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University of Dublin

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Teachers' Beliefs about Play in Infant Classes in Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland

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2015

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A thesis written in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor in Philosophy (Ph.D.)

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Dedication

To my family,

Páidí, Cian and Sorcha,

with all my love.

Abstract

This thesis presents the results of a qualitative, interpretative study of teachers' beliefs about play pedagogy in infant classes in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. The introduction of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) has drawn renewed attention to the importance of play as a context for young children's learning. This approach has been endorsed in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011), the national literacy and numeracy strategy. However, while there is little research on practice in infant classes, such evidence as exists indicates that formal teaching in infant classes is widespread. It is envisaged that considerable change in practice in infant classes will be required to ensure that the pedagogical approaches in infant classes become consistent with best practice as conceptualised in *Aistear.* To underpin this study, literature on teachers' beliefs and play in schools was reviewed. Data was collected through a series of 6 focus groups, in which teachers discussed their beliefs about play in infant classes. The focus group data was analysed thematically, resulting in the identification of three overarching themes. The findings suggest that teachers value children's play but consider that introducing play into the infant classroom is professionally risky. Teachers believe that commitment from all stakeholders, not just teachers, is required for successful implementation.

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This has been a long but very satisfying process, and I have experienced tremendous support from very many people.

The 48 teachers who participated in the focus groups did so with honesty, seriousness and generosity, and I am most grateful to them for their involvement. The Principals who recruited the participants for me made the research possible, and responded to my request for help with grace and good humour.

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My parents, Bernie and the late Tom Fallon, always placed a very high value on education and made sacrifices to ensure we had the best opportunities possible. I will always be grateful for their efforts. My sister, Noreen, is always there, and my sister, Mary, never complains because I have been an absentee daughter.

I am grateful to my friends for still being here.

My husband, Páidí Ó Néill and our children, Cian and Sorcha, have loved me and cared for me, and been patient and helpful. Páidí has never stopped encouraging me and cheering me up when I was fed up, and Cian and Sorcha took the whole thing in their stride. I love you all very much, and I am blessed every day in the family I have.

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Acronyms

ATECI	Association of Teachers' Education Centres in Ireland
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CICE	Church of Ireland College of Education
CPD	Continuing professional development
DES present)	Department of Education and Skills (2010 –
DES 2010)	Department of Education and Science (1997 –
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
ECE	Early Childhood Education
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NI	Northern Ireland
NQSS	National Early Years Quality Support Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PSC	Primary School Curriculum
RoI	Republic of Ireland

Chapter 1: Introduction

Educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it's as simple and as complex as that. (Fullan, 2001, 115)

1.1 Infant Classes in Primary Schools in the Republic of Ireland

This is a study of teachers' beliefs about play in the infant classes in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland [RoI]. Early childhood education [ECE] in the RoI is understood as referring to children in the birth to six years age group (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009). This includes children in the junior and senior infant classes in primary schools. While the compulsory school starting age in the RoI is six, most children enter junior infants in the September after their fourth birthday (Walsh et al., 2010c; Donnelly, 2007; Clark and Waller, 2007). Children attending the infant classes of primary schools in the RoI, while of an age with children in other jurisdictions attending pre-school and kindergarten (Walsh et al., 2010c) are very much located in the culture of the school as an institution based on formal didactic practice (Dunphy, 2008; Murphy, 2004b; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004).

The Primary School Curriculum [PSC] (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999a) is prescribed for infant classes as for all other classes, and the structure is the same for infant classes as for all others. Four to six year olds in the RoI are currently taught eleven subjects '… with a detailed statement of content for each subject' (Bertram and Pascal, 2002, 48). While the Introduction to the PSC (DES, 1999b) specifies that

subject boundaries are not relevant for young children, nonetheless curriculum implementation for the infant classes appears to be highly subject specific, and is evaluated on a subject by subject basis (DES Inspectorate, 2005). Curriculum overload and reliance on textbooks emerge as consequences of the size of the PSC (NCCA, 2010; DES Inspectorate, 2010). The PSC is currently being revised, beginning with the Language Curriculum, and the revision is focused on the junior classes (junior infants to second class) (NCCA, n.d.a).

Class size in infant classes in the RoI is determined in the same way as class size for all classes in the primary school. The teacher: pupil ratios in operation have been described as unacceptable and incompatible with pedagogies appropriate for this age group (OECD, 2004). The OECD (2004) also noted that teachers are not given teaching assistants to support classroom activity, and the teacher is generally the sole adult in the room (except in cases where an individual child has been allocated a Special Needs Assistant).

This research project has been conducted in the context of considerable change in the policy landscape surrounding the infant classes in primary schools in the RoI. The publication of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) introduced a concept of curriculum quite different to that of the PSC (DES, 1999a). In particular, in ancillary guidelines, *Aistear* very explicitly emphasises play as one of the key learning contexts for young children, including those in infant classes. An earlier policy intervention, *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006) states as a principle of ECE that play is central not just to the well-being of the child, but also to learning and development. However, even though both of these frameworks include infant classes in their provisions, neither has been implemented in schools.

The introduction subsequently of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020'* (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011a) puts additional focus on practice in infant classes by highlighting the appropriateness of play, as described in *Aistear*, as an effective learning medium for young children. The strategy also discouraged inappropriately formal methodologies in infant classes. These three key policy documents implicitly acknowledge that practice in infant classes in primary schools in the RoI need to change. Efforts, such as the *Aistear* Tutor Initiative (NCCA, 2012, 17) are underway to effect and support change in practice towards the inclusion of play as a teaching and learning context in the infant classes.

1.2 Rationale

The policy context described presents an ever growing imperative to understand the factors which underpin practice in the infant classes in primary schools, and this research will add to the current body of knowledge on those factors. Evidence has emerged over the past number of years that the methodologies used by teachers in the infant classes of primary schools in Ireland are predominantly didactic and focused on whole class teaching (OECD, 2004; Murphy, 2004a, 2004b; Hayes and O'Flaherty, 1997). The use of workbooks is widespread in infant classes (Dunphy, 2009b). While little research attention has been paid to play in infant classes in the RoI, there is some evidence that a majority of teachers in infant classes are not using play as a context for curriculum implementation. In a review of implementation of the PSC, 39.9% of teachers in infant classes indicated that they used play 'hardly ever/never' and a further 39.1% indicated that they used play 'once or twice a month' in the context of the English language curriculum (NCCA, 2005, 49). Murphy (2004b) observed that children spent just 18.33%

of their time in what can broadly be called play activities and that only a third of that time could be considered cognitively challenging.

While there is some evidence on what teachers in infant classes do, there is virtually none on what they think about play. Only Murphy (2004a, 2004b) has addressed teachers thinking about play in a wider research project on curriculum implementation in senior infant classes. In terms of curriculum implementation, Murphy (2004a, 83) concluded that teachers did not understand play and '...teachers' instructional practices appear to be influenced by their deeply ingrained personal beliefs and understandings rather than by the principles of the curriculum'. There is considerable agreement in the literature that, as Fullan (2001) succinctly notes, what teachers think matters, and possibly matters more than what they do: '...what really matters in educational settings are the theories, values and beliefs of practitioners...' (Wood and Attfield, 2005, 118).

The rationale for this study into teachers' beliefs about play in the infant classes in primary schools in the RoI is based on the conviction articulated by Wood and Attfied (2005). It aims to provide balance to the evidence on what teachers in infant classes do. Perhaps, more fundamentally, the rationale for the study is based on the conviction that teachers should be represented and given a voice in the research base on practice in infant classes. The national policy context for infant classes requires considerable change in practice away from didactic, paper based methodologies towards informal, play based approaches to teaching and learning, and it is teachers who will have to make those changes. There is no research currently available on what teachers in the RoI think about play, and this represents a major gap in the knowledge base for the process of change being encouraged. The policy and practice context outlined here situates this study as relevant, timely, significant and interesting – a worthy topic, one of the criteria used to assure high quality qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). The rationale for the research

focus on what teachers think also reflects my own background and experiences as a teacher and as a teacher educator over the past thirty years, which will be outlined in section 1.4.

1.3 Research Question

The overarching research question guiding the study is:

> What are teachers' educational beliefs about play in infant classes in primary schools in the RoI?

The sub-questions associated with this overarching question are:

- What do the data indicate are the elements which constitute teachers' educational beliefs about play in schools?
- What do the data reveal about the attitudes, values and perspectives which underpin teachers' educational beliefs about play in infant classes?
- How do these educational beliefs relate to the literature on play in schools?

1.4 Researcher Profile

The research design for this project, detailed in Chapter 4, incorporates a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach with particular reference to the interpretation of the data. Such an approach is predicated on the researcher being clear about her/his position in relation to the object of the research. Researcher reflection and honesty about subjective values, biases, and inclinations is also one of the criteria through which the quality of the research can be validated (Tracy, 2010), and this section addresses both of these requirements.

I qualified as a primary teacher in 1979, and over the following 23 years taught primarily in infant classes in three primary schools, two of them in areas experiencing significant

levels of socio-economic disadvantage. From 1995 until I left teaching in 2002, I taught in an Early Start Pre-School (Early Years Education Policy Unit, 2012). Early Start was designed as an early intervention in the cycle of educational disadvantage, and a focus on language development and play was an important component of the work. I was a member of the team which developed the *Early Start Curricular Guidelines for Good Practice* (In-Career Development Team, 1998). Subsequently, I was part of a team providing in-classroom support for teachers starting work in the pre-school. This was the beginning of my interest in teachers' attitudes towards play in the classroom, and the challenges they experienced.

During this period, I also became involved in delivering in-service continuing professional development [CPD] to groups of teachers involved with Early Start, but also to teachers interested in what was then called 'infant education'. In the years since then, I have had considerable experience of engaging with teachers through the provision of CPD. The experience of working with teachers is the impetus for my interest in exploring teachers' educational beliefs about play, as the diversity of interpretation among participants is a constant surprise.

In 2002, I was seconded to the CECDE as part of the team which developed *Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006). Throughout the five years I spent in the CECDE, my work involved research and policy development with reference to the entire ECE sector in the RoI. This changed my perspective from being firmly fixed on the classroom and school, to seeing infant classes as part of a continuum of provision in a child's life.

In 2007, I left the CECDE and took up a position as lecturer in ECE on the B.Ed. programme in the Church of Ireland College of Education [CICE]. On joining the CICE, I began a joint project with the Irish National Teachers Organisation [INTO] to devise a

way for teachers to introduce play into the infant classroom. The brief was to find out what was feasible and likely to be acceptable to teachers in the context of large classes, crowded classrooms and an overloaded curriculum.

I am a member of the NCCA Board of Early Childhood and Primary, and have been involved with the development of *Aistear*. I have worked with the NCCA and the Association of Teachers' Education Centres in Ireland [ATECI] on the *Aistear* Tutor Initiative to promote play pedagogy. I have also recorded a series of podcasts for the NCCA *Aistear* Toolkit website on similar topics.

I believe that play pedagogy is the most appropriate approach to children's learning in infant classes. At a minimum, I believe it to be a more humane form of provision than formal classrooms and didactic, paper based methods of teaching. I identify as a teacher and have great respect of the majority of my colleagues whom I believe put in considerable effort on behalf of the children. I spend most of my professional life promoting, explaining and advocating for play in the classroom. I am pursuing this research in order to enhance my own understanding of teachers' beliefs and their impact on practice, and to contribute to what is a very under-researched area in the RoI .

1.5 Methods

This is a qualitative, exploratory, interpretative study which aims to understand the worldview of the participating teachers in relation to play in the infant classes in primary schools in the RoI. Literature on teacher beliefs and play in schools was reviewed to underpin the study. Data collection was conducted through a series of six focus groups involving 48 primary teachers. Focus groups were held in different geographical locations, with participants from a range of school contexts. Sampling was through a process of 'active solicitation' (Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002) to ensure distance

between the researcher and the participants. Thematic data analysis (Guest et al., 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to systematically analyse the data in six phases. Throughout the entire research process, reflective writing in the form of a research diary (including a voice diary), analytic memos and reading notes was used as a research method to maintain cohesion through the process.

1.6 Chapter Layout

Chapter 2 presents a literature review on teachers' educational beliefs, addressing issues of terminology, the relationship between belief and knowledge, the ways in which an individual uses beliefs, how belief systems are structured, the relationship between beliefs and classroom practice and, finally, if and how beliefs can be changed. The review goes on to consider definitions of beliefs and specifies the definition applied for this study. Finally, Chapter 2 considers the literature on ECE teachers' educational beliefs, and beliefs about play.

Chapter 3 reviews a range of literature relevant to play in schools. The literature is considered in terms of the compatibility of play with the school as an institution; time, space and class size; stakeholder perspectives; and finally, the relationship between play and curriculum. The second section of the chapter considers literature related to play, teaching and learning, including a consideration of how teaching can be conceptualised in a play-based approach, and integrated models of play pedagogy.

Chapter 4 details the research design for this study, including the approach to trustworthiness and ethical issues, and describes the methods used. Chapter 5 presents the findings which were identified through the extensive analysis conducted on the focus group data. The findings are presented in three themes. These findings are discussed in

Chapter 6 in terms of their implications for the current process of change prompted by recent policy change.

Chapter 2: Teachers' Educational Beliefs

2.1 Introduction

Within the very considerable range of literature on teachers' educational beliefs, relatively few authors have been concerned with exploring what the concept of 'belief' might mean or how it might be defined. It has emerged from an extensive review of a range of literature on teachers' beliefs that two broad categories can be identified: the first is a small group of articles which provide overviews of teachers' beliefs (Fives and Buehl, 2012; Mansour, 2009; Borg, 2003; Einarsdottir, 2003; Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Nespor, 1987). Within this limited number of articles, Fives and Buehl (2012), Pajares (1992) and Nespor (1987) are specifically concerned with clarifying what Pajares (1992) terms 'a messy construct'. The remaining articles provide literature reviews in a range of different educational domains and from a number of different perspectives: for example, Mansour (2009) reviews science teachers' beliefs with a view to determining a research agenda for the sector.

The second, and by far the larger category, is literature which reports on research studies conducted on teachers' beliefs about a broad range of educational topics. It is noteworthy that the literature in this second category draws on the literature in the first category to establish the rationale for investigating teachers' beliefs. In particular, Pajares (1992) is cited in over 50% of the studies reviewed here (in 43 out of 71 articles). In most of these articles, Pajares (1992) is cited in conjunction with one or more of the following authors; Fang (1996), Kagan (1992) and Nespor (1987). This would appear to indicate that the

range of literature which might support clarification of the concept of teachers' beliefs is quite narrow. While there is considerable research interest in teachers' beliefs, there appears to be less interest in defining the concept of teachers' beliefs than in finding out what those beliefs actually are.

Nespor (1987) suggested that such an overarching concept was necessary to ensure that research on teachers' educational beliefs could take place within an agreed framework, but Fives and Buehl (2012) have recently come to the conclusion that this has not happened. The focus of much research has been on beliefs about specific educational topics (Kagan, 1992), with the focus on the topic itself rather than on establishing a common understanding of what the term 'beliefs' might mean. This chapter will begin by considering the literature which is concerned with understanding, characterising and defining what 'beliefs' might mean in educational research. Borg (2003) noted three types of variability in the literature on teachers' beliefs, specifically terminological, conceptual and definitional, and this section will follow this structure. Section 2.2 will, therefore, consider the terminology associated with teachers' beliefs. Section 2.3 will explore the concept of belief and the ways in which it is understood. There are a number of ways in which the concept has been clarified and these are considered in turn. The concept of belief has been understood by distinguishing 'beliefs' from 'knowledge', by identifying the uses of beliefs, by describing belief systems, by examining the relationship between beliefs and practice and by considering how beliefs change or can be changed. Section 2.4 explores definitions of belief, both general and study specific, while the final section, 2.5 focuses on early childhood education [ECE] teachers' general educational beliefs and more specifically, beliefs about play.

2.2 Terminology

The field of research on teachers' beliefs is well established (Fives and Buehl, 2012; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Nespor, 1987), but the use of terminology associated with teachers' beliefs has been the source of confusion (Ertmer, 2005; Borg, 2003; Bennett et al., 1997), both in conducting and interpreting research in this area. This is a long standing problem. Kagan (1992, 66) pointed out that even the generic term 'teacher belief' was not applied consistently in research about teachers' beliefs. She cites a range of other terms used in the literature, including principles of practice, personal epistemologies, perspectives, practical knowledge and orientations. Pajares (1992, 309) identified an even broader range of terms used synonymously with 'belief':

> ... attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertories of understanding, and social strategy ...

Following an analysis of the literature on teachers' beliefs among language teachers in the ten years after Pajares (1992) had cited this broad range of terms and labels, Borg (2003) noted that this situation still pertained. In a review of the literature on teacher cognition in language teaching, the following terms were found: personal pedagogical systems, pedagogic principles, theories for practice, routines, conceptions of practice, pedagogical knowledge, and personal practical knowledge. (See Table 2.1 for a selection of the terms used in the literature on ECE teachers' beliefs.)

Borg (2003) advised that it would be incorrect to assume that such a range of terminology is indicative of wide diversity in the meanings attributed to these terms as they function more as aliases rather than as identifiers of different constructs. However, not all researchers take this view that varied terminology does not necessarily mean

varied constructs. Tabachnick and Zeichner (1984 in Pajares, 1992, 314) used the term 'teacher perspectives' in a very specific way which was closely defined to distinguish it from teachers' beliefs. The difference here though is that the authors defined the term, rather than using it in a generalised, analogous way, and consequently eliminated confusion.

