. A postcard was described as a “Lanzarote card” that has “a picture of the holiday place on one side and where the person lives on the other” (Interview 1, p. 9).

The children, therefore, recognised traditional literacy as a means to communicate with others. Interestingly, none of the children spoke about writing to others on digital devices, indicating that they did not think of digital literacy as a form of writing or as a means to communicate, or possibly that they did not see a reason to discuss digital literacy in school.

Contradictory to an emergent literacy perspective, the children did not view writing as a platform to express their own voice (O’ Toole, 2016). Instead writing seemed to be done
only to please adults. One child said that we need to write “because if we don’t write, our teacher will get mad” (Interview 1, p. 2), while another child said that we write so that “mams and dads will be proud” (Interview 4, p. 1). It also seemed that writing was done for the purposes of rewards rather than for self-expression. One child said that we write “so that we can get a tick” (Interview 4, p. 1) and another stated that we need to write “to get a stamp” (Interview 4, p. 1). This finding correlates to the teacher’s reflection that she overused workbooks in class; this finding is outlined in a later theme. If the teacher had moved away from a traditional skills-based approach and focused more on providing agency to the children when writing, perhaps then the children would have viewed writing as a form of self-expression. Although an emergent literacy perspective suggests that children’s views of literacy are influenced by both the home and school environment (Alexander, 1997), this finding suggests that in the context of writing, schools are the power stakeholder’s in creating views of literacy (Street, 2003); the children’s views of literacy reflected only the writing that they did at school or as part of homework.

Writing was also not viewed as a life-long process (Alexander, 1997) by the children. Instead, writing was predominantly associated with school. Writing sounds and writing in workbooks were the first discussion points in all the initial interviews. None of the children discussed writing that is completed outside of school until they were asked specifically about writing cards at home. The fact that the teacher was the researcher might have influenced this. However, it reinforces the finding that children’s views of literacy are predominantly associated with school, further highlighting Street’s (2003) view that schools may be the driving force behind society’s understanding of literacy.

Upon reflection, the researcher should have investigated if the PBL approach used in this study changed the children’s overall view of literacy. Within the play intervention, the children used the writing skills learned within the socio-dramatic play area of the Post Office,
indicating that they viewed these skills as applicable to the outside world. There was also evidence from conversations with parents that the children were using the writing skills learned while playing at home. This contradicts the view of literacy as a school-based activity previously expressed by the children. The researcher should have reviewed the children’s understanding of literacy in the final group interviews to see if they still viewed writing as primarily a school activity. This would have added to the data and is a limitation of this study.

**Emergent writing development in accordance with the PLC (DES, 2019) and the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a).** Although studies such as Christie and Enz (1992) and Clark and Kragler (2005) say that providing additional literacy materials to free play areas does not bring about a significant increase in early literacy activities, this study suggests that if modelled play is introduced prior to open-ended play then children will continue to develop their early writing skills during open-ended play to meet the intended learning outcomes. This section will present the findings and analysis of the overall development of the children’s writing skills during the five-week PBL intervention. Following this, the researcher’s experience of using the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) will be discussed and the effects of providing agency on children’s writing development will be outlined.

This study found that the PBL approach used in this research enabled the children to meet the three selected writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019). The percentage of children who met the selected writing outcomes increased from week one to week five, as illustrated in Table 7. Learning outcome 6 appeared to be the most difficult of the three outcomes for the children to meet, possibly because this outcome relates to generative knowledge of writing which goes beyond basic word level (Byington & Kim, 2017).
Modelled play in weeks two and four allowed the children to work within their ZPD with the teacher acting as the more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1987). The high percentages during open-ended play in week 5 illustrates that the children internalised the new skills and met the intended outcomes independently through reproductive and combinatorial activity (Vygotsky, 2004; 1978). As a result of this, the children met more advanced progression steps in learning outcomes 2, 4, and 6 in week five than they had at the beginning of this study. The researcher recorded the children’s progress on the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) in a table each day (see Appendix H). Each writing outcome will now be examined separately.

**Learning outcome 2.** Figure 9 shows that all the children created texts that put them on either progression step b or c of learning outcome 2, in week one and week two. As the weeks progressed, the children moved up the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a). Weeks four and five saw eight children on step d and two children on step e; this was a great improvement from week one and two. Overall, between week one and week five, ten children moved on to the next progression step for this learning outcome and five children moved up two progression steps. Interestingly, in weeks four and five, the number of children on each progression step remained the same, except for one child who did not participate. This indicates that modelled play and open-ended play are equally as effective at meeting the

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**Table 7**  
*Percentage of Children who met each of the Intended Learning Outcomes each Week*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Outcome</th>
<th>Cycle 1</th>
<th>Cycle 2</th>
<th>Cycle 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning Outcome 2</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Outcome 4</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Outcome 6</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
progression steps of the PLC (DES, 2019) for learning outcome 2, for most children. This resonates with Edwards (2017) view that modelled play and open-ended play can be of equal value for learning purposes.

![Graph showing number of children on each progression step for learning outcome 2](image)

**Figure 9.** The number of children on each progression step for learning outcome 2.

**Learning outcome 4.** Figure 10 shows in week one, the children ranged in ability from step b to e for learning outcome 4. However, during modelled play in week two, four children progressed on to progression step f. This progression illustrates that some children were moving from basic phonetically correct spellings in their texts to more advanced spellings of high frequency words. From then on, there continued to be some children meeting progression step f. This reflects Pyle and Danniels (2017) view that adult involved play can support the teaching of academic skills. The number of children meeting either step e or f rose from eight in week four to thirteen in week five. This finding may contradict Kuschner’s (2012) opinion that open-ended play might not lead to intended learning objectives, as the children not only met the intended outcomes through open-ended play but also progressed on to more advanced stages of that outcome. However, it is likely that the modelled play used prior to the open-ended play influenced this progression. At the end of
the study, fourteen children had moved up one progression step for this outcome and one child had moved up two steps.

**Figure 10.** The number of children on each progression step for learning outcome 4.

**Learning outcome 6.** Figure 11 illustrates that there was a stark difference in week one and week five for learning outcome 6, in that only two children reached above step c in week one, whereas fourteen children reached above step c in week five. This progression highlights that more children were creating texts for a particular purpose and audience.

**Figure 11.** The number of children on each progression step for learning outcome 6.
The number of children meeting each progression step for learning outcome 6 remained the same throughout cycle 3. This indicates that these children continued to practice their emergent writing skills in open-ended play and met equally as high progression steps as they did when the teacher was involved. At the end of the five weeks, eleven children had progressed on to the next progression step for this outcome and four children had moved up two progression steps.

This study allowed the researcher to work in small groups with the children. The researcher developed a culturally responsive pedagogy with the children as she worked from their funds of knowledge and interests. This allowed the researcher to scaffold the children towards the learning outcomes in the pressure free environment of socio-dramatic play. These characteristics of PBL contributed to nineteen participants advancing on to the next step in at least one writing outcome, while nine participants moved up two progression steps. This indicates that PBL is conducive to developing high quality writing in these students.

