Teachers’ Perspectives of the Socio-Dramatic area of Aistear in Supporting the Development of Literacy Skills in the Infant Classroom

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Declaration

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Laura McBride

Date: 10\textsuperscript{th} May 2021
Abstract

This dissertation seeks to examine teachers’ perspectives of children’s literacy skills within the socio-dramatic area of Aistear in the infant classrooms. Despite the changes to the modern world, with everything becoming easily more accessible and available at the touch of a button, research has indicated that traditional literacy skills are fundamental for participation within a twenty-first century society. Despite Ireland’s impressive placing in recent PISA and PIRLS ratings, statistics have demonstrated that Ireland still needs to experience some change as 45% of young people in Ireland today are experiencing low levels of literacy skills (Central Statistics Office, 2013).

In recent years, the primary school teaching community has increasingly become more appreciative of the value that playful learning methodologies has on children’s learning and development, most notably with the recent introduction of the Aistear (2009) Curriculum Framework into the infant classes of primary schools and a further review of the Primary School Curriculum to introduce a new Primary Language Curriculum in 2019. This study that was carried out was a qualitative study, in the form of semi-structured interviews with mainstream infant teachers in a non-DEIS school. The purpose of this study was to get an in-depth insight into teachers’ perspectives on the impact that socio-dramatic play has on infant children’s literacy skills.

This study found that although the cohort of teachers that were involved in this study believed that socio-dramatic play has a role in developing literacy skills of infant children, they nevertheless felt that they were ill equipped with training, funding, time, space and resources to implement meaningful socio-dramatic play opportunities. Many
teachers claim that a lack of continuous professional development when Aistear was first introduced into the infant classrooms is their source of uncertainty when implementing learning opportunities, such as literacy skills, within the socio-dramatic play area. Thus, highlighting the vital need for additional training and continuous professional development in the area of Aistear and playful learning methodologies, in order to tackle the issue at hand. Future studies and research could delve into what specific supports can be put in place to support teachers in implementing playful literacy learning opportunities within the socio-dramatic area.
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I particularly want to thank the school and teachers who very generously gave up their time and knowledge, during this busy school year in the Covid-19 pandemic, to participate in this study. I learned so much from each and every one of you and without your co-operation or amazing amounts of knowledge in infant education, this study would not have been possible.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends for their unfailing support and laughs throughout my time in Marino Institute of Education; I would have been very lost without having them all with me throughout this journey!
List of Acronyms

NCCA ..................................... National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OECD ................................. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
DES ........................................ Department of Education and Skills
PLC ........................................ Primary Language Curriculum
NAEYC ................................. The National Association for the Education of Young Children
CPD ........................................ Continuous Professional Development
SERC ....................................... Student Ethics in Research Committee
DEIS ...................................... Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
BERA ................................... British Educational Research Association
ZPD ........................................ Zone of Proximal Development
SESE .................................... Social, Environmental and Scientific Education
P.D.S.T .................................. Professional Development Service for Teachers
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Literacy and language learning plays an important role in supporting the development of certain skills and dispositions for children, such as self-regulation, problem solving and perseverance (Weisberg et al, 2013a). The importance in developing sufficient practice in relation to literacy and language learning has been widely acknowledged and studied in the literacy research landscape, with links being made between literacy and language development and the role of play in early years literature. Research indicates that meaningful play opportunities are effective methodologies in supporting the development of literacy skills in the early years of literacy learning. This chapter will examine the background to this study, the aim of the research and will delve into the layout of the overall study, chapter by chapter.

Background and Aim to the Study

Research has acknowledged the crucial role that play in the early years classrooms can have on children’s learning (Anning, 2015), with play-based learning providing a meaningful context for children’s learning and development, thus having a long-term effect on children’s future academic successes (Justice and Pullen, 2003). Despite this, research also indicates that tensions exist between the play and methodology interface (Wood, 2014). Some researchers have indicated that some educators are focusing on the academic side of playful learning methodologies due to pressure from curriculum objectives in infant education, thus leading to a reduction in time spent on child-directed play.
This study aims to identify teachers’ perspectives in relation to the development of literacy skills of infants through socio-dramatic play, address some of the concerns that impacts upon this, and to expand on the existing body of research which focuses on promoting using playful learning methodologies to support teaching and learning for infant children in primary schools within Ireland. This dissertation will specifically examine the correlation between playful learning methodologies and literacy skill development, with socio-dramatic play being the main focus, of this research, in examining the role that it has in supporting the development of literacy skills.

Content of the Study

Chapter one will provide a short description to the background of this research and the aim in which this study has been built upon. The chapter will make reference to some of the research that has been examined and considered by the researcher in relation to her research question and the aim of the study.

Chapter two will review the pertinent literature that is relevant to socio-dramatic play, methodologies and literacy development. This chapter will also examine the challenges faced by teachers in their attempts to implement meaningful learning opportunities into the infant classroom to support the development of children’s literacy skills through socio-dramatic play. It reviews the literature in relation to theoretical understandings of playful learning methodologies, with careful considerations to those that support the development of literacy skills. It examines the national and international frameworks and policies that influences a teachers practices within
Ireland, the play environments that support the development of literacy skills and the role that the teacher plays in the area of socio-dramatic play.

Chapter three describes the research methodology with an overview of the design of the study and the research methods involved in this research. This chapter examines the sample that was collected for this study and the data collection and analysis strategies that were employed, as well as making reference to issues pertaining to the ethics, limitations and sampling. The researcher also makes reference to reflexivity in this chapter.

Chapter four analyses and discusses the findings that were compiled and generated from the data collected, with chapter five summarising the main findings of the study and offering recommendations based upon the results and discoveries of the researchers’ study.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

This chapter examines and reviews the pertinent literature relevant to the area of socio-dramatic play and the development of children’s literacy skills. The researcher will first look into theoretical literature pertaining to language development in the early years and how teachers can effectively promote language and literacy development. This chapter will examine what currently exists in the literature surrounding play and it’s links to language learning in the Irish educational context. Following this, this chapter will explore that role that the children’s environment has on playful learning and language attainment. Finally, the researcher will explore the role of the teacher in promoting literacy skills using playful methodologies.

Theoretical Perspectives and their view on the Teachers Role

The Sociodramatic area of Aistear (2009) can be seen as a reflection of the work of theorists, such as Vygotsky, who championed the belief that children need to engage with meaningful learning experiences, with a more knowledgeable other, in order to interpret the world around them (Dunphy, 2008). Putting Vygotsky’s theory into context, Tsao (2008) believes that a child develops literacy skills from hearing language being spoken around them and that play is a key aspect to a child’s life, not just as means of enjoyment and past time but as a methodology of learning and a tool for educational development. Parallel to Vygotsky’s theory, Brian Cambourne developed his theories on the ‘conditions of learning’ as applied to the learning of literacy. From this he developed an eight stage model for teachers to facilitate language learning in their classrooms (Mielonen and Paterson, 2009). This model for learning highlighted
the need for children to be completely immersed in a meaningful environment that
allowed for language experimentation. This model was designed for teachers to engage
with in a bid to help them create the meaningful learning experiences that Vygotsky’s
theories underpin and enhance children’s early literacy skills. However, Choppin (2011)
speculates that not every teacher may be aware of such theories of learning, model
frameworks, have time or be willing to tear themselves away from traditional text book
teaching often enough to engage with children in active and playful learning
methodologies, out of fear that they may not be implementing it correctly.