One way to address this terminological confusion is to clarify and specify what is meant by the term 'beliefs' in the context of research on beliefs in any domain so that the term could be applied with consistency. This will be considered in a later section on defining beliefs (see Section 2.4). Another contribution towards achieving clarity is to use terminology which specifies as far as possible the direction of the research. 'Teachers' beliefs' is too general a term as teachers, like all humans, have beliefs about everything (Pajares, 1992). It is more accurate to specify that it is teachers' educational beliefs which are of interest here, rather than the totality of teachers' life beliefs. Further specification of the focus of those beliefs is also necessary for terminological precision. Pajares (1992, 315) recommends using the phrase 'teachers' educational beliefs about' a particular, definable educational process or entity. Such precision ensures clarity about each component of the research project. Within this rubric, many of what could be thought of as subsections of belief (e.g., teachers' craft knowledge, Day, 2005) could be considered instead as the focus of beliefs – beliefs *about* craft knowledge. In this formula, craft knowledge needs to be defined as a concept in itself, distinct from the definition of 'educational beliefs'. Establishing this 'about' relationship between educational beliefs and craft knowledge (or any other research topic) helps with conceptual clarity, which will be addressed in more detail in Section 2.3

Of course, given the range and diversity of research on teacher beliefs, the '...riotous array of empirical research...' (Kagan, 1992, 66), to insist on the use of the actual phrase

would be unacceptably rigid and almost certainly impossible to impose. However, the principle that educational beliefs should be distinguished from life beliefs and that the specific domain of interest should be defined using terminology which is itself clearly understood, is a sound one (Buehl and Fives, 2009). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the precise focus is teachers' educational beliefs about play in infant classes. The specific definition of 'educational beliefs' will be given in Section 2.4. It has been pointed out that inconsistencies between beliefs and practice found by researchers may be the result of misunderstandings between researchers and participants on what the terms used in domain specific research actually mean (Fang, 1996; Wilcox – Herzog, 2002). For the purpose of this study, the following terms will be used:

- Attitude, defined as an individual's disposition, either negative or positive, toward a topic, object or phenomenon.
- Value, defined as the worth an individual associates with a topic, object or phenomenon.
- Perspective, defined as the individual's standpoint in relation to a given topic, object or phenomenon, and which provides a context for both attitudes and values associated with the topic, object or phenomenon.

Commonly understood and applied terminology will support conceptual clarity, which is the focus of the next section.

2.3 Nature of Belief

Conceptual clarity requires an exploration of the many ways in which beliefs have been understood in the literature. Generally, the concept is understood by comparison with other conceptual entities (e.g., 'knowledge'), in specific situations (e.g., the uses of beliefs or their relationship to practice), through descriptions of cognitive structures,

and/or through exploring ways in which beliefs develop and change. The following sub-sections will explore the relationship between belief and knowledge, how beliefs are used by teachers, the structures associated with beliefs and belief systems, the relationship between beliefs and practice, and finally, whether and how beliefs can be changed.

2.3.1 Belief and Knowledge

As with the terminology associated with the study of beliefs, there is also considerable variety in the conceptualisation of beliefs (Fives and Buehl, 2012; Mansour, 2009; Borg, 2003; Pajares, 1992). Pajares (1992) expressed concern that an important and legitimate area of enquiry – teachers' beliefs – was being undermined by a lack of conceptual clarity where the construct of beliefs was concerned. A key contributor to the lack of conceptual clarity is the lack of differentiation between knowledge and belief. Nespor (1987) developed a preliminary conceptual framework within which teachers' beliefs could be understood, primarily by showing how beliefs can be distinguished from knowledge on the basis of particular characteristics. He distinguishes between individual beliefs about a thing – object, phenomenon – and a system of belief (in which individual beliefs are gathered). He proposed a conceptual framework of at least four characteristics of belief (existential presumption; alternativity; affective and evaluative loading; and episodic structure) and adds another two characteristics of belief systems which are groups of individual beliefs (non-consensuality; unboundedness). Nespor (1987) uses this framework to distinguish 'belief' from 'knowledge', and suggests that knowledge is subject to logic and argument, whereas beliefs are not because of these four characteristics.

- Existential presumption refers to the way in which contingent, fluid, random and/or incidental characteristics of, for example, a group of pupils is solidified in teachers' perceptions into a well-defined 'entity' with objective existence (a

belief). For example, a teacher who believes that learning maths is primarily a matter of practice consequently believes that those who don't learn have not practiced sufficiently and must, therefore, be lazy.

- Alternativity refers to the belief in an ideal reality which may never have existed and which is qualitatively different from current reality. Belief in this alternative serves to influence what Nespor terms 'task definition'. For example, a teacher who tried to recreate a fun, happy classroom such as she would have liked as a child. Even though she had never experienced this, nonetheless she believed it possible.
- Affective and evaluative aspects of beliefs seem to be the area which most clearly distinguishes beliefs from knowledge. Knowing about a thing and one's feelings about that thing are two very different states. Emotion, mood, feelings and subjective value judgements are contributors to beliefs rather than to knowledge.
- Episodic storage describes the power of specific events in the life of an individual which impress themselves experientially and which continue to exert influence on the individual's continuing life experience, thus contributing to the range of beliefs held by the individual. (Adapted from Nespor, 1987, 318 – 320)

These four characteristics can be used to distinguish between behaviours and explanations of behaviours based on beliefs as opposed to behaviours and explanations of behaviours based on knowledge. Belief systems have an additional two characteristics.

- Non-consensuality describes the way in which belief systems are open to agreement or disagreement. Nespor (1987) argues that there is a difference between knowledge systems and belief systems because knowledge is developed on the basis of common standards of evaluation, judgement and argument (consensuality), whereas belief is not subject to such standards.

- Unboundedness refers to the applicability of beliefs in circumstances and contexts far from those in which the beliefs were formed in the first place. Knowledge, Nespor suggests, is applied in more specific ways in more defined contexts. (Adapted from Nespor, 1987, 320 – 321)

Hermans et al. (2008) identified two characteristics of beliefs which are somewhat more expansive than Nespor's (1987) cited above, but ultimately acknowledge similar traits. First, beliefs are an individual teacher's conceptions about the best way to teach and the optimum ways in which students learn (Nespor's existential presumption). These conceptions are located in the individual's wider personal belief system which is an amalgamation of eclectic constructs felt to be true (affect and evaluation). Second, beliefs are developed early in life through experience (episodic storage) and are relatively resistant to change (non-consensuality). Hermans et al. (2008) do not enter the debate about the distinction between beliefs and knowledge but their recognition of the power of beliefs to resist change will be discussed in a later section.

Pajares (1992), on the other hand, concludes that knowledge and beliefs are inextricably intertwined. However, the power of beliefs in an individual's life is such that new experiences, information or phenomena are filtered through beliefs (Lombaerts et al., 2009). Beliefs, therefore, would appear to have a role in determining an individual's knowledge base. Nespor (1987) would argue that knowledge and belief are based in different domains, but acknowledges that there is some level of interaction between them. Pajares (1992, 312) demonstrates how the two are intertwined; drawing on Anderson (1983, 1985) and Paris et al. (1983), he cites three categories of knowledge:

- Declarative knowledge ('what');
- Procedural knowledge ('how');
- Conditional knowledge ('when' and 'why').

He argues that an individual will not accept knowledge unless s/he believes it. However, this position is open to argument as, following Nespor (1987), it could be possible to distinguish between declarative knowledge being based on phenomena subject to external consensus (i.e. the time of day in a given location or the information in an authoritative textbook) and procedural and conditional knowledge in which there are many ways to conduct a particular process or solve a particular problem (i.e. a teacher will draw on beliefs when faced with uncertainty and contingency).

Pajares (1992) also presents the argument that belief is an evaluative and judgmental component of knowledge. In the end, he describes as artificial any distinction between knowledge and beliefs in which the former is based on objective fact and the latter on evaluation and judgement. In effect, this rejects Nespor's (1987) position, although it should be noted that Nespor (1987) acknowledges that there is likely to be some feedback between the various levels of thought in which knowledge and beliefs are situated. Pajares (1992) concludes that any distinction established between knowledge and beliefs will be as a result of consensus among researchers about how these are defined and conceptualised rather than on the basis of any distinctions inherent in the constructs themselves.

Kagan (1992) has a different perspective on the relationship between knowledge and belief than Pajares (1992). Kagan asserts that most of a teacher's professional knowledge is more accurately described as belief which has been confirmed as true on the basis of objective proof or consensus. Objective proof and consensus (external to the individual) allow for the distinction between fact (synonymous with knowledge) and opinion (synonymous with belief). But if belief is opinion, the question raised by Kagan's (1992) position is how then can objectively proven, consensus based knowledge be characterised as a kind of belief?

Kagan (1992) argues that, in teaching, knowledge itself is contingent, consisting of a cluster of alternative models for practice. For example, in terms of subject content and methodologies, teachers must make decisions among alternatives. When faced with these alternatives [similar to Nespor's (1987) 'entangled domains'], the teacher must make choices; choices are made on the basis of beliefs. (This point will be addressed further in Section 2.3.2 on the uses of beliefs in teaching.) There are similarities with Pajares' argument (1992) that beliefs underlie knowledge and act as a filter for new information. However, there are nuanced differences in these arguments as Nespor (1987) and Kagan (1992) would seem to characterise knowledge as somehow existing objectively to be chosen or not chosen on the basis of what beliefs the individual has, whereas Pajares (1992) seems to view beliefs as a filter through which knowledge passes, and is accepted or rejected in the process. Kagan (1992) subscribes to the filter image, but sees this process occurring only after an individual has accepted the information in the first place. The form the new knowledge takes is dependent on the individual's particular filtering system, leading to highly individualised interpretations of what are generally regarded as objectively established 'facts'. This is proffered as an explanation of the development of personalised pedagogies (Choi and Ramsey, 2010; Mansour, 2009).

More recently, Ertmer (2005, 28) accepts the distinction between knowledge and beliefs in which knowledge is characterised by fact and belief by 'suppositions, commitments, and ideologies'. Einarsdotter (2003) goes so far as to state that that position is common to most definitions of teachers' beliefs. Ertmer (2005) also views beliefs as the more fundamental of the two constructs in that once a new fact or proposition is encountered, the individual is free to believe it or not. Verification of a proposition does not appear to be significant in whether a belief is or is not adopted (La Paro et al., 2009b). The

conviction of truth associated with a belief, as characterised by Nespor's (1987) 'non-consensuality' feature, appears to be independent of verification.

Fives and Buehl (2008) take the opposite view of the relationship between beliefs and knowledge. They agree with Pajares (1992) in clarifying the relationship between beliefs and the domains about which teachers hold beliefs, and provide a careful definition of personal epistemology (which they are careful not to call 'teachers' epistemological beliefs'). However, they argue that beliefs are part of knowledge, specifically teachers' educational beliefs are part of teaching knowledge which they define as '... all that will assist one in engaging in the practice of teaching' (Fives and Buehl, 2008, 137).

Meehan (2007) also holds that beliefs are a form of knowledge. She subsequently focuses on categories of knowledge despite the stated purpose of the research to explore the beliefs of ECE teachers (Meehan, 2007), further emphasising the conceptual and terminological fluidity extant in the literature. Various categories of knowledge are itemised but how beliefs (as another form of knowledge) interact with these categories is not considered. Any of these categories of knowledge (e.g., pedagogical content knowledge) could be the subject of teachers' beliefs 'about' (Fives and Buehl, 2008; Pajares, 1992). This is expanded in the discussion of naive and informed beliefs (Meehan, 2007, 23); naive beliefs are not grounded in theoretical knowledge whereas informed beliefs are. This could be interpreted as similar to earlier distinctions between knowledge and beliefs (Nespor, 1987; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992) on the basis of fact and opinion. It could also be a case of '... simply different words meaning the same thing' (Pajares, 1992, 309) but therein lies the confusion.

Mansour (2009) posits a circular relationship between knowledge and beliefs in which beliefs function as an organiser of information, creating priorities for action. In this interaction between beliefs and knowledge, knowledge influences belief. This is similar

to other descriptions of the relationship between knowledge and beliefs in which beliefs act as a filter for new information (Lombaerts et al., 2009; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992), and the new information combines with pre-existing belief structures to change those structures because they have been accepted as compatible (Nespor, 1987).

Sakellariou and Rentzou (2011, 1382) subscribe to the position that beliefs are the dominant structure but that teachers' educational beliefs can be categorised in two ways:

- Implicit beliefs: ideas that teachers have about instruction which have developed from personal experience gained on the basis of 'know how'.
- Explicit beliefs: ideas which teachers have developed on the basis of their engagement with teacher education courses and professional development.

This particular conceptualisation has the benefit of consistent application of the term 'beliefs' while still accommodating ideas about knowledge and differentiating between different modes of thought, implicit and explicit.

The argument about the relationship between knowledge and beliefs is so entangled that it begs the question of whether it is at all necessary or useful to disentangle them (Borg, 2003; Pajares, 1992). All of the literature cited above engages with the debate about the distinction between beliefs and knowledge on the basis that articulating such distinctions is necessary for conceptual clarity. However, Borg (2003) does not regard this particular debate as necessary or productive. While acknowledging efforts which have been made to disentangle knowledge and beliefs, he concludes that this is at best problematic; while clarity demands some effort at establishing the distinction, ultimately these constructs are so intertwined in the individual's mind that any efforts to separate them are unlikely to succeed (Borg, 2003). One solution to this problem is to step back from the level of belief and knowledge to the broader concept of teacher cognition. Teacher cognition is

multidimensional, encompassing what teachers know, believe and think, and embracing the '... complexity of teachers' mental lives' (Borg, 2003, 86). At this conceptual level, it becomes unnecessary to get involved in 'untangling' debates, but this may well be at the cost of conceptual precision (Pajares, 1992).

Borg (2003) identified a range of psychological constructs which, in addition to beliefs and knowledge, fit within the concept of teacher cognition: theories, attitudes, images, assumptions, metaphors, conceptions and perspectives. He offers no definitions of these constructs and does not discuss the relationships between them. In this way, Borg bypasses the complexity inherent in this pot-pourri of philosophical and psychological constructs. While the intention to move the debate on from what are undoubtedly intricate arguments to a focus on what teachers actually believe is understandable, it amounts to ignoring terminological and conceptual problems, which is quite different to reaching consensus on shared meanings (Pajares, 1992).

In summary, the distinctions between beliefs and knowledge centre on beliefs being characterised by personally invested values with affective connections in contrast to knowledge which is characterised by externally validated consensus. The two are interrelated and interactive but both this interactivity and the characterisation is contested. For the purposes of this study, this distinction is applied; educational beliefs are held to be the overarching category and knowledge is subject to interpretation on the basis of those beliefs.

2.3.2 Uses of Beliefs

According to Nespor (1987), beliefs are used primarily to do two things.

- Task definition which means that a teacher will make decisions about what has to be done (how the teaching task is framed) based on beliefs; the corollary of this is that two teachers could approach the same task but frame it in different ways, leading to different behaviours in carrying out the task. The implication is that to understand why teachers teach in a particular way, we have to understand the beliefs used to frame that work.
- Facilitation of memory processes: Nespor's (1987) description is based on models of cognitive processing and draws on the episodic storage characteristic of beliefs. The affect associated with memories is more easily accessed when the individual is trawling memory in search of cognitive resources with which to address the teaching task. It is the memories most powerfully associated with affect that are privileged over those with less powerful affective associations. Consequently, it is those memories (which could be seen as cognitive resources) which are used. This, it is suggested, is how beliefs influence the application and organisation of knowledge and information relevant to the task in hand. (Adapted from Nespor, 1987, 322/323)

Nespor (1987) argues that beliefs (because of their existential presumption and unboundedness) are powerful in teaching because teaching is such a highly entangled set of processes. Teachers position themselves on what feels like solid ground – their beliefs, explicit or implicit (Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2011) – in order to be able to deal with what feels like shifting sand. As Kagan (1992, 65) puts it: 'In a landscape without bearings, teachers create and internalise their own maps'. Vartuli (1999) characterises the

classroom context as stressful and uncertain, and suggests that extemporaneous decision making in that context draws on a teacher's beliefs.

Fang (1996) reiterates the description of teaching as an entangled domain, constantly presenting teachers with dichotomous choices and dilemmas. He sees these dilemmas and complications as factors influencing the inconsistencies between teachers' beliefs and their practices, as distinct from Nespor's (1987) argument that beliefs are teachers' most effective points of reference in highly contingent situations. Bennett et al. (1997, 21) refer to this as 'situated knowledge' or 'know how', teachers' beliefs about what does and does not work in particular teaching situations.

van der Schaaf et al. (2008) propose that teachers may use beliefs in approaching their teaching either deliberately or spontaneously. The situations in which teachers deliberately draw on their beliefs are characterised by intense motivation in terms of goal setting and decision making about subsequent behaviour. This is similar to what Nespor (1987) refers to as the control or metacognitive aspect of thought processes. What van der Schaaf et al. (2008) refer to as spontaneous uses of beliefs occur in more routine situations, ' ... the level consisting of the largely automatized and procedural processes of perception which take place without conscious attention' (Nespor, 1987, 322). In considering the contingencies of the classroom context in which teachers must constantly be both responsive and decisive, Mohamad (2006) refers to 'frames of reference' which teachers use to guide their decision making and to structure their teaching. These 'frames of reference' constitute a theory which enables teachers to predict what will and will not work in the classroom context, in much the same way as Bennett et al.'s (1997) 'know how' functions.

Fives and Buehl (2012) summarise the functions of beliefs as filters, frames and guides. Echoing Pajares (1992) on beliefs acting as a filter for new knowledge, Fives and Buehl

(2012) argue that beliefs influence perception and interpretation. With Nespor (1987), they assert that the individual draws on beliefs to define the nature of a problem, thereby guiding the individual to action towards problem solving or other tasks.