*The researcher’s experience of using the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a).*

The DES (2015) states that the purpose of the Progression Continua is to describe “a child’s journey in his/her language learning and development” (p. 38). Although the Progression Continua act as support material for the PLC (DES, 2019), the researcher felt that they were needed to assess where the children were at in terms of each writing outcome. The Progression Continua allowed the researcher to track the children’s progress in relation to the three selected outcomes. In week one, the children produced texts that indicated that they were on different progression steps on the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a). Figure 12 highlighting how some children produced texts that included mainly drawings, while others wrote letters. The difference in these children’s abilities highlights the need for a literacy approach such as PBL that allows for differentiation. It also highlights that teachers need to use writing scales that cater for various writing abilities.
Figure 12. Three cards that were created by the children showing varying levels of abilities.
The first card shows how a child used mainly drawings to communicate. When asked to read his card, he used his finger to point to the pictures and replied “*dear baby bear in the forest. I love 3 tanks. From ------*” (Week 1, Observation 2). This card also supports the previous finding that children view writing and reading as indistinguishable. The other cards were more advanced as they included letters. One child used strings of random letters and another child copied print from the address wall, indicating that they were further along the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a). Although the PLC (DES, 2019) states that educators are not expected to “assess the progress of individual children using the progression milestones” (p. 52), the researcher found that doing this made her fortnightly planning easier as the next step in each child’s writing journey was illustrated. While the researcher found that using the Progression Continua was a time-consuming process, she intends to continue using them for the benefit of her future students.

At times, the researcher found it challenging to track the children’s progress as they produced various texts that indicated that they were on different progression steps of the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) on a weekly and even daily basis. Figure 13 shows two texts created minutes apart by one child. This supports the view that children may go back and forth between the various stages of writing development (Puranik & Lonigan, 2011; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) and highlights that a child may be capable of producing a higher standard of work at a different time. As a result of this finding, the researcher believes that teachers should assess children’s progress using the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) over a period rather than on a single piece of work. This finding also indicates that teachers may need to be selective about which Progression Continua that they focus on when using a PBL approach, as other approaches might be more suitable for assessment purposes. This may have implications for overall school policy and planning in the use of the Progression Continua.
The effects of agency on children’s writing development. This study was based on the researcher’s hope of providing agency to the children in their writing experience. The children were encouraged to make any texts that they wanted but, in some cases, the children’s own choices prohibited them from progressing on to higher progression steps. Occasionally, some of the children chose to draw and colour rather than to create a text with writing on it. There was also one child who did not engage in any writing activities during the three weeks of open-ended play. He only joined in when the teacher was involved, possibly indicating that he did not have the confidence to create texts on his own. These findings highlight that providing agency to the children all the time may not always be effective. This explains why several researchers (Edwards et al., 2017; Martlew et al., 2011; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Weisberg et al., 2013b) recommend that teachers use a blend of child-led and teacher-led activities to meet policy driven learning objectives.

Figure 13. Two texts created by the same child moments apart, showing different writing abilities.
Digital Technology for Emergent Writing Purposes

This study aimed to investigate if children showed a preference for digital literacy skills over traditional text-based literacy skills. The findings relating to digital technology are divided into two sub-themes. These are the children’s engagement with digital technology and the challenges of using digital technologies to meet the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019) in a junior infant class. Each sub-theme will now be addressed.

**Engagement with digital technology for writing development.** Figure 14 shows that the children created no digital texts in week one. Some children “opened a laptop and pretended to type on the keyboard” (Reflection Journal, p. 12) although none of children pressed any buttons. This reflects the children’s views from the initial group interviews that digital technology has no connection to writing or to school.

![Figure 14. The number of traditional and digital texts created each week.](image)

In week two, there was a surge in the number of digital texts created when the teacher modelled how to use a laptop and iPad. From then on, there were more digital texts published each week than traditional texts. However, Figure 15 illustrates that in weeks three and four, a higher number of children spent more time creating traditional texts. The researcher noticed
that the children usually spent more time adding colour and drawings to traditional texts than to digital texts. This may be due to the children’s understandings of literacy and their view that traditional literacy is associated with school more so than digital literacy.

![Number of children who spent more time creating traditional literacy or digital literacy texts](image)

**Figure 15.** The number of children who spent more time creating traditional literacy or digital literacy texts.

Although the findings from week one contradict the view that digital literacy is entangled in children’s lives as much as adults (Wohlwend, 2015; Yelland, 2011), the findings from week two onwards suggest that digital literacy actually is part of children’s lives but that the children did not initially recognise it as an activity which could be completed in school. This supports Marsh’s (2006) view that schools are not utilising digital technologies for literacy lessons.

At the end of the study, every child had created at least two digital texts and thirteen out of the twenty-three children had created more digital texts than traditional texts. Therefore, the advancement in the children’s writing skills must be attributed to creating digital texts as well as traditional texts. However, more credit must be given to digital texts
created on laptops than digital texts created on iPads, as texts created on iPads were usually
drawings which contained no letters, like the example shown in Figure 16.

*Figure 16. An example of a text created on the iPad, illustrating that no letters were used.*

Although the children had no difficulty using the iPads and spoke about using them at
home, they were more interested in using the laptops. This was reflected in the final group
interviews when several of the children mentioned that they enjoyed using the laptops, while
none of the children mentioned the iPads. There are several possible explanations as to why
the children were more captivated by the laptops. Data presented in the following section
highlights that the teacher occasionally integrated iPads into literacy lessons prior to this
study but never used laptops. Therefore, the children may have been more interested in the
laptops as they were new and “*cooler*” (Interview 7, p. 3). The children also witnessed the
cashier in the Post Office using a computer as opposed to an iPad when they visited. This
may have portrayed the idea that laptops are more appropriate to use in a play Post Office
than iPads. The fact that the teacher-researcher uses a laptop in class may have also
influenced the children’s interest. There was also the sense that using a laptop made the
children feel mature. This was confirmed at the end of the study when a child stated that she
enjoyed using the “*big people’s computer*” (Interview 8, p. 5).
In comparison to iPads, laptops were used to create texts that met higher progression steps in accordance with the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a). Figure 17 shows a card a child typed on a laptop with some teacher assistance. This child met all three of the learning outcomes as she used the format modelled by the teacher. This highlights that laptops can be used to help children successfully meet some of the learning outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019) when scaffolded by a teacher. This also supports the NCCA’s (2012a) view that digital technologies can be used to develop children’s emergent writing skills.

![Image of a card typed on a laptop](image)

*Figure 17. A text that was created on a laptop with some teacher assistance.*

**Challenges of using digital technologies to meet the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019).** Although the children were more interested in using the laptops, many of the children struggled to play independently with them. Most of the children did not know how to use a touchpad mouse or where to find the space bar or delete button. This highlighted that the children had no previous experience of using laptops. The researcher modelled basic typing skills, however, the children were not familiar with uppercase letters and struggled to use the keyboard, as a result. This caused frustration for some children, particularly those with special educational needs. As a result, some children lost the motivation needed to finish their texts. The researcher noted that “*it was difficult not to intervene during open-ended play when the children were walking away from their incomplete texts*” (Reflection Journal, p. 32).
In order to overcome this challenge, junior infant teachers would need to teach upper-case letters and provide opportunities for children to practice using a keyboard and mouse.