By definition, socio-dramatic play is children’s joint activity, but neo-
Vygotskians believe that adults should mediate children’s play and the role of an adult
in this play is to explain different social roles to the children. They believe that it is not
sustainable to only provide children with different toys, that educators are essential in
explaining the social roles that go with whatever the children are playing within the
socio-dramatic area; If this does not happen educators are risking the children’s socio-
dramatic play to being immature and impoverished (Bluiett, 2018). Vygotsky believed
that play promotes cognitive, social, and emotional development in children (Vygotsky,
1978). However, Vygotsky’s view on socio-dramatic play is the opposite of the
common belief that play is children’s free activity in which they do whatever they want
with liberation from rules and social pressure (Bluiett, 2018). Vygotsky’s play theory
differs from other theories on play, as he believed that real play activities involve
creating an imaginary situation, acting out roles and following a set of rules defined by
specific roles (Bodrova and Leong, 2007). Vygotsky believed that children have the
ability to engage in pretend play as they start to separate the visual field (what can be
seen) from the field of sense (what can be implied), or meaning (Scharer, 2017). It is
through pretend play that a child can decontextualise meaning and think about something even when the object is not present (Smidt, 2009). Acting according to rules begins to be determined by ideas rather than by objects and the child’s ability to relate to the real, immediate and concrete situation becomes evident through their play (Vygotsky, 1978), which Vygotsky seen as the first step in developing higher order thinking skills and verbal thinking to further support development (Gajdamaschko, 2011). It is with these developments that children master their language to organise play, undertake roles and use play voices, thus, setting the children up to advance their language skills to support their literacy development. Play helps the children to adapt as they take other people’s perspectives into consideration and look at objects through the eyes of others, which is a form of cognitive decentering (Gajdamaschko, 2011). For example, in order for the children to play airplane, they need to ensure they have tickets and passports for everyone before they begin (Bodrova and Leong, 2007). Vygotsky wrote that “Play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development” (Vygotsky, 1978, Pg102). What can be deduced from this is that, play is a primary supporter for children in their developing years to harness their social, emotional and cognitive abilities within the same socio-dramatic space to develop upon skills, such as literacy, for the educational benefit of the child.

Play for Early Years Education in Ireland

The UNCRC considers play from the perspective of the child and values it as a right that they are entitled to in their lives (OHCHR, 1989). Ireland as a member of the
UNCRC ratified the convention on the 28\textsuperscript{th} September 1992, thereby recognising the importance of children’s voice and their right to play. Free play is commonly encouraged within the socio-dramatic area of Aistear and a definition of free play would be “\textit{play in which players themselves decide what and how to play and are free to modify the goals and rules as they go along}” (Gray, 2013, Pg7). What can be deduced from this definition is that play is valued as a precious area of holistic development that can support the education of children through play. As play is viewed as an interchangeable methodology in this regard, it can therefore support the differentiated needs of children. Play is embedded into many early childhood policy frameworks and curriculums of countries around the world, particularly leading countries such as Norway, New Zealand and Germany; causing the benefits to a child’s education to be admired by many other countries (Baines and Blatchford, 2011).

Within Ireland, a curriculum framework, entitled Aistear (2009), has been developed for the early years and infants. However, worth noting is that while use of this framework is encouraged and expected, it not yet mandatory and is often left up to the interpretation of the class teacher in how his/her class of children may engage with it, if at all. Murphy (2016) has recognised that in recent years, education through the implementation of Aistear in infant classes has come under scrutiny as the standards of playful education greatly varies, due to the different levels of understanding that infant teachers have on implementing playful methodologies, which in turn will have an effect on standards of literacy the children will produce. In line with this, national and transnational policy in recent times has supported the implementation of Aistear (2009) to support teachers in providing greater learning outcomes, educational accountability and improved academic standards within their classrooms (OECD, 2015).
The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2011) has stated that language and literacy learning in the early years should take place through a broad, holistic and interconnected programme of activities. This strategy also examined literacy and numeracy learning elements of the Primary School Curriculum for infant classes and recommended that they need to be more in line with the play based approaches to teaching and learning that is championed in the Aistear Curriculum Framework. This strategy supports the development of the new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) which was introduced into primary schools in 2019 by the DES. This new curriculum promotes a more integrated approach to methodologies for language and literacy learning and has moved the focus from the teacher to the child and his/her learning. The new PLC contains an emergentist view of language acquisition that builds upon children’s prior language learning and development in their early years settings. The new PLC now correlates and builds upon the principles of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) by highlighting the crucial element that adult-child relationships and the need for playful and meaningful learning has on children’s literacy learning and development. Thus, allowing children to develop literacy concepts, dispositions and skills as appropriate to each child’s individual stage of learning through appropriately playful learning experiences.

Socio-dramatic play provides children with the opportunity to explore, discover, imitate and create new worlds. It is believed that play benefits children’s language development because “it incorporates many of the socially interactive and cognitive elements known to enhance language skills” (Weisberg et al, 2013b, p.39). The possibilities for children’s learning can be limitless as this type of play provides
children with language and literacy opportunities unlike no other, as children take on different roles, act out various different scenarios and stories and solve real life problems using their language and environment (Concannon-Gibney, 2019). In line with Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural learning, play allows children to be supported to be a more capable participant in play, thus, placing greater value on the opportunities for literacy development that it provides. In another study conducted by Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) has found value in socio-dramatic play as children who have been subject to intervention strategies to promote their learning through socio-dramatic play have demonstrated notable gains in aspects of cognitive and creative development; Developments including but not limited to; richer vocabulary, increased language comprehension, more sophisticated higher order thinking skills and increased attention span.

Teachers’ perspectives of play can differ from country to country as the value and beliefs that each culture places on play can vary due to social and cultural influences (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson and Rogers, 2010). Bringing it back into an Irish context, the value that is placed on the presence of Aistear (2009) in each classroom in Ireland varies due to different levels of understanding as to what constitutes effective socio-dramatic play (Izumi-Taylor, Ito, Lin and Lee, 2014). American educators place great value on all aspects of play as a method for children to learn and develop, however, teachers must understand how they view play first and how it supports the children’s educational development (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009). As mentioned previously, Aistear (2009) is left to the interpretation of each class teacher without thorough guidance, thus, Irish teachers are potentially missing out on the opportunity that America provides for their early year educators, to comprehend and value play.
before they implement it into their classrooms. Global notions of play include “vague general statements to justify the play-oriented curriculum and vague characterizations to describe play in early education” (DeVries et al., 2002, Pg. 6). This is similar to the principle that Aistear (2009) finds itself existing within the education system in Ireland today. Thus, not properly introducing the Aistear (2009) Curriculum Framework to teachers can potentially present the play curriculum with a preconceived notion that the educational opportunities for socio-dramatic play may not be valuable. There is an adequate amount of literature on an international level that examines the teachers’ perspectives on the value of play, however, it is yet to be examined in an Irish context how teachers value socio-dramatic play within their classroom. This data can be used to inform national Irish policies, as the perceptions of teachers on their value of play can influence the play that they implement into their classrooms to support children’s educational experiences (Harris, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek, 2011).

**Play Environment that Supports Literacy Development**

Children are susceptible to the influences of their surroundings. Research demonstrates that language learning will thrive in settings that promote rich linguistic and literacy environments where children can focus on developing upon their literacy and language skills (Shiel et al, 2012). Language development requires specific attention in the early years as it enables children to understand the world around them and to communicate effectively with others (DES, 2019). Children’s literacy learning is multidimensional and begins within their home environment. This socio-cultural perspective of emergent literacy is supported by Justice and Pullen (2003) who believe that children’s overall development is highly influenced by the social and cultural
capital of the society and environments in which they are growing and developing in. The physical classroom environment influences the way in which a child behaves and responds to learning opportunities in this environment (Dunphy, 2008), meaning that the arrangement of the classroom and the materials within it determine what area of the room will appeal to children and gain their attention. Parallel to the idea that Aistear (2009) claims how a socio-dramatic area should be presented to children, Isbell and Exelby (2001) believe that a learning environment should be attractive, exciting and a place where children can learn and play using suitable resources. A theory of the child as an individual person, with innate desires and a self-constructing attitude towards learning can organise their own play in an appropriately structured environment alongside the predetermined guidelines and curriculum objectives set out by an educator (Brennan, 2008). “The fundamental contradiction inherent in the data suggests that organisational objectives are detrimental to what is described in the data as play and the ideal play and learning environments” (Carswell, 2002, Pg23). A child’s learning from their environment is dependent on the context of the play and the cultural influence that impacts constructing meaning from their play experiences. What a child learns through exploration of the materials and objects within their environment can be mediated by the culture of their experience (Brennan, 2008).