In reference to the previous discussion on the relationship between beliefs and knowledge, Wong et al. (2009) have noted that it is not just the situated teaching context which is contingent, and likely to give rise to the need for filters, frames and guides. Knowledge in the constructivist (or more accurately the socio-constructivist) tradition is described as tentative and evolving, which suggests that beliefs may also be mobilised as teachers' engage with new knowledge and information. This will be discussed further in the section on changing beliefs.

2.3.3 Structure of Belief Systems

Generally, the term used in the literature in this field refers to teachers' beliefs, implying that an individual belief exists in some sort of arrangement with other beliefs. There are, indeed, references throughout the literature to belief systems (Mansour, 2009; Lara-Cinismo et al., 2008; Ertmer, 2005; Fang, 1996; Rusher et al., 1992; Pajares, 1992) or belief sets (Wong et al., 2009). Rokeach (1968 in Ertmer, 2005) described an individual's belief system in terms of a series of concentric circles. At the core are beliefs which anchor the system, which have been developed through personal experience and relate most closely to the individual's sense of self. There are four subsequent concentric circles of ever widening dimensions, but also of increasing weakness as they move away from the core beliefs. The closer a belief is to the core of the system, the stronger it is and the more resistant to change (Mansour, 2009; Ertmer, 2005; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). This resistance to change is an important characteristic of core beliefs as it supports the individual's self-understanding, understanding of others and of the world (Pajares, 1992), giving a sense of certainty, warranted or not, in complex situations.

Ertmer (2005) noted that even though Rokeach did not refer to educational beliefs in this model, it could be applied to educational beliefs. This suggests that the model can be both applied to an individual's totality of life beliefs of which educational beliefs will be part, and also to that set of beliefs associated with education. This differs somewhat from an interpretation of the interaction of topic specific beliefs within the main belief system in which topic specific beliefs are defined as belief clusters (van der Schaaf et al., 2008; Pajares, 1992). Examples of belief clusters based on the planned behaviour model are found in van der Schaaf et al.'s (2008) study of teachers' beliefs and practice in portfolio assessment. They identify three belief clusters which they consider to have an impact on teachers' goals and intentions:

- Behavioural beliefs – the expected effects of particular behaviours;
- Subjective norms – the expected support from other relevant personnel;
- Control beliefs - expectations about the context which will constrain or enable the planned teaching behaviours.

While Bennett et al. (1997) do not use the term belief clusters, they present their findings about teachers' theories in a concept map which clusters specific elements of thinking around six key interconnected areas of teachers' thinking. van der Schaaf et al. (2008) argue that belief clusters are not necessarily interconnected and may, in particular contexts, be incompatible. In drawing on beliefs in the ways described in section 2.3.2, a resolution will have to be reached between conflicting beliefs; van der Schaaf et al. (2008) argue that the most important beliefs will be prioritised on the basis of the context as perceived by the teacher. In Rokeach's model (Ertmer, 2005; Pajares, 1992), importance will be determined by connectedness to core beliefs.

These belief clusters about a particular thing or situation form both attitudes and values which are described as belief substructures (Pajares, 1992). Attitudes generally connote a

particular disposition towards a given focus (Choi and Ramsey, 2010), whereas value connotes the worth the individual places on that focus. van der Schaaf et al. (2008, 1693) identify a range of belief clusters about teaching that are '... context related and exist predominantly as tacit knowledge that cannot easily be articulated'. There is some confusion about Pajares' (1992) description of belief clusters in relation to Rokeach's belief system as Pajares (1992, 319) describes it.

> ... [C]lusters of beliefs around a particular object or situation form attitudes that become action agendas. Beliefs within attitudes have connections to one another and to other beliefs in other attitudes, so that a teacher's attitude about a particular educational issue may include beliefs connected to attitudes about the nature of society, the community, race, and even family.

This would appear to suggest that attitudes form an intermediary structure within the belief system between clusters of beliefs and the five levels of beliefs in Rokeach's (1968 in Pajares, 1992) model. In Borg's (2003) model of teacher cognition, beliefs and attitudes are accorded equal status as psychological constructs within the broader model. For the purposes of this research, beliefs and their associated attitudes and values are considered to exist in clusters around a given topic, in this case play in the infant classroom, and to relate both to other belief clusters and to a wider belief system.

2.3.4 Beliefs and Practice

In this highly contested area in which there is little agreement about terminology and concepts, it is noteworthy that there is considerable agreement that teachers' educational beliefs are a significant factor in the practice of teaching.

One question which arises is how teachers' educational beliefs come to have an impact in practice. Some of the ways in which teachers use beliefs in teaching have been described in section 2.2.2. but there are a number of different explanations for the route into practice. One explanation is that teachers' beliefs influence their teaching intentions, and

it is via these intentions that teachers' educational beliefs influence practice (Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2012; van der Schaaf et al., 2008). However, this sequence of beliefs → intentions → teaching behaviours does not account for the inconsistencies which have been found between teachers' beliefs and their actual practice (Borg, 2003; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002; Fang, 1996), and between beliefs and intentions (Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2011). The complexities of the classroom can intervene between teachers' beliefs and intentions and their practice (Fang, 1996), and parental pressure has also been found to be a constraint on teachers (Stipek and Byler, 1997).

Bennett et al. (1997) posit a model of the route of influence from teachers' theories/beliefs through to actual practice. In this model, teachers' educational beliefs go through a series of stages and processes before finally emerging in practice. Teachers' theories influence a teacher's general teaching orientation which is indicative of the teacher's pedagogical priorities. This general teaching orientation is then filtered through a set of mediating factors which Bennett et al. characterise as constraints. The constraints which intervene between general teaching orientation and teaching intentions can emerge at classroom, school, local, and national level. It is only after this first set of constraints have been negotiated that teaching intentions emerge. These teaching intentions can be further constrained by, for example, more interpersonal aspects of teaching such as the challenge of engaging with diverse groups of children (Dunphy, 2009a) and/or the amount of time available (Anderson et al., 2004). What is then observable in the classroom will bear a mediated relationship to an individual teacher's beliefs, and the congruence between the beliefs and the practice will depend, according to this model, on the mediating factors, be they constraining or enabling.

Anderson et al. (2004) have identified four broad categories of constraints on teachers: teachers' intra-personal characteristics; student characteristics; school culture; and

system requirements. In terms of the last of these, Mansour (2009) asserts the importance of the socio-cultural context in which teachers work as influential both in forming teachers' beliefs and in influencing their practice, and laments the lack of attention paid to contextual constraints on teachers. He describes the socio-cultural context for teaching as the interaction of the cultural, political, economic and social structures of a given society with the educational system. These 'frames' are outside the control of the teacher and can have a limiting effect on practice. Meehan (2007) also reports on similar constraints which she characterises as extrinsic factors impacting on the relationship between beliefs and practice. The internal school context can also exert an influence on teachers, favouring practice which is not compatible with teachers' own beliefs on appropriate practice in ECE classrooms (Stipek and Byler, 1997).

McMullen (1999) urges attention to teachers' personal characteristics and traits as these can also impede teachers practicing according to their beliefs. Hall and Higgins (2002) have identified the impact of individual locus of control on ECE teachers' efforts to introduce new practices into the classroom. Brown (2005) explored the importance of teachers' beliefs about self-efficacy in the teaching of maths in the ECE classroom, but her study found a contradiction between the teachers' beliefs about self-efficacy, about maths instruction and maths instruction practices. In a study of ECE teachers' beliefs about appropriate practices in comparison to their school Principals' beliefs, Rusher et al. (1992) found considerable potential for dissonance between the beliefs of policymakers, Principals and teachers. They emphasise the importance of agreement among these key players about the most appropriate educational provision for young children.

However, there are suggestions that mediating factors do not necessarily always have to be characterised as constraints, although there is relatively little reference to enabling mediating factors in the literature. Mansour (2009) identifies circumstances in which the

mediating factors enable teachers' beliefs to progress into practice when the contexts referred to above are compatible with teachers' beliefs. Fang (1996) found evidence of consistency between teachers' beliefs about literacy and their approaches to literacy teaching, indicating that mediating factors – according to Bennett et al.'s (1997) model – enabled consonance between the various stages and processes of the belief-action route. In a study of teachers' beliefs about play (Quance et al., 2008), enabling factors were identified by teachers who were able to implement their beliefs about the value of play. These enabling factors identified were:

- Reformed curriculum;
- Previous experience;
- Colleagues (teachers, support personnel, Principals);
- Philosophy of the school. (Quance et al., 2008, 13)

It should be noted, however, that the enabling factors are the same ones cited as constraints in other circumstances, so it is not these factors per se but the nature of these factors which will determine their role in mediating beliefs into practice. Bullock (2011), in a study of teachers' beliefs about learner self-assessment found that constraints, whether real or imagined, were immaterial and that it was teachers' perceptions that were the crucial contributor to actual practice.

Two issues emerge from the consideration of the role of mediating factors between teachers' beliefs and their practices. First, the degree to which teachers are able to teach in a way which is compatible with their beliefs. Second, the degree to which teachers' beliefs are compatible with the requirements of best practice designated in some external way. Where teachers with beliefs compatible with developmentally appropriate practice

[DAP] meet constraints, this is likely to have the effect of increasing their level of didactic practice in order to assuage the source of the constraints (Quance et al., 2008).

As Kagan (1992) has pointed out, inferring teachers' educational beliefs from observations of practice in the kind of scenarios described above is ineffective. Teachers can do the same thing for very different reasons depending on their experience of the mediating stages and the degree to which these mediating stages constrain or enable the teacher to act on his/her beliefs.

2.3.5 Changing Beliefs

Teachers' beliefs are characterised by resistance to change, particularly those beliefs in which the teachers are especially invested (La Paro et al., 2009b; Lombaerts et al., 2009; Hermans et al., 2008; Ertmer, 2005; Hall and Higgins, 2002). This has implications for educational innovation (Lombaerts et al., 2009; Ertmer, 2005) because '[i]f teachers' beliefs do not match the goals and assumptions of educational innovations, resistance is likely to occur' (Wong et al., 2009, 2). The beliefs that are most difficult to change are held to be those which relate most closely to core beliefs which tend to be those related to the individual's sense of self (Ertmer, 2005; Pajares, 1992). It is difficult to determine from the literature how those most strongly held beliefs can be identified, but it is suggested that knowledge based beliefs are more readily changed than affect based beliefs (Ertmer, 2005). Knowledge based beliefs have been characterised as explicit beliefs and affect based beliefs as implicit (Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2011). This would suggest that different approaches to changing different types of beliefs would be required. This is complicated by the lack of clarity, discussed in section 2.3.1, in conceptual differentiation between beliefs and knowledge. The position adopted here is that new information or knowledge, once encountered, is either accepted or rejected on

the basis of existing belief systems and clusters; if accepted, it is then filtered to become part of the individual's idiosyncratic personal pedagogy (Mansour, 2009).

While acknowledging that belief change is intricate and not easily achieved, this is not to say that it is not possible in certain situations. Nespor (1987) argued that implicit beliefs are not subject to the reasonableness of argument and that when change happens it will be akin to a conversion or a gestalt shift. Pajares (1992) describes a model of assimilation and accommodation of new beliefs, similar to Piagetian models of learning, and suggests that assimilation is more usual than accommodation; i.e. new information is assimilated into existing beliefs with beliefs evolving rather than changing. Accommodation is a last resort of a belief system as beliefs resist new knowledge that challenges existing beliefs to such an extent that the new knowledge is not 'assimilable'. This explanation is consistent with the understanding of the relationship between belief and knowledge outlined above.

The question then arises of how to change implicit beliefs when this is required in pursuit of educational innovation. In a study of the evolution of beliefs about mathematics among a small group of pre-kindergarten teachers, Herron (2010) noted that the evolutionary process was facilitated by the teachers' recognition that they needed to change their approach and their practice. Bennett et al. (1997) also observed the evolution both in beliefs and practice among the group of teachers participating in their study. This change was an unintended outcome of the research process. One aspect of the research method used was to bring the teachers together to discuss their practice, and these gatherings led to the teachers reflecting on their practice, which in turn led to changes in both beliefs and practice. This would suggest that an alternative exists to Nespor's (1987) 'conversion' or 'gestalt shift' model of change in beliefs. Making the implicit explicit through reflection is posited as one route to changing teachers' beliefs

(Hermans et al., 2008; Ertmer, 2005; Brownlee et al., 2001; Bennett et al., 1997) but there are others. Studies of pre-service teachers have indicated that teacher education courses can change students' beliefs, either through engagement with the course material and learning context (Choi and Ramsey, 2010) or through experience in the field (La Paro et al., 2009b; Ertmer, 2005).

It has also been suggested that, if teachers can be persuaded to introduce new practices into existing practice, that this can also lead to changes in beliefs (Mansour, 2009; Ertmer, 2005; Hall and Higgins, 2002). In a project designed to investigate how technology could be incorporated into ECE classrooms, Hall and Higgins (2002) found that supporting changes in practice by identifying effective and appropriate activities with computers that are consistent with teachers' existing beliefs about teaching and learning will help change teachers' attitudes towards ICT, encouraging them to use new approaches. Ertmer (2005, 32) questions the equation in which changes in beliefs precede changes in practice and suggests a three pronged approach to change:

- Personal experiences;
- Vicarious experiences;
- Socio-cultural influences.

Acknowledging the risk involved for teachers in changing their beliefs in a given domain, Ertmer (2005) suggests that teachers require an enhanced sense of self-efficacy in terms of personal experience of the innovative practice. In terms of technology, for example, this could mean offering teachers opportunities to use technology for more efficient completion of existing routine and commonplace tasks. From these early personal experiences in which the innovative practice is carefully aligned with existing practice, additional innovation can develop incrementally. Ertmer (2005) suggests that

these personal experiences will need to be enhanced through opportunities for reflection on the change.

What Ertmer (2005) terms vicarious experience refers to teachers' opportunities for observing other teachers engaging in the innovative practice in question. Vicarious experience carries both new information and motivation for the observer. She suggests that logistical difficulties in facilitating teachers to observe other teachers can be addressed through video, online footage or other electronic means. Socio-cultural influences, in Ertmer's (2005) model, can be characterised as differing levels of mediating factors between beliefs and practice, similar to Bennett et al.'s (1997) position. Ertmer (2005) recommends that teachers engage with others in professional learning communities as a supportive context for change.

Educational innovation is dependent on teachers and their beliefs (Hermans et al., 2009, 81). 'It is only when the micro level [the individual's view of themselves, their practice and technology] issues are taken into account that effective change is likely to take place' (Hall and Higgins, 2002, 317, parentheses added). The complexity of teachers' beliefs require a range of approaches to change incorporating attention both to beliefs themselves through reflection and professional engagement, and to practice through sensitive support for the introduction of new practice in a way that enhances teachers' self-confidence.

2.4 Definitions of Beliefs

Having explored the nature and significance of the concept of beliefs, particularly as they pertain to teachers, it is timely to attempt to offer a working definition of the concept. However, defining what is meant by the term 'beliefs' continues to prove very difficult (Einarsdottir, 2003; Vartuli, 1999), or perhaps more accurately, reaching agreement on a

single consistent definition continues to prove difficult (Fives and Buehl, 2012). It is currently no easier to identify a definition of beliefs which is generally agreed upon than to find agreement about terminology or conceptualisations of 'belief', as discussed in the previous section (Fives and Buehl, 2012). There are two types of definition extant in the literature on teachers' beliefs. The first type is an overarching definition of teachers' educational beliefs and the second type refers to definitions which are provided for particular studies.

2.4.1 Overarching Definitions of Teachers' Educational Beliefs

Kagan (1992, 65/66) offers the following definition: 'Teacher belief is ... generally defined as pre- or inservice teachers' implicit assumptions about students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught'. Implicit assumptions can be understood within Nespor's (1987) framework of belief characteristics. As discussed in Section 2.3.1, Nespor (1987) proposed that individual beliefs have at least four characteristics, and that collections of beliefs (belief systems) have at least two additional characteristics. These characteristics offer an expanded understanding of what 'assumptions' could mean in the context of beliefs. 'Existential presumption' describes how contingent, fluid characteristics of a situation, object or person become resolved into firm, fixed understandings – immutable assumptions. 'Alternativity' refers to an individual's conviction that there is an ideal alternative to current reality and, it could be argued, the assumption that this ideal is achievable even though the individual has never actually experienced it. The 'affective and evaluative aspects' of beliefs, the feelings teachers have about or associate with aspects of their work, can help clarify assumptions teachers might demonstrate; for example, a teacher who loves a particular subject or activity might assume that the pupils will love it too and perhaps find it difficult to empathise with those who don't. Finally, Nespor (1987) concludes that beliefs are grounded in

particular episodes or events in the individual's life – 'episodic storage' – which powerfully colour subsequent memories and Nespor (1987, 320) connects this to '... the fact that teachers learn a lot about teaching through their experiences as students ...', thus influencing assumptions about teaching. The 'assumptions' to which Kagan (1992) refers can be understood within Nespor's (1987) framework as solidified contingencies and idealised alternatives which are emotionally invested and given legitimacy through personal experience.

The second half of the definition indicates the range of contexts about which teachers hold educational beliefs, echoing Pajares' (1992) injunction that conceptual precision in the study of teachers' beliefs is enhanced when the phrase 'educational beliefs about' is applied. Kagan's (1992) categorisation of these contexts could be seen, perhaps, as incomplete. If we consider Pajares (1992) inventory of the range of teacher beliefs about the teacher *qua* teacher, such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-concept and locus of control, it may be that Kagan's (1992) definition needs another 'about' category. Such a category is a less concrete entity, perhaps, than actual students or physical classrooms, and more akin to the subjective experience of 'learning'. Kagan (1992) indeed focuses on teachers' self-esteem (as well as content-specific beliefs) as one of the key variables of teachers' beliefs. These categories of beliefs refer to what could be considered as teachers' beliefs about themselves as teachers. A teacher's educational beliefs are part of that individual's belief system(s) about everything (Pajares, 1992) and about themselves as a person. Beliefs about oneself as a teacher do not necessarily coincide with beliefs about oneself as a person, as the individual's belief system can accommodate inconsistencies (Rokeach, 1968 in Pajares, 1992). Therefore a definition of teachers' beliefs needs a reference point to the personal experience of being a teacher, of teaching. It might then be more inclusive of the full range of teachers' educational beliefs to

rephrase Kagan's (1992) definition as follows: teacher educational belief is generally defined as pre- or in-service teachers' implicit assumptions about teaching, students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught.