Another challenge that arose from this study was that different devices had different influences on children’s writing development. The children were more interested in the laptops than the iPads and as a result, the texts created on the laptops were more advanced than the texts created on the iPads. Yelland (2011) recommends that schools should use digital technologies to connect children’s home experiences with learning experiences. However, the results from this study would suggest that the children want to use different technologies than they use at home. This raises the question as to whether schools should be investing money into laptops or iPads in the future?

Unfortunately, these challenges cannot be compared to other studies as there have been very few Irish studies conducted on the uses of digital technologies to support writing development in early years’ classrooms (NCCA, 2012a).

The Teacher’s Role

This study highlighted that the teacher’s role continually changed throughout this research process. Although the teacher’s primary aim was to be a facilitator of PBL, she was also a partner in the play, a role model and a learner. This is consistent with the views of Pyle and Danniels (2017) who contend that the role of the adult varies during PBL depending on the type of play being used.

Teacher as facilitator of PBL. Weisberg et al. (2013b) contend that the adult has a more active role in PBL and must intentionally create a purposeful play environment. The teacher spent a considerable amount of time creating and modifying the play environment to include the resources that the children asked for. The researcher realised that it would not be feasible on a long-term basis to provide all the requested resources. The researcher also realised that the play context needs to change on a regular basis to match the children’s
changing interests. Although all the children stated in their final group interviews that they were enjoying the Post Office play area, 87% of them said that they would like it to change to a new play area. This finding indicates that teachers need to have resources ready for different play contexts to ensure that they can meet the changing interests of their pupils. This supports Wood’s (2014) view that open-ended play can never truly be ‘free’ as the teacher controls the play environment and the resources that are available.

Following the advice of many researchers (Einarsdóttir, 1996; Justice & Pullen, 2003; Morrow, 1990; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), the teacher facilitated a print rich environment within the socio-dramatic area to scaffold the children’s writing. Evidence from this study shows that the children repeatedly used the print rich environment during their play to enable them to write independently. Figure 18 presents an example of a card that a child wrote during open-ended play in week three. This child successfully located and copied words from the word wall and message board. This highlights how a print rich environment can scaffold children to write at a more advanced level.

Figure 18. An example of a card written using print from the environment.
Contradictory to this, the researcher noted that the children seldomly copied print from the environment when they were typing on the laptop. Unlike paper and pencil that can be moved around, the researcher never saw the children move the laptops during play. Through dialogue, the researcher discovered that the children were afraid of lifting the laptops as they “cost hundreds of monies” (Observation 18, Week 5). This provides a possible explanation as to why the children seldomly used print from the environment in their typed texts and highlights why educators should ensure that print rich environments are visible when children are sitting at laptops. The idea that laptops cost more than iPads may also have influenced the children’s interest in using them.

**Teacher as play partner.** As well as a facilitator of play, the teacher was also a partner in the play. This meant that teacher could not exhibit control of the play situation as she wanted to be viewed by the children as a partner rather than a dictator. During modelled play, the researcher found this challenging as she wanted to demonstrate the skills to all the children in the group at the same time, however some of the children did not want to play as a group. Following Rogoff’s (2003) advice, the researcher was careful not to direct the play, rather she followed the children’s lead and carefully joined in when invited to guide each child towards the specific learning outcomes. The researcher noted in her journal (see Figure 19) that she had to be mindful of providing agency to the children during these play sessions.

*Figure 19. An extract from the researcher’s reflection journal, p. 34.*

As this study was based on providing agency and voice to the children, the researcher was interested to know if the children liked when she was involved as a play partner. The
children were asked three times throughout this study if they preferred to play with the teacher or without the teacher. Figure 20 shows that each time there was a majority in favour of teacher involved play. However, ten children answered differently in their final interviews than they had in their initial group interviews highlighting that the children possibly enjoy both types of play. As a result, the researcher will continue to rotate between modelled play and open-ended play to provide agency to the children (Kuschner, 2012) and to meet the children’s interests.

![Number of children who preferred each type of play](image)

*Figure 20.* The number of children who preferred teacher involved play and child-only play.

**Teacher as role model.** While involved in the play, the teacher also acted as a role model during modelled play. The teacher modelled how to create cards in cycle 2 and how to create posters in cycle 3. Figure 21 shows that in cycle 2, 73% of children copied the researcher and used the skills modelled during modelled play and 71% of children then transferred these skills into their open-ended play. Interestingly, these percentages rose in cycle 3, with a higher percentage of children using the skills modelled in open-ended play than they had in modelled play. This reinforces Edwards et al.’s (2017) view that open-ended play can be used to promote children’s exploration of newly learned skills. The higher
percentage of children using the skills modelled in cycle 3 may be due to the children becoming more confident and familiar with the new skills having received two previous weeks of modelled play with the teacher.

Figure 21. Percentage of children using the skills modelled in their own texts each week.

Although there were some children who did not use the skills modelled by the teacher, the researcher noted that some of these children demonstrated that they had learned the skills modelled by explaining to others what to do. In one case, the teacher played in role as a customer in the Post Office and asked to buy a Birthday card from the cashier. The cashier was a child who had not previously used the skills modelled, but in the play scenario he explained in detail to the teacher how she should fill in her card and envelope and pointed out the happy birthday message on the notice board that she should write. This indicates that a higher number of children potentially learned the skills modelled but chose not to demonstrate them in texts. This finding reinforces Edwards’ (2017) view that teachers can act as role-models within play to guide the children towards the intended learning outcomes. It also illustrates the importance of using observation as an assessment strategy as opposed to relying solely on a ‘product’ as evidence.
Teacher as learner. The teacher was also a learner alongside the children during this study. The researcher reflected upon her own teaching of writing and play prior to and during the PBL intervention. The insights gained from these reflections were used throughout the study and the researcher hopes to carry these into her future teaching career. These critical reflections will be presented next.

Prior to the PBL intervention, the researcher realised that her daily writing lessons did not reflect the PBL approach that she wanted to achieve as most of her lessons revolved around structured workbooks which mainly included tracing activities or filling in missing letters. The teacher’s overuse of workbooks meant that the children were viewing writing as solely a school activity rather than seeing the connection between writing and daily life. This was evident in their views of writing in the initial group interviews. Following this realisation, the researcher used socio-dramatic/make-believe play as recommended by the NCCA (2012a) to connect her writing lessons to real-life experiences.

As the researcher was over reliant on workbooks for writing activities, she concluded that she was not providing agency for her pupils as they did not get a choice of what to write or get to express their voice within their writing (O’ Toole, 2016). The researcher abandoned all English workbooks for the duration of this study. The researcher knew that she would be “under pressure to get the workbooks finished at the end of the year” (Reflection Journal, p. 3), however, she was not afraid that the children were missing out on any writing experiences by not using textbooks. The researcher was “happy to be providing agency to the children through a PBL approach” (Reflection Journal, p. 11). The researcher intends to have less workbooks on her junior infant booklist next year to progress this further.