The meaning of literacy can range from the ability to create meaning through different media, such as visual literacy, to knowledge of key concepts and ideas, such as cultural literacy. Both in Mielonen and Patterson (2009) and in Ofra, Etti and Miriam (2002) the environment that children learn in have a contributing factor to their language and literacy skills. According to Ofra, Etti and Miriam (2002) learning literacy happens naturally through play and their case study provided evidence to support that.
They conducted research that observed a teacher in a classroom in Israel, during which this teacher set up a socio-dramatic area within her classroom that mimicked an office. The teacher played a facilitator role and provided the environment with office literate materials. The outcome of this research indicated that when the children were given literate resources, they played with it in a literate way and this was supported by the environment that was set up in a way that encouraged them to do so. The outcome of this research supports Saracho and Spodek (2005) in saying symbolic play, such as this, encourages children’s literacy development by facilitating the children’s knowledge of how environmental sounds and symbols work, as the children communicate with each other in the play setting. Literacy development in a socio-dramatic area has demonstrated to be effective as findings suggest that frequent involvement in a world of socio-dramatic play enhanced children’s phonological awareness (Fernandez-Fein and Baker, 1997).

An American Study conducted by the NAEYC examined what early childhood educators believed to help young children learn best in a socio-dramatic area. It can be deducted from this study that the educators valued the active engagement with objects and people in this particular area, as this can provide an opportunity for the integration of other academic subjects to make learning more meaningful. A unit of learning that was observed in this study examined the educators create a pet shop themed socio-dramatic area within their classroom and provide tools such as, animals, checklists, toy pet products, tills, office materials and lanyards to assign each child in role. Educators assisted children in the set-up of their play, however, the value they had for the children to lead their learning in this area prevailed. It was evident in their confidence of the area that they set up to support oral and print literacy learning to enhance play and assist
with children’s cognitive development (NAEYC, 2001). In an Irish context, it would be unfair to suggest that infant teachers are unaware of this, there is an apparent lack of evidence from an Irish perspective that examines the work on socio-dramatic play environments within the classrooms of Irish educators. However, a report by the NCCA (2012) suggested that teachers’ current literacy practices in junior classes can support motivation and engagement through hands-on activities related to specific themes in a peer-to-peer collaborative learning environment (Shanahan et al, 2010). This would suggest that there is an awareness around the work that teachers do in the socio-dramatic area to support learning, however, no research has been carried out in this specific area to demonstrate it within an Irish context.

Role of the Teacher in Play

The teacher in the Ofra, Etti and Miriam (2002) study came out of the research as having a key role as a facilitator who valued socio-dramatic play as a methodology to enhance literacy learning. However, there is a noticeable lack of research conducted nationally in Ireland that specifically represents what teachers’ perspectives are on literacy development within a socio-dramatic area. Teachers in Ireland are reporting feelings of being overwhelmed by an overloaded curriculum and lack of professional development on recent curricular developments, which for infant teachers would be Aistear (Gray and Ryan, 2016). If this is the case and teachers are feeling these pressures and time constraints within the curriculum to meet standards, it cannot be assumed that teachers are utilising their role within the sociodramatic area of Aistear to the fullest. Lynch (2015) recognised this in a study she conducted on kindergarten teachers in America, in which she sought their perspectives on play and its impact on
children’s education. One profound outcome of this research was that the teachers have documented assessments that demonstrates the benefits of sociodramatic play on their students education, however, they still feel worried that they are not fulfilling their role enough for the children’s education through play due to lack of support in the system. In response to the challenges that teachers face, Samuelsson and Johansson (2009) justify a teacher being afraid to engage with children in their play as they are demonstrating feelings of uncertainty that they are not fulfilling their role as a facilitator of playful learning correctly.

A study by Anderson and Spainhower (2012) found that children use their combined individual experiences provided by a teacher in the socio-dramatic area to extend upon their learning under a theme, for example the zoo or the vets. These developments under the specific theme were believed to be achieved by well-developed socio-dramatic play skills, which this study found to be essential in first obtaining before children could be able to learn from this environment. According to Bluiett (2018) teaching socio-dramatic skills are what teachers must model to develop the appropriate behaviours and language within each theme of socio-dramatic play. This would enable the children to test out the language and social contexts of each theme and build upon their knowledge in each area. Within this context the teaching strategy skills to develop a theme include: acknowledge the children’s current knowledge within each theme, model the language and behaviours used, facilitate literate materials for each area, support the children’s play, scaffold their learning in their play, co-construct new knowledge, demonstrate language and behaviours and direct learning when appropriate.
According to Goldstein (1997) in order for teachers to effectively engage in developmentally appropriate practice on a consistent basis requires the teachers to commit to “opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD)” in order to improve their teaching practice and provide their students with the best opportunities to develop their learning (Goldstein, 1997, Pg21). However, it has been suggested that teachers in Ireland are feeling overwhelmed by an overcrowded curriculum. It would be unjust and unfair to expect teachers to be consistently upskilling within an additional area of curriculum that has been added onto their workload without the proper supports from officials in implementing new curriculums. In the opinion of Gray and Ryan (2016), when Aistear (2009) was introduced, it caused confusion among teachers in regard to the relationship it had with the Primary School Curriculum (1999) and the impact that it had on an infant child’s educational development. It is through the Aistear curriculum that infant children receive much of their socio-dramatic play experiences supported by their class teacher. However, Moloney (2010) has claimed Aistear (2009) to be a soft policy that was implemented without being enforced in the infant classes by the DES. He came to this conclusion as they did not provide free mandatory training to teachers; Instead they imposed the cost and extra hours of training upon individual teachers if they wished to avail of it. This could be considered to undermine and disregard the crucial role that teachers play in children’s educational development within their play during Aistear time.
Conclusion

Upon reviewing the literature associated with this area of study, it has become apparent that despite current policies, frameworks and research within this area, few studies have explored the experiences and opinions of primary school teachers in Ireland. The literature highlighted the importance of using play as a methodology for literacy learning. However, current understandings suggest that there is a noticeable gap in supporting teachers and listening to their needs in order for them to be able to successfully support their students to meet curriculum objectives within a play based environment. Playful learning methodologies became prominent within the literature, highlighting the importance of using play to support and extend children’s learning in a way that is meaningful and engaging to them. The next chapter will examine the methodologies that were employed by the researcher to conduct and establish results from this research study.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will delve into the aims of this study, the research methodology that was adopted, along with the data analysis process, advantages, limitations and ethical considerations that this study encountered and considered. A literature review conducted by the researcher has informed the plan and concepts that has curated this study. This study examines teachers’ perspectives on the impact that socio-dramatic play can have in supporting the development of literacy skills of children in the infant classrooms of primary schools in Ireland.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine teachers’ perspectives on the impact they believe socio-dramatic play to have on infant children’s literacy skill development within the infant classroom. The results to this aim was achieved by the researcher gaining an in-depth insight into how teachers are implementing socio-dramatic play, the challenges faced when implementing it and their perspectives on the impact that socio-dramatic play has on the development of their students’ literacy skills.

Alongside reviewing the relevant literature in this field of study, qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of infant primary school teachers in a Irish mainstream non-DEIS school. The interview questions that were compiled, sought to obtain the perspectives of infant teachers on the topic of socio-dramatic play and the influence that they believe it has on infant
children’s literacy skills (See Appendix I for interview questions). This study drew attention to the teachers’ perspectives on the effectiveness, tools and strategies that they use for socio-dramatic play in helping children to motivate, engage and immerse themselves in socio-dramatic play, as well as looking at teachers’ own viewpoint, confidence and experience with implementing socio-dramatic play as a learning methodology within the infant classroom.