While the majority of studies of teachers' beliefs about various aspects of ECE do not provide any definition of beliefs (see Table 2.1), Kagan's (1992) definition has been adapted elsewhere in the literature. Abu-Jaber et al. (2010, 65) expanded Kagan's definition as follows: 'Teachers' beliefs are implicit assumptions about students, learning, classrooms, teaching strategies, curriculum, pedagogy and educational programs'. They offer no explanation for the expanded categories. van der Schaaf et al. (2008) noted that current definitions of beliefs focus on teachers' assumptions and they maintain this focus. They cite Artzt and Armour-Thomas' (1998) definition of teachers' beliefs as '... an integrated system of personalized assumptions about the nature of a subject, its teaching and learning' (van der Schaaf et al., 2008, 1692). This is a narrow definition of educational beliefs as it limits the focus to subject areas as opposed to a broader range of educational categories. However, it does, yet again, emphasise beliefs as 'assumptions'.

La Paro et al. (2009b, 22) proffer the following: 'A belief can be defined as a conviction of truth of a proposition without its verification. That is, beliefs are generally considered to be subjective mental interpretations based on perceptions, reasoning or communication'. This particular definition does not account for the implicit or tacit quality of beliefs that has been noted earlier (Ertmer, 2005; Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992). Rokeach (1968 in Roberts-Walter, 2007, 27; Pajares, 1992, 314) defines beliefs as 'any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase, 'I believe that ...''. This particular definition is

incompatible with the view that teachers' beliefs cannot be inferred from what teachers' do because teachers do similar things for very different reasons (Kagan, 1992).

Choi and Ramsey's (2010, 314) definition follows the 'about' model but rather than assumptions, they use the term 'repertoire of general knowledge'. This definition is quite general in that it is not about educational beliefs but life beliefs that focus on 'objects, people, events and their characteristic relationships' (Choi and Ramsey, 2010, 314). Dunphy (2009a, 7) draws on Einarsdottir's (2003) review of literature on ECE teachers beliefs for the following definition: '... [A] broad definition of beliefs is that of 'tacit, often unconsciously held attitudes teachers have about schooling, teaching, learning, students, classrooms and the academic material to be taught'. The categories about which teachers hold beliefs are similar to Kagan's (1992), and the definition carries the same characteristic of implicitness. However, as discussed earlier in connection with belief clusters (see section 2.3.3), attitudes actually derive from beliefs and it is perhaps not entirely precise to use the term 'attitudes' as a synonym for 'belief', as Dunphy (2009a) does. An attitude implies a disposition towards a particular topic, whereas an assumption connotes the 'taken for granted' quality of belief.

Fives and Buehl (2012, 473) challenge what they refer to as the 'common perspective' that teachers' beliefs are implicit. Drawing particularly on Dewey (1933/1986), they argue that beliefs must have a conscious underpinning in order to be maintained. They further argue that research methods which rely on teachers verbally expressing their beliefs may result in those beliefs being made explicit. The literature on changing beliefs also suggests that teachers can be aware of beliefs on the basis of previous reflection or because of experience of changed practices, either their own or, vicariously, colleagues' changed practices (Ertmer, 2005). Bennett et al.'s (1997) description of the unintended effects of their research into teachers' thinking, in which making that thinking explicit

led to changed perspectives, suggests that Fives and Buehl's (2012) argument has currency. They conclude that '[a]ttempts to access teachers' implicit beliefs may well bring these conceptions into the explicit realm, thereby changing the nature of the beliefs under examination' (Fives and Buehl, 2012, 474). They refer to teachers stating, espousing, and/or articulating beliefs of which they are aware.

For this reason, the following expanded version of Kagan's (1992) definition will be used to frame this study: teacher educational belief is generally defined as pre- or in-service teachers' implicit assumptions and/or explicit statements about teaching, students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught.

However, as evidenced by efforts to define the concept, any definition of teachers' educational beliefs will be highly contingent and subject to qualification. The relationship between implicit assumptions and explicit statements is likely to be complex and shifting, with implications for the collection and analysis of data (Fives and Buehl, 2012; Einarsdottir, 2003). However, this working definition means that the research can take cognisance of both implicit and explicit beliefs as they are identified in the data, and the definition has the benefit of being inclusive.

2.4.2 Study Specific Definitions

Table 2.1 provides an overview of a range of studies of teachers' beliefs about a variety of topics in ECE.

Table 2.1 Terms and definitions used in research on ECE teachers' beliefs

Source	Terms used	Definition
Jung and Jin, 2014a	Perceptions, belief, concepts, views,	No definition provided.
Jung and Jin, 2014b	Perceptions	No definition provided.
Riojas-Cortez et al., 2013	Beliefs, think about, ideology, implicit theories, perception, epistemological paradigms, thinking.	No definition provided.
Sherwood and Reifel, 2013	Beliefs, perspectives, vision, belief systems, thinking, views.	No definition provided.

Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2012	Beliefs, implicit theories, working philosophies, theories of practice, assumptions.	'Beliefs can be defined as 'the implicitly held assumptions about people and events that individuals bring to a particular knowledge domain' (Kagan, 1992, p.75)' 'For the purpose of this study, the term 'beliefs' was operationally defined to refer to the self-reported working philosophies or theories of practice held by the students whom the researchers examined'. (p. 2)
Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2011	Beliefs, implicit theories, personal constructs, assumptions, explicit theories.	'[Beliefs] are defined as personal constructs that can provide an understanding of a teacher's practice ... Also, according to Kagan (1992), teachers' beliefs are their assumptions about their students, classrooms and academic materials to be taught'. (p. 1) 'For the purpose of this study, the term 'beliefs' was operationally defined to refer to the self-reported working philosophies or theories of practice held by the students whom the researchers examined'. (p. 2)
Li and Rao, 2011	Beliefs, values, understanding.	No definition provided.
Kim and Kemple, 2011	Beliefs.	No definition provided.
Abu-Jaber et al., 2010	Beliefs, belief systems, cognitive constructs, values, cognitive styles, perceptions, implicit theories.	'Teachers' beliefs are implicit assumptions about students, learning, classrooms, teaching strategies, curriculum, pedagogy and educational programs'. (p.65)
Logue and Harvey, 2010	Views, attitudes, perceptions.	No definition provided.
van der Aalsvoort et al., 2010	Attitudes, cognitive knowledge base, beliefs, reflections, subjective theories, thinking, tacit knowledge, mental schemata.	'Teachers' beliefs are derived from tacit knowledge that intermingles with disciplinary knowledge provided by the teacher-education curriculum'. (p. 350)
Sherwood and Reifel, 2010	Beliefs.	No definition provided.
Han and Neuharth-Pritchett, 2010	Beliefs.	No definition provided.
Herron, 2010	Beliefs, perceptions.	No definition provided.
Choi and Ramsey, 2010	Beliefs, attitudes, practical knowledge.	'Teachers' beliefs are defined as a repertoire of general knowledge of objects, people,

		events and their characteristic relationships'. (p. 314)
Wong et al., 2009	Beliefs, conceptions, system of beliefs, notions, cognition, belief set.	No definition provided.
Lynch, 2009	Beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, priorities.	No definition provided.
Lara-Cinismo et al., 2009	Beliefs, belief systems.	No definition provided.
Dunphy, 2009a	Attitude, opinions, belief, thinking, theories, values.	'... a broad definition of beliefs is that of 'tacit, often unconsciously held attitudes teachers have about schooling, teaching, learning, students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught (Einarsdottir, 2003, 115-6)'. (p. 7)
La Paro et al., 2009b	Beliefs, belief systems, belief structures.	'A belief can be defined as a conviction of truth of a proposition without its verification'. (p. 22)
Hsu-Smith, 2009	Perceptions, beliefs, theories.	'Beliefs include knowledge ..., attitudes ..., perceptions ..., values, images ..., expectations ..., preconceptions ..., teachers' personal history-based lay theories ..., and implicit theories'. (p. 39)
Moon and Reifel, 2008	Thinking, beliefs, practical knowledge, implicit theories, understanding, assumptions, images, values, conceptions.	No definition provided.
Quance et al., 2008	Beliefs, belief systems.	No definition provided.
Lara-Cinismo et al., 2008	Belief systems, beliefs, conceive of.	No definition provided.
Lee and Ginsburg, 2007a	Beliefs.	No definition provided.
Meehan, 2007	Beliefs, implicit theories, knowledge in action.	'Beliefs are a form of knowledge both personal and professional'. (p. 22)
Lim and Torr, 2007	Beliefs, theory of practice, tacit forms of knowledge.	No definition provided.
Lee, 2006	Beliefs, think.	No definition provided.
Morgan and Kennewell, 2006	Views, perceptions, personal philosophy.	No definition provided.
Mohamad, 2006	Beliefs, informal theories, thinking, conceptualise, frames of reference, theory, assumptions.	No definition provided.
McMullen et al., 2006	Beliefs, philosophies.	No definition provided.
Sharpe et al., 2005	Beliefs, values, attitudes.	No definition provided.
Hedges and Cullen, 2005	Professional knowledge, beliefs.	No definition provided.
Robson and Hargreaves, 2005	Perceptions, believe.	No definition provided.
Brown, 2005	Implicit beliefs, conceptions, beliefs,	No definition provided.

	views, preferences, attitudes, judgements, ideology, dispositions, implicit and explicit theories, perspectives, rules of understanding.	
Foote et al., 2004	Beliefs, knowledge.	No definition provided.
Izumi-Taylor et al., 2004	Perspectives, understandings, concepts, think.	No definition provided.
Sanagavarapu and Wong, 2004	Views.	No definition provided.
Miller and Smith, 2004	Beliefs, views.	No definition provided.
Phillips, 2004	Beliefs, implicit theories, attitudes, principles.	'For this study, beliefs were understood to mean 'an individual's judgement of the truth or falsity of a proposition that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say and do'. (Pajares, 1992, p.316)'. (p. 42)
Hall and Higgins, 2002	Beliefs, thinking, pedagogical beliefs.	No definition provided.
Brett et al., 2002	Beliefs, views.	No definition provided.
Wood and Bennett, 2001	Theories, thought processes.	No definition provided.
Smith and Croom, 2000	Implicit theories, attitudes, values.	No definition provided.
Piotrkowski et al., 2000	Beliefs, views.	No definition provided.
Keating et al., 2000	Values , attitudes, preferences, beliefs.	No definition provided.

As can be seen in Table 2.1 above, relatively few studies in the field of ECE provide specific definitions of beliefs within which to frame the research. Of the 46 representative studies referenced, 32 do not provide a definition of beliefs. In general, these studies are focused on the topic about which beliefs are held; for example, beliefs about epistemology (Wong et al., 2009); beliefs about mathematics (Herron, 2010; Brown, 2005); beliefs about appropriate practices (Han and Neuharth-Pritchett, 2010; Lara-Cinismo et al., 2009); beliefs about ICT in ECE (Hall and Higgins, 2002); the relationship between beliefs about teaching and observed classroom practices (McMullen et al., 2006); beliefs about literacy (Li and Rao, 2011; Lim and Torr, 2007); beliefs about music (Kim and Kemple, 2011). These studies predominantly focus on establishing a

rationale for the study by stressing the importance of teachers' beliefs rather than on defining beliefs (e.g., Quance et al., 2008; Lee and Ginsburg, 2007a, 2007b; Hedges and Cullen, 2005; Smith and Croom, 2000).

Other studies do not address beliefs as a separate issue but focus on the topic about which beliefs are held (e.g., Herron, 2010; Izumi -Taylor et al., 2004; Sanagavarapu and Wong, 2004). As a general statement about the studies which do not seek to define beliefs, the de facto definition appears to be that beliefs equate to the answers the participants give in response to the questions asked about a particular topic. This, of course, is consistent with the definition given by Rokeach (1968 in Roberts-Walter, 2007, 27; Pajares, 1992, 314) cited in Section 2.4.1, that a belief is any statement that can be preceded by the phrase 'I believe that …'. Bypassing definitions, but highlighting the importance of beliefs is also consistent with Borg's (2003) position that trying to disentangle the concept of belief is not necessarily a productive endeavour. This is particularly so when the concept itself is not the focus but rather the context in which particular aspects of practice are being considered. Given that the great majority of studies choose not to get entangled in the messy process of resolving the terminological, conceptual and definitional confusion about beliefs, this appears to be the dominant position. There are, however, a number of studies which provide study specific definitions and these will now be considered.

Sakellariou and Rentzou (2012; 2011) offer overarching definitions of teachers' beliefs based on Kagan's (1992) definition, but take into account Pajares' (1992) recommendation that the specific beliefs in focus should be operationalised as specifically as possible. For the purpose of both studies, this was defined as follows: 'For the purpose of this study, the term 'beliefs' was operationally defined to refer to the self-reported working philosophies or theories of practice held by the students whom the

researchers examined' (Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2012, 123/4). Both studies focused on beliefs (working philosophies or theories of practice) of pre-service teachers, about what is termed developmentally appropriate practice [DAP], and they acknowledge both implicit and explicit dimensions to beliefs. Phillips (2004) similarly studied the beliefs of ECE personnel about DAP but worked from quite a different definition which is drawn from Pajares (1992): 'For this study, beliefs were understood to mean 'an individual's judgement of the truth or falsity of a proposition that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say and do'' (Phillips, 2004, 42).

Outside of the literature on beliefs in ECE, Mansour (2009, 26) provided the following definition:

> ... the concept of belief is used to characterize a teacher's idiosyncratic unity of thought about objects, people, events and their characteristic relationships that affect his/her planning and interactive thoughts and decisions.

Mansour acknowledges that teachers' beliefs are personalised to the point of idiosyncrasy, and that an aspect of the idiosyncrasy is that teachers can have contradictory beliefs. The individual, however, is able to reconcile these contradiction in a 'unity of thought' unique to that individual. The latter half of the definition is less clear than Kagan's about the specific areas about which teachers will have educational beliefs (Pajares, 1992). To reiterate, based on an extensive review of the relevant literature, the definition of beliefs which will best serve the orientation of this particular research study is: teacher educational belief is generally defined as pre- or in-service teachers' implicit assumptions and/or explicit statements about teaching, students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught.

2.5 ECE Teachers' Educational Beliefs and Beliefs about Play

Einarsdottir (2003, 121) stated that '... [I]t has been difficult to identify a common core of educational beliefs among early childhood teachers'. She accounts for this difficulty as due to the diversity in the field of ECE, both in terms of settings and in the age range of children from birth to eight years. Before focusing on studies of teachers beliefs about play, some aspects of the diverse range of literature on ECE teachers' beliefs will be reported. Table 2.2 provides an introductory categorisation and overview of the literature which is explored in section 2.5.1.