The researcher realised that she was not providing voice or agency to the children when using digital devices for writing development. While digital literacy was incorporated into some writing lessons, it was rarely integrated into play. When digital literacy was
integrated into writing lessons, it normally involved tracing letters on an iPad or on the interactive whiteboard. The teacher had not introduced laptops to the class prior to this study. As a result of these findings, the researcher ensured that digital devices were freely available during play for writing purposes. The researcher also plans to use laptops more frequently within her literacy lessons in the future.

The researcher found that these reflections were necessary as they highlighted the areas of her teaching practices that were not in line with her beliefs. In cycle 1, the researcher realised that her overall teaching of writing prior to the PBL intervention did not incorporate the principles of emergent writing and PBL as much as she would have liked. The researcher was not foregrounding the principles of developmental theories, children as citizens, relational pedagogy or working from the children’s funds of knowledge. After implementing a culturally responsive PBL approach to writing instruction, the researcher successfully managed to integrate all four principles of PBL into her teaching of emergent writing. She learned that this approach improves children’s overall writing abilities and increases their interest in writing. The researcher is aware that this change is the result of her critically reflecting upon her own teaching practices. This highlights the importance of reflection for practitioners.

In addition to reflection, the teacher also learned the importance of dialogue. This study highlighted to the researcher that it was not possible to learn new things or fully gain insights into the world of children’s literacy without engaging in dialogue with the children. In some instances of open-ended play, the researcher noted that the children were on progression step d as they were writing strings of random letters. However, after speaking with the children about their texts, it was clear that each letter had a purpose and phonetically represented some words indicating that the children were really at progression step e. This verifies that teachers must build a relational pedagogy with children and engage in dialogue
about their work in order to fully assess their abilities. The literature review highlighted French’s (2007) opinion on the importance of a relational pedagogy for children’s learning and development, yet this study shows that a relational pedagogy also contributes to the teacher’s learning.

**Other Findings**

An unexpected finding that emerged from this action research process was the positive impact this study had on the researcher’s relationship with others and on their interest in PBL. Through this study, the researcher became closer to her pupils, their parents and her colleagues. Each of these will be discussed now.

The researcher built a stronger relational pedagogy with her pupils through the PBL approach that she used. This relational pedagogy moved beyond the “limited ‘engaged practice’ that is evident in Irish education systems” (Quillan et al., 2019, p. 246), to a more culturally responsive teaching and learning approach that emphasises the co-construction of learning. One participant illustrated how the shift to meaning-making changed her views of the teacher when she said, “I used to think that you knew everything teacher, but now I think your brain is like mine” (Observation 11, week 4). There was a clear sense of mutual respect, as the children understood that the teacher was responding to their own interests. One child said, “I loved that you always made the cards that I asked for” (Interview 6, p. 4). Through this approach, the researcher combined the planned learning objectives with emergent objectives from the children’s interests to create a more culturally responsive relational pedagogy than she previously had.

The researcher also built a stronger partnership with the parents of her pupils. The parents were very interested in the study and asked the researcher daily how it was going. Several parents commented on the improvements in their child’s writing and were fascinated how it was the result of PBL. One stated that her child created a poster for their lost cat at
home and that she was shocked at how much detail he wrote in it. She said, “when I asked him how he knew what to write, he shrugged his shoulders and said I just do it when I’m playing” (Reflection Journal, p. 39). The researcher was surprised at the level of questions and positive comments that the parents exhibited on the benefit of play for writing development and wondered about their previous knowledge of the matter. This outlines an area for future research study. It also reflects the benefit of connecting school literacy with the home funds of knowledge.

This study also led to the teacher having a closer relationship with her colleagues. This in turn led to the researcher’s colleagues pursuing their knowledge of PBL for literacy development. The researcher’s colleagues assessed the children’s written texts using the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) on a regular basis to ensure that the researcher was providing fair and unbiased assessments. Some of the teachers were surprised at how quickly the children progressed and were interested in learning more about PBL. Two of the researcher’s colleagues have signed up for a summer course that explores play and literacy. One of these teachers has also asked the researcher to help her establish the culturally responsive PBL approach used in this study next year with senior infants. Therefore, this action research project has not only acted as a form of continuing professional development for the researcher (Cain & Milovic, 2010) but has also encouraged the professional development of her colleagues. This finding justifies the chosen methodology.

Conclusion

This chapter analysed the findings that arose from the collected data. These findings illustrate that a PBL approach was used successfully to meet some of the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019). This study suggests that using modelled play prior to open-ended play allows children to practice their emergent writing skills in a pressure free environment while also providing opportunities for the children to be agentive in their learning. Moreover, it
indicates that teachers should be vigilant towards the digital devices which they use to promote emergent literacy as some devices e.g. laptops, may contribute more to children’s writing development than tablet type devices. Lastly, the data found that through PBL, the teacher developed a culturally responsive pedagogy with her pupils and a stronger partnership with their parents.

The next and finally chapter will relate the key findings of this research to the aims of the study.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The aims of this study were fourfold: to investigate how modelled play and open-ended play could be used to meet the learning outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019); to see if children transfer the writing skills used in modelled play into their open-ended play; to see if children prefer modelled play or open-ended play while engaging in writing activities; and to examine if children show a preference for digital literacy skills over traditional literacy skills.

This chapter establishes the degree to which these four research questions were answered using a summary of the key findings. Then, the limitations of this study are outlined and recommendations are provided for future policy and practice. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a reflective summary of the action research process.

Summary of Findings

While this was a small-scale project and cannot be generalised or directly transferred to other settings, it provides valuable recommendations for the school in which the data was gathered.

How can a play-based pedagogy be used to meet the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019) in accordance with the Progression Continua? This study found that a play-based framework involving modelled play prior to open-ended play was used successfully to meet the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019). The teacher used modelled play to demonstrate the writing skills within the socio-dramatic play area and scaffolded the children as they used these skills within their own play. This PBL approach met all four of the theoretical underpinnings of PBL and emergent writing, enabling the researcher to provide voice and agency to her pupils while supporting their emergent writing development. This approach resulted in the children meeting the three selected writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019) and in most cases actually progressing on to more advanced steps on the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a). Through this approach,
nineteen of the twenty-three participants moved up the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) by one step in at least one writing outcome, while nine participants moved up two progression steps. While the researcher acknowledges that the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) is classified as support material for the PLC (DES, 2019) and not mandatory, she found that using the Progression Continua made her planning easier as the next steps in the children’s writing journeys were outlined for her.

This finding illustrates that the teachers in the school in which this research was conducted, no longer need to be caught in the dilemma between the benefits of free play as a means to provide agency (Kuschner, 2012) and the knowledge that teacher involved play is more sufficient at developing writing skills (Clark & Kragler, 2005). Instead, the teachers can embrace the two through a PBL approach by rotating between modelled play and open-ended in a socio-dramatic play area. This will enable the teachers to scaffold the children’s emergent writing skills to meet the policy-driven outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019) while also adhering to the developmentally appropriate practices that underpin PBL.