**Research Approach**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research methods help the researcher in gaining intuition into the processes associated in “co-constructions of meaning, lived experiences, cultural rituals, and oppressive practices” (Atkinson, 2017, p.65). Leedy and Ormrod (2012) believe that there are many advantages to qualitative research methods as they typically serve the purpose of providing opportunities for verified data. Thus, allowing the researcher to test the validity of a number of assumptions or claims within different contexts and formulate new hypothesis’ (Williams, 2007). Rahman (2017) believes that using a qualitative research approach holistically understands the human experience in specific settings which encompasses a wider range of epistemological viewpoints, research methods, and interpretive techniques of understanding human experiences. There was some consideration allocated to adopting a quantitative approach to this study, in the form of questionnaires, at the beginning of this research study. However, a quantitative approach would cease to constitute “one on one conversations between the researcher and participant” (Atkinson, 2017, p.69). Qualitative research was therefore considered
suitable to analyse and explore the perceptions of infant teachers on their perspectives that they believe socio-dramatic play has on infant children’s literacy skill development.

The researcher specifically employed semi-structured interviews to avail of an opportunity to question and probe eight infant teacher participants on their lived experiences, opinions and attitudes towards this area of study. Jamshed (2014) highlights that in many years gone by there has been frequent use of interviews as a reliable method of data collection by researchers. Thus, demonstrating that although conducting an interview is not an easy skill to master in order to gather data, it can bring many advantages as a method of data collection (Stewart, 2001). Interviews provide the researcher with a wide range of opportunities to gather a large amount of data and, ascertain clarification on certain topics. Therefore, awarding the researcher with opportunities to gather rich and vast insights into a teachers’ personal beliefs, opinions and experiences of using socio-dramatic play to develop upon infant children’s literacy skills.

A comfortable and professional relationship is essential to establish between the interviewer and the interviewee as the overall aim of a semi-structured interview is to create an atmosphere where the interviewee feels comfortable, trusting and confident to divulge information, opinions and personal experiences to the interviewer (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002). There is an onus on the interviewer to create this atmosphere for the interviewee in order to obtain their full co-operation and understanding on the importance of the research study (O’Keefe et al, 2016).
The researcher of this study selected participants that she had already knew of in a professional capacity. Thus, meaning that there was a good professional rapport already in place for when the researcher conducted her semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place in each infant teachers classroom, ensuring that each of them were in a familiar and natural environment. Due to Covid-19, the researcher ensured when conducting the interviews to follow all sanitizing rules when entering and exiting the classroom, wear personal protection equipment and sit at a social distance from the participants. Due to the nature of a semi-structured interview, the questions that the interviewer asked were open ended with an interview schedule in mind, therefore, allowing flexibility for the interviewer to cover topics of relevance as they arise naturally (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). Nonetheless, it was still paramount for the interviewer that the interview follows some structure as Whyte (1996) states that a genuinely non-directive interviewing approach is not appropriate for quality research.

Semi-structured interviews provide participants of a research study a degree of autonomy to explore the questions that is being presented to them and provide answers and partake in conversations that enrichen their responses (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). Meaning that semi-structured interviews “allows the interviewer greater scope in asking questions out of sequence and the interviewees of answering questions in their own way” (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002, P.162). The interview schedule, or the order of the questions, can contain prompts onto certain topics or guide the interviewees responses towards a certain area of interest to the study in order to enrichen the data collection.
Hitchcock and Hughes (2002) has stressed the fact that any of the issues that can potentially arise during fieldwork research are reduced when the data gathering occurs in the participants own environment that is familiar to them. Blandford (2013) believes that where the study and the data gathering takes place can impact upon the data gathered significantly as the participant is more likely to provide enriched responses about their work when they are providing them from the environment that they work in. With this in mind, the researcher conducted her interviews in the participants’ own classrooms after a school day, in order to avoid interruptions to the flow of the data collection process.

The most crucial and important element of consideration for this study was for the researcher to decide how she was going to record each interview, which was a decision that was made in the planning stage of this study. Given the conversational manner of a semi-structured interview, there is a concern that if recorded, the questions and answers given are likely to be lengthy, complex and likely to veer of into a degree of rambling (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002). However, in order to ensure that the researcher was able to transcribe every part of the interviewee’s responses, the interviews were recorded on a password protected audio recorder on an IPad. As stated by Hitchcock and Hughes, multiple readings of the transcripts of the interviews should be carried out, in order to obtain an appreciation for the “…subtle features of tone, pitch, intonation and other crucial aspects such as pauses, silences, emphasis” (2002, p.173).
It is important for the researcher to understand and control the intimidating manner that presenting an audio recorder to a participant can have as it could potentially influence the participants’ answers or the way in which they engage with the interview. Therefore, it was crucial to the researcher to explain to her participants how the interview was going to be conducted, how it was going to be recorded, where the audio was going to be stored/protected and who would have access to it in order to reassure her participants. The researcher also considered other factors with using the audio recorder such as ensuring there would be no technical issues, that the quality of the recording would be sufficient and ensuring the IPad could be neatly and discretely placed near the participant so that it would not intimidate them and hinder their responses (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002).

Grounded Theory Analysis

“The grounded theory approach is primarily associated with the analysis of interview transcripts” (Denscombe, 2011, p.283). The purpose of this theory in relation to this study is to develop concepts and theories from the data that the researcher gathered in her interviews, through interpreting, categorising and coding the data appropriately. Thus, the researcher deemed this method of data analysis appropriate to the study that was being carried out. In order to be completely familiar with the data that was gathered, the researcher cross referenced the audio recordings to the transcripts to ensure she has transcribed every interview word for word. The researcher then read and re-read the transcripts, while cross referencing them with the relevant literature associated with socio-dramatic play and literacy development. This process of data analysis led the researcher to identify multiple themes within her data collected.
Denscombe (2011) believes that the purpose of coding is to link parts of the data gathered to an idea that relates to the analysis. By coding the data, the researcher was able to clearly identify recurring responses and themes, aiding her to develop and identify her main topics, key concepts and themes within the data gathered.

**Research Analysis Process**

Data analysis in qualitative research is a never ending element as the researcher must engage in continuous reflexivity and data organising patterns, establishing codes and themes, as well as recognise data that is relevant and irrelevant to the researchers’ research question. Data for this study was compiled by an audio recorder and the researchers’ field notes. The researcher transcribed her recordings instantly after data collection. Participants were assigned a letter-number code to ensure confidentiality, for example: T1: Teacher 1. Mertens (2015) advises researchers to transcribe research themselves as “this is a part of the data analysis process engendered by interacting with the data in an intensive and intimate way” (P. 438). Before the researcher began the process of analysing her data collected, she read the transcripts alongside listening to the audio recordings to ensure reliability, accuracy and to provide contextual information. Following this, a thorough process of data analysis began. Data analysis of the transcripts were carried out, with the researcher compiling a list of initial codes to begin with. The researcher then re-evaluated these codes and grouped them into five separate categories of teachers’ perspectives on the development of literacy skills through socio-dramatic play including, scaffolding/higher order thinking, role of the teacher, transfer of skills/integration, space/environment and resources. The researcher
then began analysing the findings of her data with the literature that she identified and discussed in chapter two.

**Limitations of the study**

Researchers that use semi-structured interviews as method of data collection must be aware of the potential sources of bias that can arise, along with the factors that can influence the interactions between the interviewer and interviewee (Hitchcock and Hughes, 2002). Adams (2015) views misinterpretation and researcher bias towards a particular viewpoint as some of the biggest disadvantages in conducting semi-structured interviews. In order to avoid this, Robson (2010) suggests that the researcher must remain aware of ‘participant bias’ throughout the interview to ensure that the interviewees are not just giving responses that they think will please the interviewer. During her interviews, the researcher ensured to not interfere with the participants’ responses and only provide encouragement and prompts, when necessary, thus, limiting the level of the interviewer leading certain participants towards a particular view.

This study represents a small scale research project conducted within a short period of time. As a result, the researcher recognises that this study is not without limitations. The findings of this study cannot be assumed to be the practices, experiences and opinions representative of every teacher in Ireland, however, it does provide some insights and understandings into socio-dramatic play practices and the impact these have on Junior and Senior infant children’s literacy skills. Furthermore, there was a small number of eight participating infant teachers, which could be deemed as restrictive. Additionally, the findings were limited to one primary school in the
northern area of Donegal. According to Almeida et al (2017, p.378), with most research projects comes “some limitations and pitfalls”, and, time sensitivity is a contributing factor to the limitations of this research study. While the data that has been collected is detailed, informative and reflective of the participants’ current teaching contexts and experiences of socio-dramatic play, it should be noted that the data that has been complied by the researcher in this study cannot be considered a complete perspective of this area of study.