Table 2.2 ECE teachers' beliefs by category

Beliefs about Specific Learning Domains			
Literacy	*Specific focus*	*Summary of findings*	*Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice*
Li and Rao (2011)	Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs about multiple literacies by geographical location (questionnaire, video footage from classrooms).	Limited understanding of the concept of 'multiple literacies' among teachers irrespective of geographical location.	No link found between teachers' beliefs and practices. The gap is attributed to constraints including lack of training and resources. Inconsistent
Lynch, (2009)	Beliefs about print literacy development (interviews).	Teachers believed their own knowledge about the 'best way' was inadequate.	While uncertain about their own expertise and unsure if their practice constituted 'best practice', the teachers believed their practice benefitted the children. Inconclusive
Lim and Torr (2007)	Beliefs about literacy teaching in multilingual contexts, including ECE teachers freedom to act on those beliefs in the classroom (survey, including self-reported practices).	The findings indicate that almost all teachers viewed their primary goal as fostering children's ability to communicate and express themselves. They believed in using an eclectic approach rather than focusing on one or other 'method'.	The majority of respondents felt they could put their beliefs into practice and that their beliefs and practices were consistent. Inconclusive
Foote et al. (2004)	The impact of ECE teachers' beliefs about literacy on the literacy experiences of children in different ECE settings from a New Zealand perspective (interviews, child observations)	Teachers in all settings held similar beliefs about appropriate literacy practices but held diverse beliefs about appropriate pedagogical approaches.	Evidence of both appropriate practices consistent with teachers' stated beliefs and more didactic practices. Authors suggest that teachers' unconscious beliefs are responsible for the inappropriate didactic practices, but this is speculation. Inconclusive
Miller and Smith (2004)	The impact of ECE teacers' beliefs about the literacy curriculum on	Teachers' beliefs influenced by previous	In some instances, teachers incorporated practices that were inconsistent with their beliefs alongside practices they

	children's literacy experiences in a range of educational settings (interviews, child observations).	experience, but curriculum pressure and parental expectations exert influence for more formal practices than teachers believe to be appropriate.	believed to be appropriate. There was no overall either/or. Inconclusive
Mathematics	*Specific focus*	*Summary of findings*	*Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice*
Herron (2010)	Evolution of mathematical beliefs among kindergarten teachers implementing a new maths curriculum (interviews, classroom observations)	Changes occurred in the teachers' beliefs following the experience of implementing a research based, per-K maths programme. The three participating teachers were volunteers, and therefore arguably open to change.	Not addressed.
Dunphy (2009a)	Primary teachers' attitudes towards the challenges of teaching of maths in infant classes, and the aspects of maths pedagogy they would like to develop (survey).	Questionnaire identified inconsistencies between stated beliefs, and a range of constraints that teachers' reported had a negative impact on their use of appropriate pedagogical practices.	Inconsistencies within stated beliefs and between beliefs and practice. However, as these are self-reported, the results are inconclusive. Inconclusive
Lee and Ginsburg (2007a)	ECE teachers' beliefs about the teaching of mathematics to four-year-old children from low and middle SES family backgrounds (interviews).	Some common beliefs emerged, but fundamentally different beliefs emerged about pedagogical approach to maths in ECE pedagogy.	Not addressed.
Lee and Ginsburg (2007b)	ECE teachers' beliefs about appropriate early literacy and mathematics practices with children from different SES backgrounds (interviews).	The teacher participants held very different views on ECE pedagogy depending on the SES background of the children they were teaching.	Not addressed.
Brown (2005)	ECE teachers' sense of self -efficacy,	Teachers reported strong	No relationship between beliefs and observed practice.

	their beliefs about the importance of mathematics, and the impact of both on their mathematics pedagogy (questionnaires, observations in a number of classrooms).	self-efficacy beliefs but no consensus on beliefs about mathematics pedagogy.	Inconsistent
Religious Education	***Specific focus***	***Summary of findings***	***Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice***
Meehan (2007)	ECE teachers' beliefs and practice in religious education in Catholic schools in an Australian context (questionnaire, interviews, classroom observation).	The participant teachers' practice was generally consistent with their beliefs, but the study identified a range of factors which both constrain and support practice.	Consistent
Music	***Specific focus***	***Summary of findings***	***Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice***
Kim and Kemple (2011)	Pre-service ECE teachers' beliefs about the importance of music, and the factors which influence those beliefs (questionnaire, small number of interviews).	More knowledge about music led to stronger beliefs about its importance in ECE.	Not addressed.
Sharpe et al. (2005)	ECE practitioners beliefs about the role of music and movement in ECE pedagogy, and their self-reported music and movement practices (questionnaire)	All settings report providing some form of music and movement opportunities for children, but wide variety in provision emerged. Practitioners report valuing music and movement for a variety of reasons, but also report a variety of constraints on practice.	Constraints of various types, including lack of training, impede the provision of music and movement in some settings. Inconsistent
Beliefs about Children's Learning and Development			

School Readiness	*Specific focus*	*Summary of findings*	*Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice*
Lara-Cinismo et al. (2008)	ECE teachers' beliefs about what children need prior to entering kindergarten, and the differences in beliefs which emerge across programme types (focus group interviews).	Belief systems about school readiness encompass child, home and teacher; child's readiness refers to social, cognitive, physical and emotional characteristics.	Not addressed
Piotrkowski et al. (2000)	Comparative study of ECE teachers' (pre-school and kindergarten) and parents' beliefs about school readiness in disadvantaged area (questionnaire).	Parents held remarkably similar beliefs, regardless of ethnicity or education. Striking diversity in the expectations of preschool and kindergarten teachers.	Not addressed
Children's Thinking	*Specific focus*	*Summary of findings*	*Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice*
Robson and Hargreaves (2005)	Perceptions and practices of ECE teachers in relation to 3-5 year old children's development of thinking skills (interviews, child observations).	'Thinking' understood primarily as a problem solving activity Practitioners believed supporting children's thinking to be an important part of their role, but this was found to be more implicit than explicit in their planning. However, the relationship between beliefs and practice is not fully drawn out as the observations of the children are used to illustrate the interview data, rather than to compare beliefs and practice.	Inconclusive

Children's Self-Concept	*Specific focus*	*Summary of findings*	*Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice*
Smith and Croom (2000)	The relationship between children's multidimensional self-concept and teachers' beliefs about developmentally appropriate practice [DAP] (questionnaire).	Teachers' beliefs about DAP had no predictive relationship with girls' self-concept. Stronger beliefs in traditional methodologies related to specific aspects of boys' self-concept.	Not addressed
Beliefs about Developmentally Appropriate Practice [DAP]			
Pre-service Teachers' Beliefs about DAP	*Specific focus*	*Summary of findings*	*Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice*
Sakellariou and Rentzou (2012)	Comparing Greek pre-service kindergarten teachers' beliefs and pedagogical intentions related to child/adult interactions (questionnaire).	Students expressed strong beliefs in developmentally appropriate interaction with children, but do not believe in getting involved in play. The students' beliefs did not predict their intentions in relation to pedagogical interactions.	Inconsistent
Sakellariou and Rentzou (2011)	Comparing Cypriot pre-service kindergarten teachers' beliefs and self-reported practices related to developmentally appropriate practice [DAP] (questionnaire).	While the participants held beliefs that could be characterised as both developmentally appropriate and inappropriate, developmentally appropriate beliefs were stronger. While the participants reported implementing DAP, scores were stronger for beliefs than practices.	Qualified consistency

La Paro et al. (2009b)	Assessing the beliefs of pre-service ECE teachers' beliefs about children, discipline and teaching practices in comparison to the beliefs of the teacher educators involved in the programme (questionnaire)	The students' beliefs were more aligned with the teacher educators' beliefs by the end of the degree programme.	Not addressed
Teachers' Beliefs about DAP	***Specific focus***	***Summary of findings***	***Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice***
Abu-Jaber et al. (2010)	Beliefs of Jordanian kindergarten teacher about DAP (questionnaire).	While the teachers showed strong beliefs in DAP on most domains, nonetheless beliefs consistent with more didactic practices also emerged.	Not addressed
Han and Neuharth-Pritchett (2010)	The relationship between ECE teachers' qualification levels and their beliefs about developmentally appropriate/inappropriate practice (questionnaire)	Higher qualifications more associated with developmentally appropriate beliefs, but insufficiently so to be the defining variable.	Not addressed
Lara-Cinismo et al. (2009)	ECE teachers' beliefs about the optimum way to work with pre-school children in different setting types preparing to enter kindergarten (focus group interviews).	Practitioners in all setting types held similar beliefs about the main dimensions of optimum practice, but considerable variation emerged across all setting types on the specific factors constituting those dimensions.	Not addressed
Lee (2006)	ECE teachers' beliefs about appropriate or ideal preschool pedagogy and the extent to which these beliefs are shared among the participants (responses to film footage stimulus).	Shared patterns emerged which crossed diverse teaching backgrounds, especially in terms of preschool being a fun experience for children and a resistance to an emphasis on 'academics'	Not addressed

		within the preschool.	
McMullen et al. (2006)	Comparison of ECE teachers' self-reported beliefs and documentable practice in terms of DAP or 'traditional' approaches (questionnaire, classroom observations)	General consistency between practice and beliefs (either DAP or traditional)	Consistent
Phillips (2004)	ECE teachers' beliefs about appropriate practice in ECE classrooms, and the relationship between those beliefs and the practice observed in their classrooms (interviews, classroom observations)	While the teahcers' beliefs were consistent with descriptions of DAP, those beliefs had less impact on practice than various constraints at school, parental and policy level.	Inconsistent
McMullen (1999)	The characteristic of teachers who express beliefs in DAP and consistently put these beliefs into practice, despite experiencing the same constraints that other teachers cite as constraining their practice (questionnaire, classroom observations).	Preschool teachers were found to hold stronger DAP beliefs and to be more likely to implement them than primary school teachers. Holding DAP beliefs is the strongest predictor of implementing DAP in the classroom, followed by internal locus of control, personal teaching efficacy and ECE training.	Consistent
Vartuli (1999)	Teachers' educational beliefs and the impact of those beliefs on practice, and changes in both beliefs and practice with rising grade levels (questionnaires, classroom observations).	While there was consistency between observed practices and expressed beliefs, beliefs were considerably more aligned with DAP than was practice. As grade level increased, the teachers' beliefs and observed practice became less aligned with DAP.	Consistency

Beliefs about Teachers' Professional Characteristics			
Subject Knowledge	*Specific focus*	*Summary of findings*	*Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice*
Hedges and Cullen (2005)	ECE teachers, parents' and children's beliefs about specific areas of teacher knowledge, illustrated with observed practices (interviews, diaries, field notes, curriculum documentation).	Subject content knowledge was held to be important by all groups involved, but was underemphasised by teachers in the informal interactions which were the main type of interaction observed. The authors are at pains to point out that the findings relate only to the small group involved in the research.	Inconsistent
ICT Competency	*Specific focus*	*Summary of findings*	*Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice*
Hall and Higgins (2002)	The impact of ECE teachers' beliefs about computer/technology use in the classroom and how ECE teachers' can be supported to incorporate ICT in their practice (survey, collaborative action research).	ECE teachers' beliefs about ICT are likely to be consistent with their overall educational beliefs. They may lack confidence in their own skills and consequently not value ICT's potential as a learning and teaching tool. Research suggests that if activities can be introduced which the teachers consider appropriate, beliefs can subsequently be changed. Change must occur at the micro-level if it is to be	Consistent

		effective.	
Progression and Continuity in Teaching and Learning	***Specific focus***	***Summary of findings***	***Consistency/inconsistency between beliefs and practice***
Wood and Bennett (2001)	ECE teachers' understanding of progression and continuity in children's learning, and how these concepts are interpreted in terms of national curriculum policy (teachers' narrative accounts, interviews, classroom observations, discussions with children, group interviews with participating teachers).	The teachers' theories of progression and continuity are consistent with their overall theories of how children learn. While these theories have an impact on practice, they are mediated by the national curriculum policy framework. The teachers respond to the constraints in a number of ways ranging from resistance to adaptation.	Variation between teachers so inconclusive.
Consistency between Beliefs and Practice (Constraints, etc.)			
Wilcox-Herzog (2002)	Whether there is a link between ECE teachers' beliefs about DAP and their actual practice (questionnaire, videotaped observations).	No link was found between beliefs and practice. One possible explanation may be inconsistent definitions of what constitutes DAP. Other mediating factors are also suggested.	Inconsistent
Stipek and Byler (1997)	ECE and First Grade teachers beliefs' about a range of pedagogical and policy issues, and their classroom practices (questionnaire, classroom obervations)	The instrument was designed to align the teachers' beliefs either with DAP or a traditional approach to practice, rather than an inductive approach to establishing the nature of the teachers' beliefs. The teachers'	For pre-school and kindergarten teachers, their beliefs were consistent with practice, but less so for First Grade Teachers. Several constraints, mainly parental expectations were cited. Inconclusive

		beliefs were quite evenly split between 'basic skills' and DAP orientations.	
Rusher et al. (1992)	Differences in beliefs about child development, appropriate curriculum and teaching strategies between ECE teachers and their Principals (survey).	The teachers and Principals generally agreed on child-centred practices, but differences emerged between male Principals' beliefs and those of the teachers.	Not addressed

2.5.1 ECE Teachers' Educational Beliefs

A range of research literature on ECE teachers' educational beliefs was identified through a variety of search methods. These included using the 'cited by' function in Google Scholar and a review of the bibliography of each item of literature as it was identified in 'snowball' fashion (Lillard et al., 2012). The references chosen have been limited to those focused on ECE teachers working with children in the four to eight year age group, as this is the age group of children in infant classes in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland [RoI]. Because of the terminological uncertainty discussed earlier, the search was limited to literature which specifically used the term 'beliefs'. Exceptions to this rule are Wood and Bennett (2001) as it draws on similar understandings as Bennett et al. (1997) which is relevant to this study, and Dunphy (2009a) which is the only study of the Irish infant class context which includes an acknowledgement of the importance of teachers' beliefs. In addition, only literature associated specifically with ECE practitioners was included in this section.

Research on ECE educators' beliefs is focused on a number of areas which can be categorised as follows.

- Domain specific beliefs such as literacy (Li and Rao, 2011; Lynch, 2009; Lim and Torr, 2007; Miller and Smith, 2004; Foote et al., 2004), mathematics (Herron, 2010; Dunphy, 2009a; Lee and Ginsburg, 2007a, 2007b; Brown, 2005), religious education (Meehan, 2007), music (Kim and Kemple, 2011; Sharpe et al., 2005).

- Children's learning and development issues such as school readiness (Lara-Cinismo et al., 2008; Piotrkowski et al., 2000), children's thinking (Robson and Hargreaves, 2005) and children's self-concept (Smith and Croom, 2000).

- Appropriate practices in ECE (Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2012, 2011; Abu-Jaber et al., 2010; Han and Neuharth-Pritchett, 2010; La Paro et al., 2009a; Lee and Ginsburg, 2007a, 2007b; Lee, 2006; McMullen et al., 2006; Lara-Cinismo et al., 2009; Phillips, 2004).

- Teachers professional characteristics such as subject knowledge (Hedges and Cullen, 2005), self-efficacy (Brown, 2005), ICT competency (Hall and Higgins, 2002), and understanding of progression and continuity in learning (Wood and Bennett, 2001).

A review of this selection of literature reinforces Einarsdottir's (2003) comment about the difficulty of identifying any core concepts of teachers' beliefs. There is no consistent definition of what is meant by beliefs and this range of literature is subject to the same confusion which Borg (2003) noted earlier in relation to the literature on language teachers' beliefs. In addition, the range of categories and sub-categories listed above is also criss-crossed with a myriad of methodological and intermediary issues which render the drawing of any conclusions problematic.

For example, La Paro et al. (2009b) assessed the beliefs of pre-service ECE teachers as did Sakellariou and Rentzou (2012). However, La Paro et al. (2009b) focused on beliefs about children, discipline and teaching practices of the students, which Sakellariou and Rentzou (2012) investigated teaching intentions among their participants. La Paro et al. (2009b) used Q-sort methodology whereas Sakellariou and Rentzou (2012) used Wilcox-Herzog's (2004) 'Beliefs-intensions' scale. Other studies with practicing teachers in the general category of appropriate practices use the DAP (Phillips, 2004) framework (Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2011; Abu-Jaber, 2010; Lee, 2006; McMullen et al., 2006; Phillips, 2004), while others do not (Han and Neuharth-Pritchett, 2010; Lara-Cinismo et

al., 2009). Within the first group who explicitly reference DAP, considerable diversity exists.

Cultural diversity, for example, is an important distinction. Sakellariou and Rentzou (2011) conducted their study with Cypriot pre-service teachers, noting the preponderance of research conducted in the US. Abu-Jaber et al. (2010) describe the very particular context for ECE in Jordan and also emphasise the lack of culturally specific studies in Arabic educational and psychological literature. Lee's (2006) study was conducted in Manhattan with an ethnically diverse group of participants who additionally had a variety of qualifications and worked in different setting types. McMullen et al.'s (2006) participants worked in a diverse range of settings in a Mid-western state in the US, while Phillips' (2004) study participants worked together in one school, also in a Mid-western context in the US. Culture is a major contributor to an individual's beliefs (Einarsdottir, 2003; Pajares, 1992) and studies of teachers' beliefs across different cultures have identified variations in teacher beliefs that are culturally specific (Wong et al., 2009; Einarsdottir, 2003).

Table 2.2 provides an overview and some level of categorisation of the range of literature on teachers' beliefs about various aspects of ECE. Even within the category of literacy, for example, while it would appear that Miller and Smith (2004) and Foote et al. (2004) focus on the same topic, the studies used different methods, in different setting types, with practitioners with very different educational backgrounds, in different policy contexts and in different countries.

An analysis vis-à-vis the consistency or inconsistency between beliefs and practice shows that it is equally difficult to identify a core or emerging consensus on the issue of the consistency of relationships between beliefs and practice in ECE. Of the 34 articles reviewed, the issue of consistency was not addressed in 13 studies, by far the largest

category; in eight cases the findings were inconclusive; consistency between beliefs and practice was found in six cases; and inconsistency was found in seven cases. It may be that the high number of studies which did not address the issue of consistency between beliefs and practices is a reflection of the highly mediated relationship between beliefs and practice (see section 2.3.4). In a number of studies in which beliefs and practice were found to be inconsistent, the reasons given were connected to constraints upon the teachers' practice (e.g., Li and Rao, 2011; Sharpe et al., 2005). It was also the case that, in some instances, where beliefs and practice were found to be consistent, this was due to enabling factors (e.g., Meehan, 2007; McMullen, 1999). Where the findings have been termed inconclusive, the reasons include teachers who implemented both consistent and inconsistent practices; studies in which the practices were self-reported rather than observed by researchers; or studies in which the data about beliefs and practices were not compared, but in which the observations of practice were used to illustrate interview data. Einarsdottir (2003, 126) concluded that:

> Research results reveal that teachers who do not practice according to their reported beliefs are to a great extent the ones who work in more academics oriented programs.

It could be suggested that consistency between beliefs and practice is not always desirable. McMullen et al. (2006) found teachers with beliefs which favoured traditional, didactic practices in ECE (as opposed to DAP) whose practice was consistent with those beliefs. Beliefs which render a teacher well disposed towards practices which are at odds with widely held ideas of best practice are not necessarily welcome. Hence the importance of exploring ECE teachers' beliefs in a wide range of contexts. Consistency between teachers' beliefs and models of best practice are desirable, and teachers' ability to implement best practice consistent with their beliefs must be facilitated.

Spodek (1987 in Vartuli, 1999, 490) found that '... early care and education teachers generated a greater number and greater variety of implicit theories about educational decisions than did either the primary or kindergarten teachers studies'. It would appear that continues to be true of research in this field.