**Do children transfer the writing skills used in modelled play into their open-ended play?** In cycle 2 of the action research process, 71% of the children transferred the writing skills modelled by the teacher into their open-ended play. This figure rose to 91% in cycle 3, highlighting that most of the children had internalised the new skills and were now capable of using them independently. Some children who did not transfer the skills into texts, demonstrated that they learned the skills by telling others what to do. These results confirm that the children in this study did transfer the skills learned in modelled play into their open-ended play. This supports the view that modelled play prior to open-ended play is conducive to developing high quality writing in young children.

**Do children prefer modelled play or open-ended play while engaging in writing activities?** A higher number of children stated that they preferred modelled play over open-
ended play. However, ten children provided a different answer at the end of the study than they had at the beginning. This provides evidence that it should not be an answer of either or, rather the children enjoy both types of play. This supports the use of both types of play in this study as it meets the children’s interests.

**Do children show a preference for digital literacy skills over traditional literacy skills?** Although the children produced more digital texts as products of the literacy events from week two onwards, they actually spent more time engaging with traditional texts most weeks. As a result, the researcher does not believe that the children favoured digital literacy over traditional literacy. Instead, it appeared that the children were more interested in what they believed to be ‘schooled literacy’. There was evidence from both the group interviews and from the observations that the children did not initially associate digital literacy with school. A critical review of the researcher’s own teaching practice showed that the children’s views of literacy reflected her own teaching practices as she rarely integrated digital literacy into her lessons. Therefore, the results of this study may not have truly portrayed the children’s preference, rather it showed what the children considered to be appropriate writing for school.

This study found that digital literacy attributed to the advancement in the children’s writing skills just as much as traditional literacy. However, not all digital devices contributed equally. Within digital literacy, the children showed a preference for laptops over iPads. The children viewed a laptop as a “big people’s computer” that was “cooler”, and “cost hundreds of monies”. Although the children struggled to use the laptops independently, they were more interested in using them. This led to a substantial difference in the advanced texts produced on laptops compared to the drawings which were created on iPads. This finding highlights that schools should be mindful of the digital technologies that they purchase, as laptops/computers may be more suited to promoting writing development than iPads. This
also supports the use of a play-based pedagogy as practitioners can trial different digital
technologies to see which devices meet the children’s interests. This PBL approach will also
permit the teachers to model digital literacy concepts in a meaningful and lifelike manner.

The teacher’s role. This study found that the teacher’s role continually changed
throughout this research process. The researcher found this difficult at times as she had to
navigate between her role as a play partner during modelled play and her role as an observer
during open-ended play. Alongside these, the teacher also had to balance the duties of being a
facilitator, a role model and a learner. As a facilitator, she gathered the resources, built the
play context and created a print rich environment. These were vital for the learning
experiences of the children as the data revealed that the children regularly used print from the
environment to create texts within the play area created. As a role model, the researcher
demonstrated the specific writing skills which met the three intended writing outcomes of the
PLC (DES, 2019). This had a profound impact on the number of children who progressed on
to more advanced stages of the Progression Continua (NCCA, 2019a) through both
traditional and digital literacy. Lastly, as a learner, the teacher critically reflected on her daily
practices and her previous teaching habits that influenced the children’s understanding of
literacy. This was not an easy process as the researcher realised that her previous teaching
methods such as using the workbooks had gone against her beliefs of providing agency and
voice to the children. The researcher learned that critical reflection was necessary to see the
changes which were needed in her own practice.

Limitations

As mentioned in chapter 3, all research carries some limitations and this study was no
exception. This was a small-scale study limited to one junior infant classroom and one
researcher. Due to time constraints, this study focused on only three writing outcomes from
the PLC (DES, 2019). The results of this study may have varied if three different outcomes
were selected or if a different group of children were involved. A longitudinal study would be needed to truly assess if a PBL approach could be used to meet all nine writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019). This is an area that should be looked at for future research purposes.

The teacher’s general teaching practices prior to this study may have influenced some of the findings. For instance, the researcher has used teacher-involved play in the socio-dramatic play area since September with this class. This may have influenced the children’s play preference and might explain why a higher number of children said that they preferred modelled play.

The researcher had planned to observe the children in the weeks and months after the play intervention to see if they continued to use the new skills learned within their play. Unfortunately, all schools were ordered to close the week after the play intervention finished due to Covid-19 restrictions. This limited the researcher’s insight into the long-term impact that this study had on her pupils’ emergent writing development.

**Recommendations for Future Policy and Practice**

The findings in this study give rise to some interesting recommendations for future policy and practice. These will be outlined below.

- Continual professional development for infant teachers relating to the PLC (DES, 2019) should foreground the following:
  - The benefit that a PBL framework sequencing modelled play before open-ended play can have on children’s emergent writing development.
  - The importance of adhering to the four underpinning principles of PBL when using a play-based pedagogy to meet the nine writing outcomes of the Curriculum.
Which aspects of digital literacy should be taught in the first two years of school and which digital devices are more suited to meeting the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019)?

- A longitudinal study on school policy and planning should be undertaken, outlining how a PBL approach can be used to meet all nine of the writing outcomes of the PLC (DES, 2019). This would provide support and guidance to schools and infant teachers in Ireland.
- Any review of the PLC (DES, 2019) should have a greater and more explicit articulation of the use of digital technologies to support emergent writing development.
- More emphasis should be placed on the need for teachers to critically reflect on their own practices as they implement policies and teaching methodologies such as PBL.

Reflective Summary of the Process

As action research is a self-critical inquiry (Basit, 2010), it seems appropriate to conclude this study with a reflective summary of my own experience as a teacher-researcher. I have learned a lot about myself as a teacher and a learner through this process.

As a teacher, I am committed to using a PBL approach to teach the infant curriculum. I strive to provide voice and agency to all children and hope to run workshops for my colleagues on this topic. I have grown to love the culturally responsive PBL pedagogy that has been part of my teaching since this study started, and I intend to use this approach with my new Junior Infant class. I am excited to return to school in September and look forward to seeing the benefits of this approach over a full school year.

Overall, reflection and dialogue were the two elements that lead to my learning in this study. Quillinan et al. (2019) recently highlighted that dialogue and reflection are key elements of transformative learning. I believe that this study has been a transformative
experience for me as I have learned with and from the participants. Prior to this study, I had never critically examined my own teaching practice. I did not realise the benefits that a reflection journal would have on my professional development journey or on my emotional wellbeing. Through reflection, I saw the distortions in my beliefs and practices. By using Gibb’s (1988) reflection cycle within my journal entries, I was able to turn my reflections into actions. Mezirow (2009) states that true transformation takes place when the learner actively takes steps that acknowledge their new beliefs. Through this study, I have experienced a true transformation as I implemented a PBL approach to writing instruction that was in line with my aims of providing an agentic learning experience to writing instruction for the children. I have grown to love journaling and intend to continue the practice. In this way, this transformative learning experience will continue for many years to come. This will also ensure that the voices of the participants will always be honoured; “I wish that your college homework could continue forever” (Observation 23, Week 5).
References


Department of Education and Skills (DES). (2020). *Literacy and numeracy in disadvantaged schools: Challenges for teachers and learners*. Retrieved from https://assets.gov.ie/25383/3c90a0c03b5f4b5e91b7f0f444cb5db9.pdf


management using action research and action learning; concepts, frameworks, processes and applications (pp. 1–20). Lismore, Australia: Southern Cross University Press.
Appendix A

Letters of Consent

Letter of Consent for the Board of Management

6th December 2019

Dear [Name],

I am completing the Master in Education Studies (focusing on Early Childhood Education) at the Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year, I am required to complete a thesis.