**Ethical Considerations**

At the beginning of this research process, the researcher completed a SERC form for the Marino Institute of Education Ethics Committee board to gain ethical approval for this study before the researcher began the research process. The participants within this research study were mainstream teachers within a non-DEIS primary school in Ireland. In order to carry out this research study, the researcher initially sought permission from the board of management of the school, via the principal, to carry out this study with their teachers with a letter of information and letter of consent. The researcher also sought permission to conduct an interview with each participant by also providing them with a letter of information and letter of consent. Each letter of consent included the details and purpose of the research study that the researcher was carrying out (see Appendix II for letters of information and consent provided to board of management and participants). Handling data with care, confidentiality and gaining the trust of participants is of the upmost importance when conducting a research study, which is something that the researcher took due diligence in ensuring throughout her study. The participants of this study gave consent to take
part in this study. The researcher assured her participants throughout the process that she will handle all data appropriately in an ethical manner in order to ensure confidentiality and to gain their trust (Walsh et al., 2020). The participants of this study were made aware of any of the details of the research study being disseminated, along with their identity remaining anonymous. All participants within this research study were over the age of eighteen and not classed as ‘vulnerable adults’ (Abbot, 2014). In relation to primary data gathering, the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011), state some ethical considerations relevant to the researchers study are:

Voluntary Informed Consent – the participants of the researchers’ study were made completely aware of the purpose of the study and the necessity of their participation to the study, with no pressure to take part.

Right to Withdraw – the participants were made aware of their right to withdraw their information from this study at any given time without reason in their letter of consent and, by the interviewer before she conducted the interview.

Sample Selection

Denscombe (2011) claims that purposive sampling works when the researcher knows specific details about the specific sample that they have in mind for their research study, thus, deliberately selects them in order to obtain the most valuable data for their research question. The researcher choose purposive sampling in order to specifically gain infant teachers’ perspectives which will in turn benefit and enrichen the data collected in response to the interview questions, and subsequently the research question. For this reason, the researcher interviewed all of the junior infant and senior infant teachers within the school that she carried out her research study in.
**Reflection Process**

Reflexivity is seen as a crucial element in conducting research (Marshall and Miles, 2011). The researcher is the most fundamental element to the entire research study, as they are the instrument that gathers the data and conducts an analysis of it. Reflexivity relates to the “analytic attention to the researcher’s role in qualitative research” (Palaganas et al, 2017, p.427). Throughout this study, the researcher engaged in reflection in the form of a personal diary made up of handwritten notes and observations that the researcher compiled throughout the study. The researcher’s reflections were also formalised by following Pollard’s example of reflective teaching (Figure 3.7). Abbot (2014) believes that this is a cyclical framework allowing the reflector time for experimental learning, reflection, analysis and evaluation. This framework aided the researcher in effectively reflecting throughout her research study, particularly in the stage of gathering teachers’ perspectives of the potential impact that socio-dramatic play can have on children’s literacy skills.

*Figure 3.7 Diagram to show the process of reflective teaching framework*
Conclusion

This chapter has examined the research methodology employed to carry out this research study. It has rationalized and discussed the qualitative research method that was chosen and has acknowledged considerations of other research methods. Furthermore, ethical considerations and approval were acknowledged the type of sampling chosen was explored, as well as data collection, data analysis, limitations and reflexivity. The next chapter will discuss and analysis the findings of the data that was collected in this research and provide some insight into the perspectives that the infant teachers provided the researcher with.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to analyse data collected and to present and discuss its findings. Data was compiled using audio recordings which were then transcribed by the researcher. Prior to analysis, all transcripts were read alongside the audio recordings to ensure reliability and accuracy and to provide contextual information. An inductive data analysis process followed. The researcher conducted an analysis of the purpose and function of each comment that was made by the teachers in response to the researchers’ questions on sociodramatic play. A list of codes was developed; these codes were then reanalysed and grouped into five broad categories that impact upon literacy skill development.

Scaffolding / Higher Order Thinking

The PLC focuses on three elements of language: communication, understanding and exploring and using, all of which build upon and develop a child’s holistic language skills. The element of communication looks at developing communicative relationships through language. It primarily focuses on developing children’s knowledge and understanding of how we build and share meaning together in communicative relationships (DES, 2019), with emphasis on providing a more functional curriculum, enabling children to make and explore meaning, as well as receive and create it (NCCA, 2015). T5 believes that making connections and extending the children’s learning in this manner “enables the child’s knowledge and learning, when children communicate through socio-dramatic play they are learning how language works and eventually they make connections from the spoken language to the written language.” This highlighted
the value that this teacher had on socio-dramatic play to support and extend children’s language and literacy development and awareness. T5 also stressed in her interview that peer on peer scaffolding is a paramount element in the successful implementation of oral language and literacy development as she believes from her many years of experience that “literacy skills are built and developed from the playing and experimenting with spoken language, so communicating with their peers and other more knowledgeable others’ support the children in learning their own linguistic confidence, thus, allowing them to develop how they communicate with each other”. T5 also highlighted that “the less able child is picking up language from the more able child” therefore allowing the researcher to draw up a hypothesis that considers the children and their peers to be the best sources of knowledge to each other as they intimately play in a supportive and meaningful socio-dramatic play setting.

Tsao (2008) believed that children naturally develop literacy skills from hearing language being spoken around them and that play is a key aspect of children’s lives. However, T1 has discovered in her 20 years of teaching that “in the last seven to nine years I have noticed children’s vocabulary and literacy skills are lessening as they come into school”. T1 believes that the amount of time that children spend on technology is a detrimental contributor to this calamity. T1 has found that regardless of what people may think of children’s “use of educational apps… they are still not getting the same scaffolding benefits and learning opportunities that they would get face to face” from a more knowledgeable other through socio-dramatic play. Werling (2020) claims that there is a thin line to be treaded on in regards to children’s use of technology and their time spent learning through play. Technology alone cannot meet and cater to the crucial moments in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) that only another
human could cater to, particularly in regards to developmental needs (Quesenberry et al., 2016). T1’s opinion supports this research as she believes that “children need a model and more knowledgeable other to provide them with opportunities of exposure to language they may not get at home or elsewhere... Play is a necessity, children have to play! It is so important for their enjoyment of their childhood, socially, emotionally, intellectually, physically it is so important to their development and it is their basic human right” to have these opportunities.

Bluiett (2018) believes that adults have an important role to play in mediating children’s play and providing them with opportunities to see language being used. It is through this that children can draw meaning from the spoken word to the written text as T5 previously made reference to. T2 has also made reference to seeing this happen with some of her students in her 17 years of teaching, with some “children providing great detail about their experiences in certain social settings”, however, T2 has noticed that in recent years “Children aren’t getting real life experience as much these days, especially in the last year with Covid, because more parents are possibly doing online shopping or other errands online, so some of the children, I have found, when we are doing the theme of the shop really didn’t know how to conduct themselves or have the language needed to engage with someone in a shop”. Thus, T2 believes that it is in situations such as this one where peer scaffolding is not enough that the teacher will need to take it upon themselves to engage in modelling the use of certain language for the children in a socio-dramatic setting by “prompt and developing what language they do have, use open ended questions, tell me more about your trip to the shop or encourage them to describe and explain actions in any way to demonstrate to them that spoken language has a meaning and purpose”.

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Vygotsky (1978) believed that the ZPD is a place that can be used to extend on any part of the holistic child, particularly when they are engaged in play. To which, T1 believes that socio-dramatic play “teaches the children to self-regulate by resolving issues or problems that may arise in the area, providing the children with the opportunity to coordinate with others and plan”. T4 has stressed the fact that “Aistear is a collaboration with the pupils, it belongs to them, but it does need to be supported by a (teacher) more knowledgeable other” in order to provide the children with new language that the teacher has targeted for them and then scaffold upon it through socio-dramatic play.