2.5.2 Teachers' Beliefs about Play

Within the literature on teachers' beliefs about various aspects of ECE, the literature on beliefs about play appears to be very limited. Quance et al. (2008) identify two studies on teacher beliefs about play: Bennett et al. (1997) and Keating et al.(2000). Hsu-Smith (2009) identifies a further six: Moon and Reifel (2008); Izumi-Taylor et al. (2004); Riojas-Cortez and Flores (2004); Spielberger (1999); and Kemple (1996). Additional web searches for material citing these articles have identified the following material: van der Aalsvoort et al. (2010); Logue and Harvey (2010); Sherwood and Reifel (2010); Sanagavarapu and Wong (2004); Brett et al. (2002) and, with reference to student teachers' views on play, Morgan and Kennewell (2006). In addition, Sherwood and Reifel (2010) identify Ranz-Smith (2007) and Klugman (1996). Continuing searches identified Jung and Jin (2014a, 2014b); Riojas-Cortez et al. (2013); Sherwood and Reifel (2013); and Hanney and Bissonnette (2011).

Kemple (1996) noted that despite ever increasing awareness of the contribution of play to children's learning and development, the provision of play opportunities was gradually reducing, a point reiterated by Nicolopoulou (2010) many years later. Kemple (1996) explored both teachers' beliefs about the importance of sociodramatic play and their practice. Sociodramatic play is defined as a cooperative form of dramatic play in which children take on different character roles (Kemple, 1996). While teachers believed strongly in the beneficial role of sociodramatic play in children's learning and development, they were less sure that the school Principal shared that belief. This is

similar to Rusher et al.'s (1992) findings, and again emphasises the school culture as a possible source of constraints on teachers (see section 2.3.4). However, in this case, the teachers believed that they could promote sociodramatic play in their classrooms (Kemple, 1996) suggesting that teachers' personal characteristics, in this case beliefs about self-efficacy, can be an enabling factor in the translation of beliefs into practice. In exploring the issue further, Kemple investigated the teachers' beliefs about the amount of time they were able to give to play in the classroom, cited elsewhere as a possible constraint (Anderson et al., 2004). Some teachers' believed that they were providing adequate time and other teachers did not believe so. However, an analysis of the time spent by all of these teachers found no difference in the actual time spent (Kemple, 1996). This finding emphasises the significance of teachers' beliefs in the provision of play opportunities for children. A caveat must be entered in that this study was based on teachers' self-reported practices, so while the results indicate congruence between beliefs and reported practices, the data may be open to further scrutiny.

Bennett et al. (1997) conducted an analysis of teachers' narratives on play and on follow-up individual interviews with the participating teachers. Classroom observations were videotaped and the video was analysed with the teachers in 'reflection-on-action' sessions (Bennett et al., 1997, 27). They found that teachers' beliefs about play could be categorised under the following headings:

- The nature and benefits of play
- The teacher's role
- Planning
- Assessment

- Constraints.

Bennett et al. (1997, 23) developed a conceptual model which describes how these clusters of theories impacted on what they term the teachers' 'General Teaching Orientations', described as teachers' pedagogical priorities. Their conceptual model then goes on to describe the further impact on practice, thus demonstrating the pathways along which beliefs relate to practice.

In expanding that conceptual model, the authors designed a concept map of the clusters of ideas related to each of the themes which emerged (Bennett et al., 1997, 138). As a group, the teachers believed play to be developmentally appropriate for the children in their classes. They reported that play supports holistic development, but also provides an antidote to formal work. On a more pragmatic level, it occupies the children while the teacher is otherwise engaged.

While the teachers made strong connections between play and learning, planning for play and learning was seen as problematic because of its exploratory, open-ended nature. Children's ownership of play was seen as paramount to the point where the teachers did not want to risk interfering with the children's intentions, considering child-initiation as a defining characteristic of play. Some tension emerged between this 'non-interference' approach, a second approach which involved teachers engaging with the children's play in a facilitative way, and a third and more didactic type of involvement (Bennett et al., 1997).

Bennett et al. (1997) and Keating et al. (2000) found that practitioners, when given the opportunity to reflect on their practice, felt guilt at the mis-match between their beliefs and their practice. In the former study, the research process itself led to the identification of dilemmas for the participants and had the effect of changing their practice (Bennett et

al., 1997). Keating et al. (2000) studied perceptions of play in the reception classes in ten primary schools. However, unlike Bennett et al. (1997) and Kemple (1996), they investigated the beliefs of five key stakeholders in each school: the headteacher, the reception class teacher, the classroom assistant, the parent, and the child (Keating et al., 2000). Findings related to teachers' beliefs indicated that system demands for accountability in terms of children's learning created a dilemma for teachers who saw this as being at odds with the play based holistic learning that they valued. The type of evidence of learning demanded by the system could not easily be drawn from the children's play, thus constraining teachers' beliefs about play as a valuable context for learning. Keating et al. (2000) contextualised the teachers' dilemma within the debate on the perception of play as somehow the opposite of work. In a finding which mirrors Bennett et al.'s (1997) identification of the pragmatic function of play, Keating et al. (2000, 445) found that play was increasingly accorded an organisational role unrelated to its role in children's learning, '... as a way of keeping children occupied whilst the teacher was engaged elsewhere'. A second pragmatic function of play was identified in which play was used as a reward for children who had finished what was designated as 'work'. These identified functions of play are inconsistent with the expressed beliefs of the teachers who participated in the study, and were the cause of what the authors termed 'anguish' (Keating et al., 2000, 451).

In the studies reported so far, Kemple (1996) focused on sociodramatic play while Bennett et al. (1997) and Keating et al. (2000) investigated play in the broader classroom context. Brett et al. (2002) inquired into teachers' beliefs about 'rough and tumble' play and play provision for children with special needs. The teachers in the study held beliefs about play that were consistent with the literature on DAP (Phillips, 2004) and reported that they gave over 50% of time in the classroom to play activities in recognition of its

importance to children's learning and development. Because the study was based on self-reported practices, a similar caveat must be entered as with Kemple's (1996) study that actual practice might not reflect the teachers' reports.

'Rough and tumble' play is '.... vigorous and active physical play that includes wrestling, play fighting, rolling around, chasing, laughing, and screaming' (Brett et al., 2002, 72). This type of play emerged as problematic for the teachers despite their beliefs about the importance of play in general; while the majority allowed for 'rough and tumble' play, believing it to be a necessary part of children's experience and beneficial to their development, a significant minority did not allow it. The reasons given related to fears of aggressive behaviour and injury. Brett et al. (2002) conclude that some teachers find it difficult to distinguish between 'rough and tumble' play as a particular form of motor and social activity, and aggression. The focus of Logue and Harvey's (2010) study was ostensibly teachers' perceptions of dramatic play, including 'rough and tumble' play. However, only one of four research questions included any reference to beliefs, and that question referred to the major influences on teachers' attitudes towards 'rough and tumble' play, but did not address the attitudes themselves. Training, childhood experiences and the attitudes of colleagues were the major influences identified, and Logue and Harvey (2010) conclude that teachers experience considerable ambivalence towards 'rough and tumble' play, with the most negative attitudes displayed towards play fighting.

Spielberger (1999) found that teachers believed that there was a distinction between beneficial (good) and harmful (bad) play. Harmful play consisted of aggressive behaviour, and pretend play around a violent theme, play fighting and weapons. Consistent with Logue and Harvey (2010), Spielberger (1999) found that teachers routinely applied rules to prevent such behaviours, and interrupted them when they

occurred. Some teachers did not prevent super-hero or gun play, and this was based on their belief that such play was therapeutic for the children, reflecting their lives outside the centre.

Brett et al. (2002) also investigated how the teachers adapted play to the needs of children with disabilities. Where adaptations were made, although this did not happen in all cases, the teachers focused support on children's cognitive development and provided less support for social development through play. This would seem to suggest that the teachers believed that the role of play is primarily associated with cognitive development, at least in the case of children with disabilities. In general, Brett et al. (2002) indicate that teachers' beliefs were in concert with their practices, or that the teachers themselves believed this to be so, although as these were self-reported assertions, they are open to question.

In contrast to Brett et al.'s (2002) findings about different approaches to cognitive and social development through play, Hanney and Bissonnette's (2011) participants, pre-service and serving teachers, strongly endorsed a belief in the efficacy of play in building social skills among children, but were less clear about play's contribution to cognitive development. However, despite making strong connections between play and social learning, Hanney and Bissonnette's (2011) participants did not demonstrate correspondingly positive intentions about the possibility of increasing play opportunities to enhance children's prosocial skills. The reasons suggested relate to the strength of the mandate for didactic approaches to teaching consequent on the prevalence of high stakes testing. Spielberger's (1999) findings about teachers' beliefs about the relationship between play and learning are consistent with Hanney and Bissonnette's (2011) study. She found that while there was a consistent belief among the six Head Start teachers she interviewed that pretend play is beneficial for children's holistic development, they

believed that it was more beneficial for social, emotional and language development than for cognitive and literacy development.

A significant area of interest in terms of teachers' beliefs about ECE is the impact of culture (Einarsdottir, 2003), and there has been some focus on beliefs about play in particular cultural contexts. One such study was conducted by Riojas-Cortez and Flores (2004). They investigated teachers' and parents' beliefs about play in bilingual ECE classrooms in Texas. Given evidence that parental pressure has emerged as a constraint on teachers' provision of play in the classroom (Stipek and Byler, 1997), the parents participating in this study believed that play was a fun way for children to learn (Riojas-Cortez and Flores, 2004). Findings indicated that parents' views of play were defined within their culture, which valued play for enjoyment even if the cultural ties to traditional play were being weakened through acculturation in the new location. The authors suggest that, in this particular Mexican-American cultural context, children's culture can be acknowledged and incorporated by including the games valued by the community of parents.

While a considerable level of congruence was found between the teachers' and parents' beliefs about play, constraints were identified in the school context. An example is given of a teacher who felt constrained by the fact that the noise her class made during play was disruptive for other teachers. Intra-personal constraints were also identified, with one teacher experiencing conflict between her beliefs and behaviour. She expressed very clearly her inability to explain why she found it difficult to give children control of their play when she believed that this would be beneficial for their learning (Riojas-Cortez and Flores, 2004). The authors conclude that the teachers believed in the value of play, but for a number of reasons were not ready for implementation. They did not regard this as an entirely negative position as there was evidence of teachers engaging in a reflective

process which would eventually lead to changes in practice. This finding emphasises once again the importance of investigating teachers' beliefs and making them explicit because '... even though teachers may know the benefits of play for child development, their own biases become obstacles for the implementation of play in their classrooms' (Riojas-Cortez and Flores, 2004, 280).

Sanagavarapu and Wong (2004) examined the issue of culturally specific play among children from a range of cultural backgrounds in Sydney, Australia. The inclusion of this study in this report is tenuous as, while the research was conducted with ECE teachers, the focus is on their observations of the children's play rather than on their beliefs about that play. The teachers reported observing differences in the play of children from various cultural backgrounds (Sanagavarapu and Wong, 2004), but appeared not to believe that it would be important to explore this with parents. A minority of teachers reported making an effort to incorporate CAP (Culturally Appropriate Play) into their settings (Sanagavarapu and Wong, 2004). The finding which makes the study relevant here is that the teachers believed that the differences in play were primarily attributable to the children's proficiency or otherwise in English, rather than to cultural distinctions in the way the children play.

Izumi-Taylor et al. (2004) reported on a cross-cultural study of Japanese and American pre-school teachers' perspectives on play. As with Sanangavarapu and Wong (2004), there is no delineation of what is meant by 'perspectives' or what the impact or significance of such perspectives might be. All participating teachers valued play for children's learning and development, and this was contextualised as being consistent with the value placed by both societies on play as evidenced by the regulatory frameworks of both countries (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2004). Differences emerged in the emphases on the purposes of play across both cultures; Japanese teachers emphasised the

power of play in helping children learn how to live within the cultural norms of their society in a way that American teachers did not. American teachers emphasised play as children's work which Japanese teachers did not. This may suggest that the oppositional characterisation of play versus work which can operate in Western discourse (e.g., Keating et al., 2000) may not be relevant in Japanese society.

Spielberger (1999) conducted her research with a group of African-American Head Start teachers. She found considerable variety among the participants in terms of their beliefs, attitudes and values. Spielberger (1999) concluded that, not only are there different perspectives on play across cultural groups, but also that there are different perspectives within cultural groups. As a footnote to this discussion of the impact of culture on play, Klugman (1996), in a study of the perceptions of play among undergraduate ECE students, found that the responses of participants from African-American, Hispanic and Asian backgrounds did not differ materially from the responses of the Caucasian American students. However, rather than accepting that finding as accurate, Klugman (1996) concludes that the questionnaire instrument was insufficiently sensitive to this issue, and that additional research on the effect of culture on perceptions of play were necessary.

Quance et al. (2008) investigated the beliefs of teachers working in Grade One classrooms with a slightly older age group of children than in the other studies detailed here. It has been noted elsewhere that as grade levels increase, teachers' beliefs become less developmentally appropriate (Vartuli, 1999). Quance et al. (2008) found that the Grade One classrooms differed significantly from kindergarten classrooms in that there was little evidence of provision for dramatic play, centre based play or sand/water play. This would suggest a substantial break between practice in ECE classrooms and in Grade One classrooms. This was mirrored in the finding that the teachers prioritised 'basic

skills' (Quance et al., 2008, 7) even though they believed in play as a fun way for children to learn. While some teachers were able to incorporate play methods in line with their beliefs, other teachers described constraints on their beliefs, mainly related to time factors and lack of resources as well as pupil characteristics (Quance et al., 2008). As part of the study, detailed photographs were taken of ten classrooms when the children were absent. Following analysis of the photographs, no difference was found in the classrooms of those teachers who reported incorporating play into their classrooms and the classrooms of those who did not (Quance et al., 2008). However, there is no reference to the numbers of children of children each classroom had to accommodate, and this might have had an impact on practice. Lack of materials was also evident from the analysis, but the study suggests that classroom conditions were not the explanation for the provision or non-provision of play opportunities for the children. This is similar to Kemple's (1996) finding about the time allocated to play in that it supports Bullock's (2011) position that contextual mediating factors are not the crucial determinant of practice but teachers' beliefs about those mediating factors.

Ranz-Smith (2007) also conducted her research in Grade One classrooms, and the findings support the view that teachers' beliefs are the crucial contributors to practice. Ranz-Smith's (2007) study was conducted in two schools, with two teachers in each school. In one particular finding, the two teachers in the Site II school defined play in similar ways as characterised by child initiation and choice, and occurring spontaneously. 'Working autonomously within the same school setting, they made consequential decisions to include (in Janelle's case) or exclude (in Darcee's case) play in the classroom' (Ranz-Smith, 2007, 294). While both believed in the beneficial value of play for children, their practice was very different, indicating that each had responded very differently to the context in which they were teaching. 'Janelle' and 'Darcee' both

perceived an equal number of barriers to the provision of play opportunities, as well as holding similar beliefs about the benefits and appropriateness of play. Both teachers perceived curricular expectations as a barrier; 'Janelle' however, was able to resist this particular constraint, '... saying 'I can see all that's required of us ... You learn to ignore it'' (Ranz-Smith, 2007, 287). This suggests that 'Janelle's' beliefs about play could be characterised as core beliefs (Mansour, 2009; Ertmer, 2005) because of the resilience of those beliefs in the face of constraints. This is also consistent with McMullen's (1999) findings that teachers whose practice is consistent with their beliefs about DAP are characterised by robust internal locus of control and personal teaching efficacy. However, 'Janelle' claimed that she had had no training in the use of play in teaching (Ranz-Smith, 2007) whereas McMullen (1999) found that training in ECE was one of the key factors enabling a teacher to implement her/his DAP beliefs. Spielberger (1999) concluded that each of the six participants in the qualitative phase of her study of teachers' beliefs demonstrated individual approaches and qualities, and she concludes that none of the participants could be described as 'typical' of the broad range of Head Start teachers. Spielberger (1999) also concludes, with Ranz-Smith (2007) that the relationship between beliefs and practices is fluid, complex, and highly individual. The impact of contextual factors (either as constraints or as enabling factors) depends on the particular configuration or integration of those factors in the individual's experience.

One further finding in Ranz-Smith (2007) is of interest here and that is that all four teachers involved in the study perceived the curricular expectations prevalent in their areas as constraints on their ability to provide play opportunities in their classrooms. However, on analysis of the relevant documents, Ranz-Smith (2007, 291) found that:

> With the teachers' sense that there was no time for play in the classroom because of all that was expected of first graders these days, it was interesting to discover that the first-grade objectives of both sites, as

> formally adopted by their respective boards of education, suggested play as a means of implementing the curriculum.

This raises the issue of the relationship between belief and knowledge as discussed in section 2.3.1, and the teachers' beliefs about the curriculum as a constraint could be said to be characterised by 'non-consensuality' and 'existential presumption' (Nespor, 1987). The 'non-consensuality' refers to the way in which beliefs can be seen as a matter of opinion, free of or even opposed to objective knowledge and open to argument. 'Existential presumption' describes the way in which contingent and incidental characteristics of a situation, person or object is solidified into a structured entity, a 'belief', in this case the teachers' belief that the curriculum represented a barrier to play in the classroom.

Moon and Reifel (2008) investigated one teacher's situated beliefs about the development of literacy through play in a classroom with a highly diverse population of children in terms of language. A prime concern was the development of English as a second language (ESL). The teacher's beliefs about the value of play in her particular context indicated four main themes. Play:

- Functioned as an international language;
- Promoted a relaxed milieu for the children's learning;
- Facilitated integrated learning;
- Provided a connection between the children's first language and ESL (Moon and Reifel, 2008, 55).

The teacher believed her role in the play/literacy nexus was to be a '... provider, player, facilitator, helper and monitor ...' (Moon and Reifel, 2008, 55). The study found that the teacher's description of her play provision, that is the range of activities which she

included in the 'play' category, was in fact much broader that the play framework she espoused. They suggest that in this situated context, the teacher was in fact constructing her own emergent discourse about the meanings of play, rather than those extant in the literature. This is helpful in adding to an understanding of how teachers' beliefs evolve in the course of practice, and expands both Ertmer's (2005) and Hall and Higgins' (2002) observations about changes in practice impacting on beliefs, leading to further changes in practice.