For this, I would like to ask the board of management for permission to complete an action research project to investigate how an infant teacher can use a play-based learning approach to meet the writing outcomes of the Primary Language Curriculum. This will involve a five-week intervention of playful activities that will develop my pupil’s emergent writing skills.

Although all the children will be involved in the teaching and learning of this unit of work, I would like to ask their parents for permission to interview the children and use samples of their written work as data for my research. I would also like to ask the children for their assent to take part in the group interviews and to provide samples of their written work before I start this study.

The school and all the children will remain anonymous throughout the process and their work will be unnamed. The data I gather will be stored for 13 months in a secure filing cabinet and then destroyed. This research has been approved by the Ethics committee in the Marino Institute of Education. If you have any questions or seek clarification, please do not hesitate to come see me in my classroom.

Many thanks for your support,

Aoife Kavanagh

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Please tick and return by the 18th December:

☐ I consent to this research taking place in [Name] school.

or

☐ I do not consent to this research taking place in [Name] school.

Chairperson’s signature_________________________ Date: _________________________
Letter of consent for the school principal

6th December 2019

Dear [Name],

I am completing the Master in Education Studies (focusing on Early Childhood Education) at the Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year, I am required to complete a thesis.

For this, I would like your permission to complete an action research project to investigate how an infant teacher can use a play-based learning approach to meet the writing outcomes of the Primary Language Curriculum. This will involve a five-week intervention of playful activities that will develop my pupil’s emergent writing skills.

Although all the children will be involved in the teaching and learning of this unit of work, I would like to ask their parents for permission to interview the children and use samples of their written work as data for my research. I would also like to ask the children for their assent to take part in the group interviews and to provide samples of their written work before I start this study.

The school and all the children will remain anonymous throughout the process and their work will be unnamed. The data I gather will be stored for 13 months in a secure filing cabinet and then destroyed. This research has been approved by the Ethics committee in the Marino Institute of Education. If you have any questions or seek clarification, please do not hesitate to come see me in my class.

Many thanks for your support,

Aoife Kavanagh

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Please tick and return by the 18th December:

☐ I consent to this research taking place in this school.

or

☐ I do not consent to this research taking place in this school.

Principal’s signature _______________________ Date: _________________________
Letter of consent for the parents

9th December 2019

Dear Parents/ Guardians,

As most of you are aware, I am completing the Master in Education Studies (focusing on Early Childhood Education) at the Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year, I am required to complete a thesis.

For my thesis, I will be completing an action research project investigating how an infant teacher can use a play-based learning approach to meet the writing outcomes of the Primary Language Curriculum. This will involve a five-week intervention of playful activities that will develop the children’s writing skills. I will be setting up a play Post Office in the classroom and scaffolding the children’s writing as they engage with various writing utensils and digital equipment such as laptops and iPads. I will be implementing this intervention during Aistear sessions starting in February.

During this action research project, I will be journaling my lessons and identifying ways that I can improve my teaching. I will be interviewing the children in small groups before and after the five weeks to see what they like/dislike about writing. I will also gather samples of their writing as evidence that the children are meeting the learning outcomes of the curriculum.

I am asking for your consent to allow your child to take part in this research and allow me to interview him/her within a small group and use samples of their work as part of the data in the research. I will also ask the children for their assent before this project starts. If you do not wish for your child to take part, s/he will still be included in the teaching and learning during this study, but I will not interview him/her, and I will not gather any samples of their work.

The school and all the children will remain anonymous throughout the process and their work will be unnamed. The data I gather will be stored for 13 months in a secure filing cabinet and then destroyed. This research has been approved by the Ethics committee in the Marino Institute of Education and permission has been granted by the school principal and board of management. You may withdraw your consent at any time during the five weeks. If you have any questions or seek clarification, please do not hesitate to come see me. I would appreciate if you would sign and return the attached form please.

Many thanks for your support,

_______________________________
Aoife Kavanagh
Child’s name: ________________________

Please tick all that apply and return by the 18th of December:

☐ I consent to audio recordings of my child being taken during small group interviews.

☐ I consent to samples of my child’s work being used anonymously for research purposes.

or

☐ I do not consent to audio recordings of my child being taken during small group interviews.

☐ I do not consent to samples of my child’s work being used anonymously for research purposes.

Parent/guardian’s signature_____________________ Date: _________________________
Appendix B

Infant Friendly Assent Form

Name: ______________________       Date: ________________

Ms. Kavanagh has permission to record my voice during interviews.

[Yes] yes [No] no

Ms. Kavanagh has permission to use samples of my work for her college homework.

[Yes] yes [No] no
Appendix C

The Steps Involved in each Cycle of the Action Research Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phases</th>
<th>Steps involved in cycle 1 of the action research process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Plan   | • The topics of writing and play were chosen as the researcher felt that these were the aspects of her teaching that she needed to improve on.  
        • A timeframe for this study was established.  
        • A research sample was selected. |
| Act    | • An in-depth literature review was completed.  
        • Four group interviews were conducted using the projection technique teacher-in-role.  
        • The children engaged in dialogic reading sessions of the story *The Jolly Postman*. They visited the local Post Office and interviewed a postman to ensure that the Post Office was part of their funds of knowledge.  
        • A play Post Office was created in the classroom. This play area included a card stand, envelopes, copies, sticky notes, parcel forms, three iPads and three laptops. The print rich environment included vocabulary words, a message board and an address wall for the children to copy from. |
| Observe | • The researcher observed her own teaching practices and play sessions using the following questions:  
           - Did the writing lessons incorporate appropriately playful learning experiences?  
           - Was voice and agency being given to the children during writing lessons?  
           - Were the children engaging in mark-making during play and for what purposes?  
           - How were the children being supported as writers during play?  
           - Was digital literacy being integrated into writing lessons and play?  
        • The observation checklist was piloted for three days.  
        • The children were observed in open-ended play in the Post Office. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflect</th>
<th>The researcher reflected daily on her own teaching practices using a reflection journal.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Steps involved in cycle 2 of the action research process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>From the observations in cycle 1, it was clear that most of the children did not understand the layout of a card. A lesson plan for modelled play was created to demonstrate this.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act</th>
<th>The researcher engaged in modelled play for 50 minutes each day with a different group of children; she chose a card from the card stand (see Figure C1) and modelled how to write a card and an envelope. She incorporated digital literacy by modelling how to type and print a card on the laptop and how to send a birthday message on the iPad.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observe</th>
<th>The researcher gathered ‘live’ data (Cohen et al., 2011) of what was happening through structured observations of open-ended play. She assessed if the children were meeting the 3 selected learning outcomes, transferring the skills shown in modelled play into their open-ended play, and recorded if the children were more interested in traditional or digital literacy.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflect</th>
<th>Zuber-Skerritt (as cited by Altrichter at al., 2002) states that insights gained from the initial cycle feed into planning of the next cycle, for which the action plan is modified, and the research process repeated. In line with this information, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic approach was used to analyse the observation checklists, the children’s work samples and the researcher’s journal reflections. This data was used to create a revised plan for cycle 3.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Steps involved in cycle 3 of the action research process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>The data from cycle 2 revealed that the next progression step for most children was to create texts to display. The researcher focused on posters as the children repeatedly spoke about a missing cat poster that they saw in the window of the Post Office when they visited. The researcher discussed this with the children and one boy suggested that they create WANTED posters of bold people like in his video game.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
- A lesson plan for modelled play demonstrating how to create both types of posters was formed.