**Role of the Teacher**

As identified in the Literature review of this dissertation, the researcher was well informed of the responsibilities of the teacher-as-facilitator when entering into socio-dramatic play with the children. Gray and Ryan (2016) claim that it may not always be possible for the teacher to be actively involved in the socio-dramatic area with the children as there are other stations operating at the same time and an overcrowded curriculum to facilitate. Although this can be the case, T2 claims that if the teacher cannot be with the children in the socio-dramatic area, they could be “observing or looking giving the children the thumbs up and quietly encouraging them”. Thus, this would suggest that the teacher is facilitating the children’s emotional needs that they may need fulfilled to confidently engage in a socio-dramatic setting. T4 believes that “it is important for the teacher to act as a facilitator to socio-dramatic play, however, I also think that the role of the teacher may differ for each group that engage in the area”. This correlates to a study by Anderson and Spainhower (2012), in
which they believed that it is important for the children to have sufficient socio-dramatic play skills and literacy awareness in order to effectively engage with the environment. T4 highlights that this may not be an easy task for every play group as “one group might be so confident and know what they are doing and not require the teacher to facilitate anything for them. Whereas, another group might just be standing about not knowing what to do, so it is important for the teacher to observe and assess their current level of knowledge first. Then, you will know what you need to do to facilitate their literacy development through socio-dramatic play”. T1 claims to something similar as she has found in recent years that “some children have no idea how to play” meaning that there can be a group of students that she would have to directly “teach those children how to become imaginative” in order to access the learning opportunities within the socio-dramatic area. These circumstances may conflict the facilitator role of the teacher in this area as they may not able to take a step back. However, T1 believes that there can be an equal balance established as “we can provide the opportunities for socio-dramatic play and we can facilitate play with language and literacy learning. However, if there is a problem and the children are not solving it themselves then I would step in, not take over but guide them in the right direction”.

Samuelsson and Johnansson (2009) reflect these concerns in their research and justify a teacher having feelings of anxiousness as they try to navigate their role as a facilitator and direct educator.

For many teachers, the main source of uncertainty in regards to their role in socio-dramatic play has been able to take a step back from controlling the area and the children’s learning within it. T2 believes that most of the uncertainty surrounding role play and imaginary play came from the roll out of the Aistear (2009) curriculum and
made her feel like it was “a grey area that we all took onboard and got very little
training for”. This would undermine the PLC (2019) goal to shift the focus of language
learning from the adult to the child, with appropriate guidance, yet there has been very
little input for teachers in how they guide children’s play without interfering in it. Thus,
it has created feelings of distress for teachers such as T1 who said that she found this “a
bit of a struggle because I was obviously going to be like ‘I am going to control this’
but that was a curve that I had to learn to embrace”, and T3 who believed that at the
start of implementing it into her classroom that “automatically I found as a teacher that
I was in the middle of it, and I was trying, I suppose, to model it and take on a role
myself so it is tricky”. This highlights to the researcher that teachers are acutely aware
of the role that they should be undertaking, however, there is an innate desire in
teachers to control all aspects of children’s learning (Yogman et al., 2018), therefore,
being left to interpret their role in socio-dramatic play has caused teachers to be left
navigating “the grey area” (T1). T3 believes that it is only with time and practice in her
role during socio-dramatic play that she has come to realise that “the teacher should
step back and allow the children to use the language at their own level, you know there
is a bit of desire to control in us all, we want it to look and go a certain way, however,
that may not always be helpful”.

**Transfer of Skills / Integration**

Careful and effective planning for socio-dramatic play is a necessity in order to
ensure that children will have better opportunities to have positive language-rich
interactions in all areas of learning (Concannon-Gibney, 2019). Planning thematic units
of work can help to develop language and literacy skills as children learn new
vocabulary, recognise meaning of print, discuss and interpret play scenarios, and make the roles, props and actions clear to others. Language objectives, in relation to targeted vocabulary and print, should be planned as part of the play scenarios. The NCCA have provided a planning framework developed by Kiely (2015), as part of its support material archives for the PLC (2019), in order to provide practical advice on how to set up a play scenario in the classroom to support socio-dramatic play and promote an integrated approach to oral language and literacy learning in the early years classroom.

This document is a necessity, along with many others like it, as it is an aid to teachers to manage a “curriculum that is overloaded” (T1). All of the teachers that were interviewed for this research study found that they had to integrate many subjects, SESE in particular, into Aistear and socio-dramatic play, as they have no time to do distinct lessons for them all. T1 has found that being more realistic with her plans and “that by reeling down our plans, a lot of work has gone into combining Science, History and Geography with literacy, which helps us and benefits the children a lot”. However, T4 has also established the feelings of teacher guilt that can be experienced, “it would just be great to have more time for play and not feel guilty about not getting Irish, English, Maths and all the rest of the class stuff done”. Although teachers are encouraged to integrate the curriculum and can engage in CPD to upskill on their integration skills, it is more often than not at a cost of their own and not something that is offered by the department (Anglin-Lawlor, 2014). However, T7 believes that these courses on integration can be “very vague, and when the overcrowded curriculum is brought up at these courses, the answer is always to integrate further, but like how? It’s well-intentioned but not well guided and realistic to the real life classroom”. 
Space / Environment

In relation to how the children’s socio-dramatic play environment should look like T1, T2, T4 and T5 all shared a similar opinion in that “It should be bright, it should be stimulating and it should be spacious. It should have lots of prompt visual cards and equipt with materials for the particular theme”. Shiel et al (2012) believe that children will thrive in a classroom that promotes a rich linguistic and literacy stimulated environment where children can focus on developing upon their literacy and language skills. T2 understands the socio-dramatic play environment to belong to the children and should reflect their interests, therefore, she does up “a chart with the children to get them involved. For example, creating the post office, we would discuss what we would see or use in the post office and make a list of all the things that they will need or want to make for their post office in the socio-dramatic area, which gives them the ownership of this area then and it’s not just something that they come into on Monday morning that teacher has set up for them”. Justice and Pullen (2003) supports a sociocultural view of emergent literacy skills in which children are influenced by the environment they are developing in. T4 reflects this view as she believes that “the children should be surrounded by posters, labels and flash cards with pictures on them. The room should be rich with print, but it must be beneficial to the children, there is no point in having fancy posters up when the children can’t see or understand them. Like a picture can mean more to children and encourage a conversation or promote them to play in a literate way”. All the teachers in this study believed that there needs to be adequate space in the classroom to allow for socio-dramatic play to be implemented effectively. However, all of the teachers equally recognised that this is the case for many of them and that teachers in other schools too are also in the same predicament. Something that T7 finds frustrating is that she has “to move stuff before we even begin setting up the
socio-dramatic area”. T5 thinks that socio-dramatic play “needs a corner for itself with all of the props and labels etc, however, the space is not there to play with as our classrooms are too small”. A study for the NCCA by McCoy, Smyth and Banks (2012) has found that children’s education are at risk of being at a disadvantage due to the small size of classrooms, leaving children with little to no room to move and actively learn. Therefore, the teachers in this study have validity behind their concerns that the impact that the sizes of their classrooms can have on the educational attainment of their infant students within a tightly squeezed area for socio-dramatic play.