Hsu-Smith (2009) investigated the impact of a play-therapy training course on the participants' beliefs about play and play therapy. Only one of the participants was an ECE teacher, so the study relates only peripherally to the issue of ECE teachers' beliefs about play. However, given the importance of the issue of whether and how changes in teachers' beliefs can be achieved, it is included here. It should also be noted that the training was related to a very specific perspective on play, i.e. play therapy which is defined as being '... concerned with the therapeutic relationship that develops between a child and a therapist through the context of toys and other play materials' (Hsu-Smith, 2009, 38).

Initially, the participating teachers' beliefs about play related to enjoyment, expressing feelings, pretend, social skills development, a reward and, to a much lesser extent, learning (Hsu-Smith, 2009). Engagement with the play therapy course had an impact on the participants' beliefs in that those beliefs became aligned with the discourse on play underpinning play therapy, but participants continued to find it difficult to conceptualise play as a form of communication in itself or as a worthwhile learning context. The play-therapy context involved the teachers in one-to-one interactions with a child and the teachers reported that they believed that they had a better relationship with the focus

child having engaged in the play therapy sessions as part of the coursework (Hsu-Smith, 2009).

In a study of the impact of a graduate professional development programme for ECE teachers, Riojas-Cortez et al. (2013) found individualised perspectives on play among the participating teachers with no single perspective or understanding of play as a consensus position. They found that the teachers' existing beliefs about the relationship between play in its various manifestations and children's learning and development prevented the participants identifying broadly based connections between play and learning. Certain types of play in the classroom were associated with learning, but, for example, outdoor play was not because it was conceptualised as free-time or as a reward. This articulates with Sherwood and Reifel's (2013) findings among their student participants whose conceptualisations of play included 'letting off steam' and making the non-play parts of school bearable for the children.

Riojas-Cortez et al.'s (2013) study also shows the challenges for teachers in aligning their beliefs and practice, even when the individual has engaged in a supportive reflective community of practice through which s/he has experienced changed perspectives as a result of professional development and critical reflection. The authors argue that teachers need opportunities to address these inconsistencies and contradictions, and suggest that systematic CPD based on communities of practice focused on critical dialogue within a theoretical framework is required.

van der Aalsvoort et al. (2010) conducted a comparative study in which the beliefs of practicing preschool teachers were compared with those of pre-service preschool teachers. A cross-cultural comparison of these groups was then undertaken between Germany and the Netherlands. All participants watched video footage from a range of play scenarios and were asked to make written responses about their initial impressions,

whether or not they would define the activity as play, whether the activity promoted children's development, and if they considered that the children's experience of the play could be improved. Contrary to expectations, the practicing teachers' observations were not more detailed or complex than those of the students, particularly the German students (van der Aalsvoort et al., 2010). The authors suggest that this may be as a result of changes to the teacher education courses in Germany which were aimed at improving the quality of preschool education there. As with the cross-cultural study by Izumi-Taylor et al. (2004), differences in the perspectives of both in-service and pre-service groups were found to relate to the regulatory contexts in both countries, as well as to background differences among participants and between the groups (van der Aalsvoort et al., 2010).

The methodology employed in van der Aalsvoort et al.'s (2010) study was quantitative: while the questions asked on the questionnaire were open-ended, they were subsequently numerically coded according to four codes: reference to teacher, reference to children, reference to peers, and reference to context. The findings do not indicate, for example, whether the teachers defined the video vignettes as play or not, or what definition of play emerged. The authors acknowledge this as a limitation of the study, and while this illuminates the impact of cultural context and teacher education on teachers' interpretation of children's activity, it does not provide specific insights into teachers' beliefs about play.

In a finding which echoes similar findings about the 'idiosyncratic' (Mansour, 2009) character of an individual's beliefs, Sherwood and Reifel (2010, 329) found that while the student teacher participants in their study attributed common characteristics to play, individuals combined these attributes in personalised belief clusters. In findings similar to Riojas-Cortez et al.'s (2013) in relation to practicing teachers, no single, unified vision of play as a construct emerged, but neither does such a unified, shared definition exist in

the literature. Spielberger (1999) found that the six participants in her qualitative study all agreed that play was characterised by 'make-believe' or 'pretend' but thereafter, there was no consensus on the range of characteristics identified.

Sherwood and Reifel (2013) further report that the participants held contradictory views on the role of play in learning. These contradictory views emerged especially when learning through play was being compared with learning through non-play. Play was valued for learning across a range of contexts, but yet it emerged that what the participants primarily conceptualised as learning was '... acquiring academic knowledge during 'not-play' (Sherwood and Reifel, 2013, 274). The authors note that this finding exemplifies the understanding of beliefs as not being subject to logic and not causing the individual to experience tension in holding contradictory beliefs. This study is particularly interesting in revealing the participants taken-for-granted belief that learning in school is a not-play experience. It would be of further interest to investigate the extent to which the preservice teachers' beliefs about play versus not-play is rooted in their own experiences in the early years of school.

Morgan and Kennewell (2006) also conducted research with students, but unlike Sherwood and Reifel's (2010, 2013) cohort, this study focused on the students' own playful learning of ICT. The research found that the students valued their playful learning experiences, believing that play with ICT would be important for children (Morgan and Kennewell, 2006). However, observations of the students' practices during their practicum found no incorporation of such practices. The reasons given by the students include time pressures, insufficient computers with consequent difficulties of access, testing requirement and lack of confidence (Morgan and Kennewell, 2006). These are similar to constraints on teachers which have been found in other studies (Dunphy, 2009a; Anderson et al., 2004; McMullen, 1999; Fang, 1996).

In a questionnaire study among pre-service ECE teachers, Jung and Jin, (2014a) found that the most senior students had become less sure of the place of play in the classroom in comparison to students in earlier phases of their college course. The authors hypothesise that these students are possibly more aware of the complexities of play because of their deeper grasp of the concept. They also postulate that the senior students' beliefs about the place of play in the classroom are compromised by perceptions of curricular demands and play's incompatibility with standards based education. The senior students may well be taking into account their impending entry into the workforce in a way that students in the early stages of their college careers may not. However, the authors also found that this effect was mitigated by attendance at courses specifically focused on play. They suggest that in order to maintain strong beliefs about the importance of play in the ECE classroom among senior students, the students should have increased options for courses focused on play.

However, this last finding is rendered somewhat uncertain by a further report. Jung and Jin (2014b) found an association between students taking play-related coursework and greater likelihood of those students having positive perceptions of play and positive intentions to incorporate play into their classroom practices, as also reported in Jung and Jin (2014a). It appears that the students were not surveyed in advance of taking the courses so it is unclear whether the positive perceptions and intentions pre-dated the coursework, and may in fact have been the reason the students chose that coursework in the first place. If this were the case, it would be consistent with the findings which indicated that the students' perceptions of play were the significant mediating factor between the coursework and the positive perceptions and intentions. Several studies have indicated that student teachers' beliefs on entry to a college course exert

considerable influence on how and what those students subsequently learn (Sherwood and Reifel, 2013).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has considered the terminology associated with the study of teachers' educational beliefs and the nature of those beliefs. Following an analysis of definitions applied in the literature, a definition of teachers' beliefs appropriate as a frame for this study has been identified. The eclectic range of literature on ECE teachers' beliefs about a wide range of educational topics has been considered, with a particular focus on findings regarding the consistency or otherwise between ECE teachers' educational beliefs and their classroom practice. Finally, the literature on teachers' beliefs about play was reviewed

What emerges from an extensive review of literature on teachers' beliefs is that the concept of belief is not fixed and is interpreted in many different ways and applied differently in a variety of contexts. Education is multi-faceted and complex and teachers have beliefs about such a range of topics that it is very difficult to come to any conclusions that cannot be contradicted from within the literature. It can be said that teachers' beliefs have an impact on practice, even if it is through a '... process of resistance, adaptation and mediation' (Wood and Bennett, 2001, 229).

Chapter 3: Play in Schools

3.1 Introduction

Play has proven to be, and continues to be difficult to define (Wood, 2013; McInnes et al., 2009), and play pedagogy in practice continues to be a matter of debate (Stephen, 2010; Synodi, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004; British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group [BERAEYSIG], 2003). In any case, it is not the purpose of this study to define play or play pedagogy per se, but to explore the beliefs of teachers about play in infant classes in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland [RoI]. The purpose of this literature review is identify issues associated with play in the specific context of schools, as distinct from either play as a phenomenon or play in contexts other than educational settings catering for children in the four to six year old age group. As described in the Introduction, considerable policy change is underway in the RoI which will impact on infant classes, and efforts to promote change in practice towards play-based teaching and learning are evident.

It has proven difficult to find examples in the international literature of provision for children in the four to six year old age group which is similar to that in the RoI. The difficulty in putting provision for four to six year old children in the RoI into an international context is not unusual. A number of reviews have identified the difficulty of comparing provision internationally because of differing age ranges and terminology associated with what is generally termed early childhood education [ECE] (Bertram and Pascal, 2002; Walsh et al., 2010c). Anning et al. (2009) have also described how provision is structured very differently in different jurisdictions.

Given that caveat, literature for inclusion in this review has been focused on the nexus of children between the ages of four and six years, school based provision, play in schools, and curriculum arrangements for this age group. In a comparison of provision for children of four to five years of age, England, Northern Ireland [NI] and Wales are identified as jurisdictions where children of that age are in school (Clark and Waller, 2007). Four to five year olds in Scotland are in a mix of pre-school and school based provision, as school starting age is five. Clark and Waller (2007) also draw attention to the actual starting age of children as distinct from the compulsory school starting age. While direct comparison is difficult because of context, the similarities, particularly with NI, resonate with the circumstances found in the RoI. As a result, literature from NI, England, Scotland and Wales is the main resource for this review.

Section 3.2 will consider a number of issues related to the place of play in the school as an institution. Considerations in the literature about play in schools can reflect tensions surrounding play provision in school and classroom contexts. These considerations raise questions about the compatibility of play provision:

- with the school as an institution;
- with the physical space and embedded routines and practices of the school;
- with the views of parents, teachers and school Principals;
- with Curriculum policy implementation, with its emphasis on objectives, outcomes and accountability.

A consideration of these issues will constitute the first section of this review. Section 3.3 will consider issues associated with the relationship between teaching and a pedagogy of play, and goes on to discuss examples from the literature of models of play pedagogy which suggest ways to move beyond the tensions described in section 3.2.

3.2 Play in Schools

While play is central to the provision of ECE (McInnes et al., 2011) very little is known about play in schools (Sandberg and Heden, 2011). There are particular issues associated with play in schools, and play is perceived differently in pre-schools and kindergarten than in schools (Walsh et al., 2010a). There is also a suggestion that young children themselves are seen differently in schools than in kindergarten settings (Hayes et al., 1997). Martlew et al. (2011) reported teacher comments to the effect that children who had been demonstrating high levels of independence in their pre-school setting were, however, expected to wait for the teacher to do things for them in school, indicating an assumption of helplessness.

3.2.1 Play in School: Compatibility Issues

The position of play in schools is presented in the literature as a series of tensions which position play and various aspects of school culture and context at odds with each other. To begin with, play has been described as being in conflict with the purpose and culture of schools, specifically the '... rigid structure and the values of conformity, uniformity, and accountability that characterise many traditional elementary school environments' (Goldstein, 1997, 4). Kuschner (2012) conceptualises the problem as a series of fundamental contradictions between play and school. He asserts that while play is often seen as a natural phenomenon in childhood, the school is a cultural construct through which the child's development is filtered with the clear intent of changing the child to cultural specifications.

Kuschner (2012) argues that in play, children manipulate and reconstruct reality to their own ends or needs, as active agents. In school, however, the classroom context is fixed and the children are acted upon and required to change to meet the needs of the school.

There is evidence that this tension becomes more acute in the period just preceding the point at which the child transfers from the equivalent of reception class into formal schooling (Hunter and Walsh, 2013; Rogers, 2011). Kuschner's (2012) second site of tension is conceptual development. In play, children develop concepts in a ground-up process, whereas the school approaches conceptual development as a cultural transmission process. This tension resonates with evidence indicating that direct teaching constrains children's exploration in the environment (Bonawitz et al., 2011) but that children's learning is enhanced by opportunities for playful exploration of a task (McInnes et al., 2009).

Kuschner (2012) identifies another area of tension in that through play, children generate their own learning while the school requires child to meet predetermined learning outcomes. This specific tension is particularly highlighted in the literature on play in schools (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010). Prescribed curriculum is not a feature of the kindergarten, generally, and only becomes an issue when provision for young children is based in schools (Walsh et al., 2010a).

Play, Kuschner (2012) argues, is child-invented and original whereas the school as institution values the conventional and predictable. Kuschner (2012) further argues that when children are playing, they are in flow as defined by Csikszentmihalyi, a state which is independent of time and more properly described as space. Schools, on the other hand, are increasingly bound by time allocations for subject teaching (Martlew et al., 2011; Sestini, 1987). Finally, Kuschner (2012) encapsulates the tension between play and school as the contrast between exuberance and control.

Having described the contradiction, Kuschner (2012) goes on to assert that, by definition, play cannot happen in school because once play is employed in pursuit of academic goals, then it is no longer play. However, a caveat should be introduced here, in that this

position does not acknowledge children's agency in play, and the ways in which they can appropriate and extend the play space (Rogers and Evans, 2007) to, among other things, transgress '... educational agendas and institutional norms of conduct ...' (Evaldsson and Tellgren, 2009, 10). Wood (2013) argues that the idea of agency is crucial to any understanding of play because play involves expressions of children's will to act in their world. It would seem premature then, to take the position that play cannot, by definition, happen in schools because to do so is to ignore children's agency in play. Nonetheless, the concern remains that adult efforts to control play in school undermine children's agency in play, notwithstanding children's efforts at resistance (Wood, 2013). Wood (2013) asserts that play is done by the children and not by the teachers, and adult perspectives are not the arbiters of what is and isn't play. It must be the players themselves who determine the nature of the activity (McInnes et al., 2009). The position argued here is that notwithstanding the tensions, play can happen in schools. Making the tensions explicit is a necessary step in finding strategies to address them, and in raising teachers' awareness of their role in enacting those tensions.

Evidence from classrooms seems to support Kuschner's (2012) conclusions about the incompatibility between play and school. In an observational study of children's experiences in nursery settings and reception classes, Sestini (1987) found the reception classes to be very teacher directed with structured pre-reading, number and writing activities requiring individual, concentrated work which the teachers monitored by circulating around the tables at which the children were sitting. While the children had play opportunities, provision was bounded by rules applied to render the play compatible with classroom conditions, for example limiting the numbers at the role play area to four because of space constraints (Rogers and Evans, 2007). Sestini (1987) found that the children had absorbed the rules associated with play, and adapted their play behaviours

accordingly. They were aware that they should not make too much noise, should not move materials from the designated space to other areas of the classroom, the number of children at each play area had to be limited and that they had to circulate after a given period of time to give other children a chance. There was no indication that the children had been involved in finding solutions to the constraints associated with the classroom conditions.

Broadhead (2004, 105) found that the 'how many are allowed in' rule actually caused disruption. However, she found positive consequences for behaviour where children in reception classes were involved in regulating their play environment, and had consistent experiences of play so that they had no anxiety about 'missing their turn'. The implication of Broadhead's (2004) study is that teachers can adopt approaches in the classroom which do not perpetuate the tensions between play and the school as institution. Involving the children in decisions about their classroom does not remove the tensions, but indicates a way in which the teacher can avoid emphasising them.

Another example of the kind of tensions which Kuschner (2012) has endeavoured to capture is the degree to which an individual school views infant classes as being part of the school, and part of the continuum of the school. An instance of this emerged in the context of systemic reorientation of practice away from formal methods to a play-based pedagogy as was experienced in NI and is currently being promoted in the RoI (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011a). In 2000, the Early Years Enriched Curriculum was introduced in NI as a response to what was perceived as the overly formal curriculum then in operation for young children (Walsh and Gardner, 2006). The enriched curriculum, characterised as more developmentally appropriate for the age group, incorporating play-based pedagogy, was found to provide children with better learning experiences than the formal curriculum (Walsh et al., 2006).

However, in a later evaluation, it emerged that schools did not initially view the change involved in such a profound reorientation of curriculum as being of significance to the whole school (McGuinness et al., 2009). This suggests that the schools may not have viewed the classes catering for the very youngest children as being part of the school proper, and it may exemplify the institutional resistance referred to by Goldstein (1997). Goldstein (1997) asserts that it is not just the practices associated with developmentally appropriate practice [DAP], but also the values which it espouses (such as children's right to make choices about their learning experiences) that are contrary to the norms of the school as institution. This may cause schools to see the early years' classrooms as something of an alien species. It should be noted, however, that as time passed, and the children who had experienced the play-based enriched curriculum began to progress through the school, the effects were felt throughout and the schools began to adapt (McGuinness et al., 2009). Fullan (2001, 64), in a discussion on leadership in time of change, points out that '... the organization must change along with the individuals'. Change by individual teachers will not be sustainable unless change is integrated throughout the whole school.

3.2.2 Time, Space, Class Size

In a study of the effects of class size on teaching in reception classes, Blatchford et al. (2002b, 107) commented that '... teachers do not meet pupils out of context ...'. A number of aspects of contextual conditions associated with school classrooms impact on play provision and on the children's experience of play in the classroom. Sestini (1987) found that the children's play in the school setting was limited by the space available, the time allowed to them for the development of their play, the level of resourcing and degree to which their activity was directed towards teacher expectations.