**Act**
- The researcher modelled how to fill in a missing animal poster and a WANTED poster on paper and on the laptop. Templates of these were created to scaffold the children’s writing. The print rich environment was adjusted to meet the objectives of this cycle. Animal names and descriptions were placed on a notice board and sample WANTED posters were displayed on the wall as shown in Figure C2.

**Observe**
- The children were observed during open-ended play to assess if they were meeting the 3 selected learning outcomes, and to note if they were using the skills learned during modelled play.

**Reflect**
- The researcher wrote daily reflections in her journal.
- Group interviews were conducted after the final observation.

*Figure C1*. Card stand that was created for the play Post Office.
Figure C2. Animal names and sample WANTED posters displayed for cycle 3.
Appendix D

Group Interview Schedules

Teacher will be in role as Ms. Bird. Ms. Bird is a character in a series of behaviour management books that the researcher read during dialogic reading sessions prior to this study.

Group Interview Schedule at the Beginning of the Research

Ms. Bird (teacher-in-role): *Hi boys and girls, I believe you have read some of the books about my class. Your teacher has told me that you read the stories ‘Monkey needs to listen’, ‘Lion’s in a flap’ and ‘Elephant learns to share’. I hope you liked hearing about my class because I love hearing all the stories Ms. Kavanagh tells me about your class. She says you are great at working together and solving problems, is this true? .......Well I have a big problem and I need your help. The animals in my class do not like writing. Do you think you could help me with this problem?*

Questions

1. Are you a writer?
2. Do you like writing?
3. Why do we need to write?
4. What is your favourite thing to write?
5. When do you like to write?
6. Has anyone ever written anything to you before?
7. Do you ever write during play time? If so, what do you write?
8. Do you like when teacher helps you write when you are playing, or do you prefer to play without teacher?
Follow on conversation from Ms. Bird (teacher-in-role): Ok, it seems that a fun time to do writing might be during play time. I read a story last week to my class called ‘The Jolly Postman’ and my class loved it. I think I will set up a pretend Post Office in my classroom. Do you think my class will like that?

Follow on questions:

9. What would I need to set up a Post Office?

10. What would my class do in the Post Office play area?

11. How could I help the animals with their writing in the Post Office?

12. Would you like your teacher to set up a Post Office in your classroom? Why?

13. If yes, what would you like Ms. Kavanagh to put in your Post Office?

14. Is there anything you would like Ms. Kavanagh to help you write when you are playing in the Post Office?

Group Interview Schedule at the end of the Research

Ms. Bird (teacher-in-role): Hi boys and girls, I am delighted that I am back here today because I wanted to say thank you for all your help the last time we met. You all gave me some great ideas on how I could help the animals in my class learn to write. Did you get the letter I posted?... Ms. Kavanagh told me that you also set up a play Post Office in your classroom like I did.

Questions

1. What did you write in the Post Office?

2. What did you use the laptop for?

3. What did you use the iPad for?

4. What was your favourite thing that you did in the Post Office?
5. Did you prefer the weeks when Ms. Kavanagh helped you write or when you played on your own?

6. Would you like the Post Office to continue or would you prefer it to change to a new play area?

Ms. Bird (teacher-in-role): *Did you know I asked the animals in my class the same questions?* Monkey said his favourite thing was typing posters on the laptop and Hippo said his favourite thing was to write cards and give them to his friends. *I think it is very interesting that they liked some of the same things you did.* Well I must go now, thank you for all your help and I can’t wait to meet Ms. Kavanagh for coffee next week to hear about the great work that you are all doing. *Bye.*
Appendix E

Description of the Three Selected Learning Outcomes and their Corresponding Progression Steps

Learning outcome 2 falls into the communicating element of the PLC (DES, 2019) and is based on motivation and choice. Within this outcome, the children are enabled to “choose appropriate tools, content and topics for their own writing and select texts for sharing with others” (DES, 2019, p. 30).

Table E1
The progression steps linked to learning outcome 2 of the writing strand of the PLC (adapted from NCCA, 2019a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Progression step description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Handles mark-making implements and materials to create text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Chooses mark-making implements and materials to create text of their choosing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Plays with a variety of implements and materials to create texts on a topic of their choice and selects texts to share with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>Uses a variety of implements and materials to create texts on a chosen topic and selects texts to display.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>With increasing independence, chooses a topic and appropriate implements to create texts and selects texts to publish and display.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>Chooses from a wider range of topics and, with support, selects content and different presentation formats to share their writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learning outcome 4 is in the understanding element of the PLC (DES, 2019) and relates to spelling and word study. This outcome enables children to “recognise, name and sound letters and use some correct spellings, drawing on their sound and letter patterns to try out invented spelling” (DES, 2019, p. 30).

Table E2
The progression steps linked to learning outcome 4 of the writing strand of the PLC (adapted from NCCA, 2019a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Progression step description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Creates shapes in mark making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Creates shapes in mark-making to communicate meaning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
c Recognises some letters in familiar words and uses these and other symbols to represent text.
Recalls features/differences of pictures and/or objects.
d Connects the letter symbol to the sound for some upper and lower-case letters.
Uses random strings of letters showing emerging awareness of letter sounds to represent text.
Understands the connection between the written and the spoken word.
Begins to copy print.
e Uses some phonetically correct letters, common letter patterns and familiar words.
Begins to distinguish between short and long vowel sounds.
Recognises similarities and differences between some letters.
f Sounds and names all upper and lower-case letters.
Uses some correct consonants and vowels in approximate spellings and spells some high frequency and familiar words with appropriate sequencing of phonemes.
Demonstrates an awareness of sounds covered through sounding out unfamiliar words while spelling.
Recognises consonant/vowel sound patterns in syllables of spoken words.

Learning outcome 6 is within the exploring and using element of the PLC (DES, 2019) and correlates to purpose, genre and voice. This outcome enables the children to “draw and write with a sense of purpose and audience” and “explore and use the typical text structure and language features associated with a variety of genres” (DES, 2019, p. 31).