Resources

Ofra, Etti and Miriam (2002) believed that learning literacy happens naturally through play, particularly when the children are given literate materials to play with. T7 felt that it is very important “to have real things such as a real telephone, real computer, real food. We got some resources from the doctors' surgery in the town and the local chemist”. T4 believes that “there should be plentiful opportunities for reading and writing in the socio-dramatic area, for example: notebooks, order books, diaries, paper, pencils, pens, postcards. There should be an opportunity for vertical writing too, as this will build on a better pencil grasp and fine motor controls”. The researcher has uncovered that there is no reliable and up-to-date research in recent times that can give an insight into how resources can impact upon socio-dramatic play. However, this study has uncovered that budgets and funding are a potential detrimental factor to the resources that are provided to the children in a socio-dramatic area. T5 believes that obtaining and sourcing adequate resources for the socio-dramatic area is challenging as “there is no money to buy anything so you just have to make do with whatever you have,
or whatever you make or buy yourself”. This was a recurring response from all participants of this study, however, another common response was that the teachers “encourage the children to make the resources themselves”. T1 believes that this has a greatly positive impact on the children’s intrinsic motivation to engage with the resources in the socio-dramatic area in a literate way “and enjoy the area more, and say ‘Oh that’s our open and closed sign for the door of the shop, so I love playing with that because me and my group made that’”. Teachers also believe that time from the experts of a theme, such as a vet, is the best resource possible as “it is really brilliant how much language skills that the children learn from having the vet in, as they get to interview him, scribble down their notes” (T2). However, there is an uncalled for cost on teachers to buy resources that they cannot source and bear the burden of purchasing the resources from their own pockets, something that all teachers in this study made reference to happening. T2 states that “funding for resources would be nice so that the socio-dramatic area looks more enticing. I am currently using old toys now, and I even bring in some of my children’s old toys from home. It would just be lovely to be able to buy all the nice things that you would need.”

Conclusion

This chapter analysed the findings of the data that was collected. These findings illustrate that scaffolding supports the children’s development of higher order thinking skills and support the development of literacy skills. The findings also made it apparent that the teacher’s role within the socio-dramatic area is one of a facilitator, although not always possible for every group of children. This chapter then continued to analyse the impact that an integrated approach to the curriculum has on the implementation of
socio-dramatic play and the literacy skills developed within it. Finally, this chapter examined the impact that space and resources has on the socio-dramatic area, particularly the benefits and challenges that they brought to it. The next chapter will provide a conclusion of the main findings from this chapter and overall research study, as well as provide some recommendations for future practice.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a clear summary of the main findings of this dissertation. The chapter will also outline recommended actions informed by the findings of this study for those working in the infant classes within primary schools in Ireland.

Summary of Main Findings

This study sought to examine children’s literacy skill development within socio-dramatic play in the infant classroom of an Irish primary school. The aim of this research was to establish teachers’ perspectives of how the socio-dramatic area of Aistear can support children’s development of literacy skills.

As identified in the literature review, socio-dramatic play provides a natural context through which infant children can interact with their peers and develop upon their literacy skills. The findings of this study established that peer on peer scaffolding is paramount in the successful implementation of oral language and literacy development. The teachers of this study believed that literacy skills are built upon and developed from experimenting with and using the spoken language in a playful manner with their peers. Thus, this consolidates the meaning and learning of language, it builds on children’s linguistic confidence, they learn from more knowledgeable others, as well as providing a more functional curriculum for the children. The findings of this study have also shown a light on the impact that Covid-19 and technology has had on
children’s literacy development, highlighting that children are missing out on social interactions due to increased reliance on online and technological services, thus bypassing going into a physical shop, Post Office etc, meaning that children are missing out on the opportunity to learn the language required to conduct yourself within these settings. Thus, the teachers of this study have found that it is within these contexts that they need to be the more knowledgeable other to extend and help children to bridge their ZPD.

As research suggests and the findings from this study show, the teacher’s role in socio-dramatic play is important for supporting and extending the children’s literacy skills. Gray and Ryan (2016) values the teacher as a facilitator to play, to which all of the teachers within this study have valued their role within play to fit this category also. This study has found the teachers role as a facilitator to be situational, as the teachers within this study have found that their role changes depending on the play skills of individual groups of children. They have found that one group of children may strive and excel with the language that the teacher facilitates their play with, however, another group of children may need extra support and involvement from their teacher to model language and literacy skills through socio-dramatic play. This study has uncovered the innate desire in all teachers of this study to have some form of control over children’s play within the socio-dramatic area of Aistear when it was first introduced to primary schools. Teachers were presented with a task to navigate and understand a new element of curriculum that they were unfamiliar with without a great amount of discrete guidance or direction from department officials. The teachers of this study feel that it has only been through their previous years of personal CPD, practice and
implementation of Aistear that they feel that they have more confidence and knowledge in their role and implementation of Aistear as a whole.

Concannon-Gibney (2019) has found that careful and effective integrated planning for socio-dramatic play is a necessity to ensure that children have an effective opportunity for language rich interactions across all areas of learning, to which this study has found to be true to the teachers who were interviewed for this research. Many of the interviewed teachers admitted that integration is a crucial necessity to their teaching practices in ensuring that they get all curricular areas and Aistear covered as they feel there is not enough time in the overcrowded infant curriculum to do discrete lessons in all areas of the infant curriculum.

Children need space to move, navigate and explore a classroom environment that promotes a rich linguistic environment in order to develop upon their linguistic and language skills, according to Shiel et al (2012). This study has uncovered that the teachers who were interviewed believe that this is the case for them. Every teacher interviewed believed that a socio-dramatic area should be bright, inviting, literacy rich with corresponding pictures and literacy related materials. However, they all disclosed a common problem to the researcher in that there is simply not enough space in Irish classrooms to accommodate a permanent socio-dramatic area, thus the socio-dramatic area often has be created every time it is implemented.

As discussed in chapter 2, when children are provided with literate materials to play with, literacy learning can happen naturally. The teachers within this study
believed that when you provide the children with real things to play with their learning becomes more meaningful, particularly when they are involved in the creation and set up of the socio-dramatic area. However, the researcher has noted from the teachers that there is not enough funding from the DES for resources in the infant classrooms, with most teachers finding that it is often them who are providing the funds for the resources within their classrooms.

Recommendations

Before proceeding onto the recommendations of this study it is important to reiterate that this research is a small scale research study and further research into the role that socio-dramatic play has in developing children’s literacy skills would add to the body of research.

The researcher recommends the following actions:

- For the Primary Development review to re-evaluate the Aistear Curriculum Framework and the definitions of literacy within the Aistear Curriculum, to determine what currently exists within the Aistear framework and what areas can be improved upon, particularly in areas such as socio-dramatic play which can support literacy skill development in a meaningful way for children. This review of Aistear would aid the integration of learning experiences in Stages 1 and 2 (Junior Infants to 2nd Class) of the newly purposed Primary Curriculum Framework Draft which aims to support young children’s learning and development by “building on and extending their earlier learning experiences in preschool through Aistear” (NCCA, 2020, Pg.11).
• More opportunities for CPD for teachers, particularly infant teachers, in relation to playful literacy learning methodologies for infant children. This training could take the form of pre-service and in-service days for teachers, as well as increased amounts of study within this area in undergraduate and postgraduate education.

• Increased amounts of in-service support and training from the P.D.S.T and/or the NCCA for all teachers, with primary focus on infant teachers, in implementing the Aistear curriculum framework alongside the Primary School Curriculum. This would aid teachers in establishing their role within playful learning opportunities and demonstrate ways in which teachers can implement and integrate playful learning opportunities with curriculum objectives.

• Continued in-service support from the P.D.S.T in regards to keeping teachers up to date with recent developments in research on children’s social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.

• A review of the Primary School Curriculum by the NCCA to focus on a more integrated curriculum for junior classes of the primary school, to provide more opportunities for teachers to be flexible with their curriculum and promote more meaningful learning opportunities through play-based methodologies.

• Bigger classrooms, lower pupil: teacher ratio and extra human assistance in the infant classes.

• Increased funding from the Department of Education to fund fundamental high quality play resources that are needed for all classes within primary schools.
Conclusion

The overall aim of this research question was to gain an in-depth insight into teachers’ perspectives on the impact that socio-dramatic play has on the development of literacy skills of children in the infant classes of primary schools in Ireland. It is important to note that socio-dramatic play can be a demanding and complex element of the Aistear (2009) Curriculum Framework at times, however, both the strengths and challenges of this type of play has been discussed throughout this study. While this research was small scale, it still indicates that some teachers do associate many benefits that socio-dramatic play has to children’s literacy skills and the ways in which they can be built upon through playful learning methodologies in a socio-dramatic area. This research has identified the crucial need for additional training for teachers, classroom space and resources, in order to further aid teachers’ knowledge and confidence in facilitating purposeful and effective literacy learning opportunities through socio-dramatic play for children in the infant classrooms.
References


Stewart, N. (2001). *Drama in education, the key to unlocking the door to literacy: a study of the effectiveness of the use of Drama in Education in the teaching of reading to fifth class pupils*. Trinity College (Dublin, Ireland). School of Education.


Appendices

Appendix I

Interview Questions for Dissertation

Dissertation Question: “Teachers’ Perspectives of the Socio-Dramatic area of Aistear in Supporting the Development of Literacy skills in the Infant Classroom”

1. What class level do you currently teach?
2. How many years have you been implementing the Aistear curriculum?
3. What is your understanding of socio-dramatic play?
4. What is your opinion on children’s learning experiences within socio-dramatic play?
5. In your opinion, is socio-dramatic play a valuable methodology of learning for infant children?
6. Based on your experience, do you think children are developing literacy skills when they are engaged in socio-dramatic play?
7. Have you witnessed children draw on their own personal experiences to engage in socio-dramatic play – Eg. Trip to the Post Office with mammy
8. In your opinion, do you think that socio-dramatic play supports the development of higher order thinking skills in children?
9. In your opinion, can you describe what you believe the socio-dramatic play environment should look like?
10. Do you think literacy and language learning happens naturally through play when children are given literacy related materials to play with?
11. In your opinion, do you think the quality of children’s playful learning experiences is affected by a teacher’s level of experience with the Aistear framework?
12. What do you believe the role of the teacher is when the children are involved in socio-dramatic play?

13. In your opinion, is it important for a teacher to support children’s learning in socio-dramatic play by exploring/explaining a new Aistear/socio-dramatic area to them first?

14. Do you think time allocations for the primary language curriculum allows for adequate time for children to engage in playful learning opportunities?

15. In your opinion, should teachers model the appropriate language and behaviours associated with the theme of a socio-dramatic area in order for children to imitate and develop these for themselves?

16. Can you describe any challenges you have faced as a teacher when implementing socio-dramatic play experiences?

17. Is there anything else that you would like to add, share or say in regards to socio-dramatic play?
Appendix II

Participant Information Letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

Let me introduce myself, my name is Laura McBride and I am a second year Postgraduate Masters of Education (Primary Teaching) student at Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year coursework, I am conducting a dissertation research project entitled “Teacher’s Perspectives of the Sociodramatic area of Aistear in Supporting the Development of Literacy skills in the Infant Classroom”. The aim of this research is to bridge the gap between the theory in literature to the teachers’ perspectives of on their ground experiences in practice. I will specifically look at bridging the gap between theory and practice on the topic of play, the effects socio-dramatic play has on children’s literacy skills and an infant teachers feelings, knowledge and role within this type of play and the effects that they feel it has on their students literacy learning.

I am writing to ask you to participate in this research project which would involve a short interview. The purpose of the interview is to ascertain your experiences with implementing the sociodramatic area of Aistear, the strategies that you use to support literacy through socio-dramatic play, the role you take within sociodramatic play and the impact that you have witnessed this area have on the literacy skills, and the subsequent development of such skills, in the children that you are currently teaching or have previously taught. Each interview will take approximately 30-40 minutes. I wish
to assure you that the data collection will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner.

I wish to make it clear that you are free to withdraw from the research at any stage without having to offer a reason. Strict confidentiality is central to my research and, in order to protect participant anonymity, I will ensure that no identifying details will be revealed in my project. The name of the school or any participant in the research will not be disclosed and the data will carefully be stored on my personal USB key which is password protected. The data will only be used to write up my dissertation and will not be disseminated in any way.

I would be very grateful if you could consent to participate in my research study. Should you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor, Clara Fiorentini, who can be contacted by email at Clara.fiorentini@mie.ie.

I look forward to your response,

Yours Faithfully,

Laura McBride
Participant Consent Form for Interview

Title of Research: Teachers Perspectives of the Socio-Dramatic area of Aistear in Supporting the Development of Literacy Skills in Children in the Infant Classes.

This study is part of my final year Dissertation for my Postgraduate Masters of Education in Primary Teaching, in which we have to under-take an area of study that interests us to do research on.

Please read the following points below carefully and if you are still happy to consent to take part in this interview please sign your name at the bottom of this page.

• I have read the participant information letter and I confirm that I understand what the nature of this research study is about and what the purpose of this research study is for.
• I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.
• I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.
• I agree for this interview to be audio-recorded. I understand that the audio recording made of this interview will be used only for analysis and that extracts from the interview, from which I would not be personally identified, may be used in any conference presentation, report or journal article developed as a result of the research. I understand that no other use will be made of the recording without my written permission, and that no one outside the research team will be allowed access to the original recording.
• I agree that my anonymised data will be kept for future research purposes such as publications related to this study after the completion of the study.

I agree to take part in this interview.

__________________________________________  ____________  ____________
Name of participant                     Date                     Signature
Dear Sir/Madam,

Let me introduce myself, my name is Laura McBride and I am a second year Postgraduate Masters of Education (Primary Teaching) student at Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year coursework, I am conducting a dissertation research project entitled “Teacher’s Perspectives of the Sociodramatic area of Aistear in Supporting the Development of Literacy skills in the Infant Classroom”. The aim of this research is to bridge the gap between the theory in literature to the teachers’ perspectives of on their ground experiences in practice. I will specifically look at bridging the gap between theory and practice on the topic of play, the effects socio-dramatic play has on children’s literacy skills and an infant teachers feelings, knowledge and role within this type of play and the effects that they feel it has on their students literacy learning.

I am writing to ask you for permission to invite your infant class teachers to participate in this research project which would involve a short interview. The purpose of the interview is to ascertain the teacher’s experiences with implementing the sociodramatic area of Aistear, the strategies that they use to support literacy through socio-dramatic play, the role they take within sociodramatic play and the impact that they have witnessed this area have on the literacy skills, and the subsequent development of such skills, in the children that they are currently teaching or have previously taught. Each interview will take approximately 30-40 minutes. I wish to
assure you that the data collection will be carried out in a sensitive and non-stressful manner.

I wish to make it clear that your teachers are free to withdraw from the research at any stage without having to offer a reason. Strict confidentiality is central to my research and, in order to protect participant anonymity, I will ensure that no identifying details will be revealed in my project. The name of the school or any participant in the research will not be disclosed and the data will carefully be stored on my personal USB key which is password protected. The data will only be used to write up my dissertation and will not be disseminated in any way.

I would be very grateful if you could consent for your teachers to participate in my research study. Should you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me or my dissertation supervisor, Clara Fiorentini, who can be contacted by email at Clara.fiorentini@mie.ie.

I look forward to your response,

Yours faithfully,
Laura McBride
Title of Research: Teachers Perspectives of the Socio-Dramatic area of Aistear in Supporting the Development of Literacy Skills in the Infant Classroom.

This study is part of my final year Dissertation for my Postgraduate Masters of Education in Primary Teaching, in which we have to under-take an area of study that interests us to do research on.

Please read the following points below carefully and if you are still happy to consent for your teachers to take part in this interview please sign your name at the bottom of this page.

- I have read the participant information letter and I confirm that I understand what the nature of this research study is about and what the purpose of this research study is for.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and that the teachers are free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.
- I understand that responses will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that names will not be linked with the research materials, and will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.
- I agree for this interview to be audio-recorded. I understand that the audio recording made of this interview will be used only for analysis and that extracts from the interview, from which no one will be personally identified, may be used in any conference presentation, report or journal article developed as a result of the research. I understand that no other use will be made of the recording without my written permission, and that no one outside the research team will be allowed access to the original recording.
- I agree that anonymised data will be kept for future research purposes such as publications related to this study after the completion of the study.

I agree for the infant teachers in my school to take part in this interview.

__________________________________  ____________________  ___________________
Name of participant                  Date                     Signature