Table E3
The progression steps linked to learning outcome 6 of the writing strand of the PLC (adapted from NCCA, 2019a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Progression step description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Uses signs, symbols or text to share experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>Shares thoughts, knowledge and experiences with others through mark-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>Begins to share thoughts, knowledge and experiences for a particular purpose and audience using marks, drawings and some letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>Writes and draws for a particular purpose and audience while sharing thoughts, knowledge and experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>Writes for a wider range of purposes and audiences while sharing thoughts, knowledge and experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>Begins to write in a range of genres using a basic structure appropriate to a particular genre, matching language to purpose, genre and audience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the progression steps for each outcome range from a- k, it is unlikely that the children in junior infants would progress past step f.
Appendix F

Pre-Pilot and Post-Pilot Observation Checklists

Pre-pilot observation checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Group:</th>
<th>Child:</th>
<th>Age:</th>
<th>Male/ female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning outcomes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Progression steps</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Motivation and choice</strong></td>
<td>a. Handles mark-making implements and materials to create text.</td>
<td>b. Chooses mark-making implements and materials to create text of their choosing.</td>
<td>c. Plays with a variety of implements and materials to create texts on a topic of their choice and selects texts to share with others.</td>
<td>d. Uses a variety of implements and materials to create texts on a chosen topic and selects texts to display.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Spelling and word study</strong></td>
<td>b. Creates shapes in mark-making to communicate meaning.</td>
<td>c. Recognises some letters in familiar words and uses these and other symbols to represent text. Recalls features/differences of pictures and/or objects.</td>
<td>d. Connects the letter symbol to the sound for some upper and lower-case letters and uses random strings of letters showing emerging awareness of letter sounds to represent text. Understands the connection between the written and the spoken word. Begins to copy print.</td>
<td>e. Uses some phonetically correct letters, common letter patterns and familiar words. Begins to distinguish between short and long vowel sounds. Recognises similarities and differences between some letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. Purpose, Genre and Voice</strong></td>
<td>a. Uses signs, symbols or text to share experiences.</td>
<td>b. Shares thoughts, knowledge and experiences with others through mark-making.</td>
<td>c. Begins to share thoughts, knowledge and experiences for a particular purpose and audience using marks, drawings and some letters.</td>
<td>d. Writes and draws for a particular purpose and audience while sharing thoughts, knowledge and experiences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
Post-pilot observation checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Group:</th>
<th>Child:</th>
<th>Prefers: teacher’s help/ writing own way</th>
<th>Male/ female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning outcomes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Progression steps</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Motivation and choice</td>
<td>b. Chooses mark-making implements and materials to create text of their choosing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Plays with a variety of implements and materials to create texts on a topic of their choice and selects texts to share with others.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Uses a variety of implements and materials to create texts on a chosen topic and selects texts to display.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. With increasing independence, chooses a topic and appropriate implements to create texts and selects texts to publish and display.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Spelling and word study</td>
<td>c. Recognises some letters in familiar words and uses these and other symbols to represent text. Recalls features/differences of pictures and/or objects.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Connects the letter symbol to the sound for some upper and lower-case letters and uses random strings of letters showing emerging awareness of letter sounds to represent text. Understands the connection between the written and the spoken word. Begins to copy print.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. Uses some phonetically correct letters, common letter patterns and familiar words. Begins to distinguish between short and long vowel sounds. Recognises similarities and differences between some letters.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f. Sounds and names all upper and lower-case letters. Uses some correct consonants and vowels in approximate spellings and spells some high frequency and familiar words with appropriate sequencing of phonemes. Demonstrates an awareness of sounds covered through sounding out unfamiliar words while spelling. Recognises consonant/vowel sound patterns in syllables of spoken words.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Purpose, Genre and Voice</td>
<td>b. Shares thoughts, knowledge and experiences with others through mark-making.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c. Begins to share thoughts, knowledge and experiences for a particular purpose and audience using marks, drawings and some letters.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Writes and draws for a particular purpose and audience while sharing thoughts, knowledge and experiences.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e. Writes for a wider range of purposes and audiences while sharing thoughts, knowledge and experiences.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Uses the skills modelled: **Yes/ No**
2. Engages with digital literacy equipment: **Yes/ No**
3. More time spent on traditional literacy or digital literacy? ________________
4. Number of published Traditional texts _______ and Digital texts _______

**Observations:**
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

**Analysis:**
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

**Future aim for this child:**
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
Appendix G

Sample Lesson Plan for Modelled Play

**Context:** Socio-dramatic play area based on the post office (prior to this lesson, we will have read the story *The Jolly Postman* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg during a dialogic shared reading session and visited the Post Office).

**Resources needed:** writing materials (pens, pencils, markers, crayons), Birthday cards, Valentine’s day cards, Get Well Soon cards, sticky notes, copies, envelopes, stamps, sample addresses, stampers, post boxes, laptops, iPads, printer.

**Time:** 9.10am – 10am

**Learning outcomes:** That the children will be enabled to:

- Learning outcome 2: Choose appropriate tools, content and topics for their own writing and select texts for sharing with others.
- Learning outcome 4: Recognise, name and sound letters and use some correct spellings, drawing on their sound and letter patterns to try out invented spelling.
- Learning outcome 6: Draw and write with a sense of purpose and audience while creating texts in a range of genres and other languages where appropriate.

**Introduction:** I will:

- Remind the children of the story and discuss what items a postman delivers e.g. letters, postcards, Birthday invitations etc.
- Explain that these go into envelopes and we need to write the address on the envelope so that the postman knows where to deliver them to.
- Explain that the postman will collect all the envelopes from the post box and deliver them to the correct addresses.

**Development:** I will:

- Explain that I would like to send Goldilocks a Birthday card (as it was her birthday in the story). Ask the children which card I should use.
- Model how to write a Birthday card to Goldilocks. e.g. Dear Goldilocks, happy birthday. From Ms. Kavanagh.
- Model how to put the card in the envelope and write Goldilocks’ address on the envelope. I will copy Goldilocks’ address from the address wall.
- Model how to stick the stamp onto the envelope and post the card into the post box.
- Explain that I also want to send a Valentine’s card to my sister, but I want to type this one on the laptop. Model how to type a Valentine’s day card on the laptop and print it.
- Model how to create a Get Well Soon card on the iPad for my cousin.
- Scaffold the children through modelled play as they (hopefully) engage in writing activities.

**Conclusion:** I will:

- Invite some of the children to act as postal workers to deliver the cards that were created.
- Invite some of the children to play in role as the recipients of the cards. These children will check their post boxes, open their post and read them to others.
Appendix H

Progression Continua Progress Progress Records

Table H1

Record of the Progression Steps met each week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group and child</th>
<th>Cycle 1</th>
<th>Cycle 2</th>
<th>Cycle 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Week 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open-ended play</td>
<td>Modelled play</td>
<td>Open-ended play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LO2</td>
<td>LO4</td>
<td>LO6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 1</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 2</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 3</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 4</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 5</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 6</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<td>d</td>
<td>c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 6</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: LO is an abbreviation for learning outcome. The colours represent the four groups that were created. ---- indicates that the child did not meet the outcome and ⊖ indicates that the child was absent.