3.2.2.1 Time

Different aspects of the relationship between time and provision for play in the classroom appear in the literature. In the context of the introduction of the National Curriculum in England, teachers referred to the difficulty of finding time for everything in the context of curriculum overload (Wood, 1999), play being part of 'everything'. Keating et al. (2000, 441) report similar comments in which the weight of curriculum is made visible through time considerations: 'there's so much to get through'. This resulted in teachers not giving the children sufficient time to develop their play because of the perceived need to have the children completing desk based written work. Similarly, Sestini (1987) observed children having to move on from their play after 15 or 20 minutes in order to give other children a turn. This lack of time to develop their play resulted in the play she observed having little cognitive challenge. She asserts that the children viewed play as primarily a social activity and did not associate play with the learning dimension of school. Even in terms of social activity, Broadhead (2004) observed that disruptions to play prevented the play from becoming highly sociable and cooperative.

Sestini (1987) argued that children's attitudes may have been associated with their perceptions of how play was valued in the classroom as evidenced by the teachers' lack of involvement in play, the short time the teachers allowed for play and their practice of interrupting the children's play. Teachers used the time the children spent playing to get on with other teaching tasks, such as hearing children read or to check written work, for which they took children away from play. This suggests that formal activity, often literacy work, was valued in practice more highly than play, a message not lost on the children. Quite a number of years later, Keating et al. (2000) found children explicitly acknowledging that play was not as important as work, illustrating Martlew et al.'s (2011) point that the amount of time a teacher allocates to play communicates clear messages about its value and significance.

In a study which elaborates some of the issues raised by Sestini (1987) around the conditions associated with play in infant (reception) classes, Stevenson (1987) details the effect of disruptions by the teacher to the children's play in order to pursue reading and writing tasks associated with formal instruction. The disruption to the play compounds the insufficient time given to children to develop their play. The child who is taken away from the play is disrupted, but so too are the children who remain at play as the group dynamic is disturbed and may not survive. Rogers and Evans (2007, 160) assert that the practice of taking children away from their play for reading or phonics work, or other interruptions, is the '... single most disruptive factor in the quality of children's role play...'. Other disruptions associated with the running of the school as institution (Goldstein, 1997), and which apply to all classes irrespective of the nature of the activity therein, such as lunch and other breaks, also have a disruptive effect on play (Stevenson, 1987).

Another aspect of the impact of time on play in classrooms is the frequency with which children can initiate and lead their own activity, and the relationship between child initiated/led activity and adult led activity. It is acknowledged that, among the key descriptors or characteristics of play, the child's self-determination in play is deeply significant (Wood, 2013; Martlew et al., 2011) although it should be clarified that this is not the same as playing alone. Walsh et al. (2010a) found that, in the context of an initiative to change practice among teachers working with young children in primary schools, that play-based pedagogy promoted a better balance of time between child-led and adult-led activity, and a better balance between play, written work and activities as compared to a traditional practice classroom. However, in another study in the context of changing to more appropriate practice, Martlew et al. (2011) found little evidence of

child initiated activity at any stage during the day, suggesting that the effects of change are not certain.

The time allocations in the Primary School Curriculum [PSC] (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999b, 69/70) are described as guidelines and are not designed to be prescriptive. The most important issue is that children experience meaningful learning experiences and this, it is recommended, will require flexible use of time. While no evidence has been found to date on timetabling of subject teaching in infant classes in the primary school in the RoI, there is evidence that teaching is carried out on a subject specific basis (DES Inspectorate, 2005, 2010), and there is some evidence (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], n.d.b)to suggest that timetables are constructed around individual subject areas rather than on the integrated basis advised in the PSC. The lack of comprehensive evidence on how time is allocated by teachers in infant classes inhibits addressing specifically how teachers might incorporate extended play sessions into the infant day. What can be said is that the PSC (DES, 1999b) clearly mandates the flexible use of time in the infant classes to ensure that children experience learning in an integrated way.

The literature is clear that children need extended time periods '... to build momentum in their play ...' (Broadhead, 2004, 3), and teachers need to desist from interrupting play. When planning for play in the school timetable, play should be scheduled so as to minimise the disruption caused by breaktimes and other embedded routines.

3.2.2.2 Class size

Surprisingly little is said about the effect of class size on the provision of play in schools, certainly very little about class sizes of 25 or 26 to a single teacher with no assistants. Studies have shown that class size in reception/infant classes have an impact on children's attainment in school (Blatchford et al., 2002a), and on the nature of their

experiences in the classroom (Blatchford et al., 2002b), but it has proven difficult to locate empirical research exploring the effect of class size on play provision or on children's play experiences in school. Class size is a particularly pertinent issue in the RoI which has class sizes greater than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] average (OECD, 2012). Children in infant classes in the RoI can be in groups of 30 (Donnelly, 2007; Bertram and Pascal, 2002) or over. In the school year 2012 – 2013, a sizable number - 27,876 - of children were in infant classes of more than 30 children (DES, 2013). One junior infant class had 41 pupils (DES, 2013). Average class size in Key Stage 1 classes in England was 27.2 in 2011 (Department for Education, 2011), although there were some instances where the legal maximum class size of 30 was breached (Department for Education, 2012). In Scotland, the average class size was 23.2 children (The Scottish Government, 2013).

Infant classes in the RoI are allocated a single teacher with no teaching assistant (OECD, 2004) whereas Taylor Nelson Sofres and Aubrey (2002) reported that almost all of the teachers in the reception classes in England which they surveyed had general classroom support staff. Thus, four year olds in schools in the RoI are severely disadvantaged in comparison to four year olds in pre-schools in terms of the adult/child ratio provided (Bertram and Pascal, 2002; Hayes et al., 1997). Hayes et al. (1997) found that having a second adult with the group (which was not found in school settings), had a positive impact on the type of interactions which could take place. Indeed, one practical recommendation from the OECD (2004) was that a classroom assistant should be provided for each infant class in the RoI to effect an improvement in the adult/child ratio.

Very few studies of play in classrooms focus on the effect of the number of children in the classroom on both provision and on the children's experience. References in the literature to the impact of class size on play in the classroom feature mainly in research

with teachers who identify class size as a constraint on their ability to provide for play (Taylor Nelson Sofres and Aubrey, 2002; Keating et al., 2000; Wood, 1999; Wood and Bennett, 1998; Bennett et al., 1997). This may be because large class sizes may be mitigated by small group work where there are numbers of classroom assistants available for such, and there is evidence that it is mainly classroom assistants who play with the children (Keating et al., 2000). Martlew et al. (2011) found that the children demonstrated higher levels of engagement during small group work supported by classroom assistants or other adults than during whole class work with just the teacher. However, these observations relate to what the authors term 'active learning' rather than play. Stevenson (1987) attributed teachers' focus on 'work' activities rather than on play interactions to class size, and the difficulty for the teacher of getting to each child. Wood (2013, 64) has described the practical problems associated with trying to implement the High Scope Plan-Do-Review model with large groups, with the process taking so long that the children become restless. From their classroom observations, Martlew et al. (2011) concluded that the change from traditional classroom practice to practice based on purposeful play was rendered difficult by practicalities, including the large numbers of children in the classrooms.

Martlew et al.'s (2011) conclusions in the context of curriculum change in Scotland were echoed in Siraj-Blatchford et al.'s (2005) findings from an evaluation of the Foundation Phase Project in Wales. They found that improving the ratios of adults to children was one of the changes (in addition to changes to the indoor and outdoor environments, and improved resourcing) required in order for the services to be able to provide more active learning and play opportunities (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2005, 41). In a more recent research project in Wales, those classrooms with lower child to teacher ratios were found to be implementing the Foundation Phase to a greater degree than where higher child to

adult ratios were applied (Waldron et al., 2014). However, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2005) emphasise that reducing ratios and/or class sizes is not a guarantee of improved quality, but is part of a web of contextual factors including staff qualifications and training which contribute to overall effectiveness.

The available evidence indicates that class size is likely to have an effect on the provision of play in the classroom, and on children's play experiences but additional empirical research which focuses on the relationship between the two, and the mediating processes, will be necessary to elucidate the issue. However, it is possible to conclude that the very large class sizes in infant classes in the RoI, and the lack of teaching assistants is very likely to have a negative impact on the introduction of play. Reduction in class sizes and the provision of teaching assistants in infant classes would address these issues.

3.2.2.3 Space

There is no clear demarcation line between issues of class size and classroom space. Bascia and Faubert (2012) have suggested that some of the positive effects observed in children's behaviour following class size reduction may actually be attributable to the increase in personal space available, and to the overall student-space ratio. Blatchford et al. (2002b) observed how children in a class of 37 had limited space in which to move, and the constriction appeared to have negative consequences for their behaviour. Rogers and Evans (2007) found considerable impact on role play in the classroom from what they refer to as 'poverty of space'. The role play area in the classrooms observed was generally a corner sectioned off from the main space. The number of children allowed to play in the area was limited on the basis of the small space available, and the researchers noted that the children's games seemed to be constrained by the lack of space. However, in an example of children's agency, they – the children – initiated changes and adaptations to the area, as well as colonising other parts of the classroom in order to be able to extend their play. Such changes were not sanctioned by the teachers (Rogers and

Evans, 2007), who tended to intervene when the play, inevitably, became noisy. In some cases, the teachers stopped the play and in other instances tried to work within the play script to achieve the same end by refocusing the children. Broadhead (2004) describes a different response to the space issue by a teacher involved in her research. This teacher reorganised the space in the classroom to include additional Areas of Provision, reflecting her experience that regular and guaranteed access to play reduced behaviour problems. Increasing the range of Areas of Provision meant that there was increased access for all.

Rogers and Evans (2007) found that the lack of space, in addition to other contextual factors, led to the teachers managing the children's play through what they term 'containment'. Boys and girls experienced containment of their play in different ways in relation to the space available. Girls seemed to self-contain their play in the indoor space, whereas boys' active play became problematic in the confined space of the classroom. Rogers and Evans (2007), having observed the popularity of outdoor 'dens' among the children, and the children's comfort with larger numbers playing in the 'dens', suggest that outdoor play has the potential to relieve the pressures which prompt the use of 'containment' strategies. Such outdoor spaces seem to work for both genders as girls, who restricted their use of space indoors, were observed in more physically active and expansive play outdoors, and boys had the space they lacked indoors (Rogers and Evans, 2007: Broadhead, 2004).

However, provision for outdoor play, and the relationship between the outdoor and indoor space has long been an issue. While children value outdoor play in school as a space away from the adult control of the classroom (Kernan, 2007), Cleave and Brown (1991) found that a significant proportion of schools did not have good facilities for outdoor play. More than 20 years later, Rhys et al. (2014) found that the development of

outdoor space was still a work in progress. In any case, the literature suggests that the risks associated with outdoor play cause considerable discomfort for teachers and other practitioners (Tovey, 2010). Tovey (2010) argues that children's outdoor play, in educational settings, has the potential to help develop children's resilience and their ability to assess risk for themselves. School environments should provide outdoor spaces in which children can take risks, which is different from children being exposed to hazardous or dangerous experiences.

The national play policy (National Children's Office, 2004) offers the development of an outdoor play space in an infant school in the RoI as a model of good practice in the provision of play opportunities in school. One of the actions listed in the policy is that Boards of Management of primary schools would address the need for enhanced play opportunities as part of the school plan. There is no evidence to suggest that any of the actions specified by the policy for schools have been implemented in a systematic way, including the provisions of outdoor play.

As suggested by Rogers and Evans (2007), the way in which the classroom space is organised can have an impact on provision for play. A particular feature of school classrooms appears to be the ubiquity of tables and chairs, a feature observed and commented on by the OECD (2004) in relation to infant classes in the RoI. Martlew et al. (2011) described the classrooms in Scotland which they observed as being dominated by tables and chairs, which had implications for the way in which concrete resources were used. In what they described as a traditional classroom in the Australian state of Victoria, Reynolds et al. (2011) noted that the classroom featured tables with a chair for each child as a way to facilitate subject teaching. Cleave and Brown (1991) report on teachers removing tables and chairs to make more space for activities including play. While some teachers felt that children didn't need a designated seat at which to sit every day, Cleave

and Brown (1991) found that many held the view that they needed enough chairs for all the children to sit at the same time, for example, to eat lunch.

Pascal (1990) considered classroom layout in detail and analysed how the layout revealed the teachers' priorities for teaching and learning. In the process, Pascal (1990, 22) also explored how the arrangement of the physical environment of the classroom '... shapes and influences the curriculum that takes place within it ...'. While the classrooms themselves were cramped to begin with, with little space for play, nonetheless in nine out of ten classrooms, such space as was available was given to tables and chairs, thereby creating a very formal environment. Overall, Pascal (1990) found virtually no access to outdoor facilities. The way in which the teachers organised the classroom space provided insights into the relationship between their stated position on appropriate practice and the practice itself, and in most cases, this relationship was anomalous.

Goouch (2008) argues that the decisions a teacher makes about the environment in which the child's learning and development is to be fostered reflects that teacher's perspective on education. She sketches the alternative viewpoints on education which can be embodied in the spaces provided for children; on the one hand, a model of education which privileges the pursuit of pre-determined curriculum outcomes, and is evident in classrooms such as are described by Martlew et al. (2011) and Reynolds et al. (2011); on the other hand, spaces which facilitate children's agency and recognise their right to have control in their environment. The conclusion drawn is that there is a synergetic relationship between the use of space and the teaching approaches implemented in the classroom. Tradition (Broadhead, 2004), specifically the Anglo-Saxon tradition (Brodin and Renblad, 2014a), clearly has an impact given the ubiquity of table and chairs in the jurisdictions cited. There does not appear to be any substantive or objective reason why

the classroom space cannot be adapted to accommodate play activity, and teachers could re-imagine their use of space as part of the reorientation of practice towards play.

3.2.3 Stakeholder perspectives

The PSC (DES, 1999a) describes the parent as the primary educator and asserts that close partnership between parents and teachers can result in significant benefits for the child. *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009), as part of its 12 principles of early learning and development, states that parents are the most important people in children's lives, and encourages teachers/practitioners to work together with parents in the best interests of the child. Neither document refers to parental expectations about what their children should be doing in school, or, by implication, parental expectations of how teachers should be teaching.

Drawing on data from the IEA Pre-primary Project, Kernan and Hayes (1999) investigated the consistency of teachers' and parents' expectations of education for their children at age four in both pre-schools and primary schools. It should be noted that the research for this project was conducted at a time when the 1971 Primary School Curriculum (An Roinn Oideachais, 1971) was in use in primary schools prior to the revised PSC (DES, 1999a) being introduced. Two types of primary schools were included: Designated Disadvantaged (DD) schools and Non-Designated Disadvantaged (NDD) schools on the basis of criteria applied by the DES at the time. The designations were based on socio-economic factors. The implication is that parents and teachers would have different expectations based on the socio-economic context in which the school was located, which, it could be argued, might constitute cultural differences.

In DD schools, parents' and teachers' priority expectations coincided on two of three points: both groups identified social skills with peers and pre-academic skills as priorities. However the groups differed in the third priority in that teachers believed that

language skills were a priority whereas parents felt that learning to listen to, co-operate with and respect adults was important. In the NDD schools, there was less agreement between parents' and teachers' priorities for children: both groups prioritised developing social skills with peers, but differed on the other two priority areas (Kernan and Hayes, 1999). Irrespective of the setting type, both parents and teachers chose as their first priority for children's learning and development social skills with other children. While this research may no longer reflect current conditions, the importance placed by both parents and teachers in both school types on the development of children's skills in interaction with other children suggests that parents and teachers should, if consistent, value play equally.

Kernan and Hayes (1999) further explored parents' and teachers' mutual understanding of each other's expectations. Teachers in both DD and NDD schools believed that parents would prioritise pre-academic skills above other areas of learning and development, although this was not entirely accurate as parents actually prioritised social skills with peers. The teachers' prediction is not without justification, however. Walsh (2000 in Trew et al., 2009) found that a significant minority of the parents in NI who participated in research about play based versus formal approaches to the education of young children defined quality provision in terms of academic approaches. Parents in Denmark, however, as part of the same study, placed a high value on play for young children.

Almost 20 years earlier, David (1992) had found similar differences in the attitudes of parents in Britain and Belgium in relation to parental priorities for ECE. Parents in Belgium wanted more child-directed learning, for example, while parents in Britain felt that young children attending nursery classes should spend some time on reading and writing as preparation for primary school. Trew et al. (2009) conclude that there are

likely to be cultural differences in what parents value in and expect of their children's educational experiences. Brooker's (2002) research has demonstrated that learning through play is viewed differently from diverse cultural perspectives. Indeed, in the case of the Bangladeshi families in Brooker's (2002) study, learning through play had virtually no resonance with the culture of the children's homes, leading to increased awareness that children may need support to be able to access play opportunities in the classroom (Wood, 2009).

Goldstein (1997) found examples of parents complaining, with varying degrees of explicitness, on the lack of evidence for academic learning within the non-subject based approach the teacher was implementing in her classroom. The teacher's approach was endorsed by the school, and she felt insecure and angry that she was experiencing such responses for doing her job. Despite her view that the parents comments emerged from a lack of understanding about how children learn and from parents' own anxieties about their children's progress, she was tempted to resort to worksheets to relieve the intense pressure she was experiencing.

In a study of stakeholders' (including parents' and school Principals') views on the role of play in children's learning, Fung and Cheng (2012) found that all stakeholder groups expressed positive feelings about play but the authors concluded that this was on the basis of superficial understandings of the significance of play for children's learning. While the stakeholders espoused play as an approach to teaching curriculum content, they did not demonstrate awareness of children's self-generated learning through play, and were uneasy about the lack of proof of learning progress. Parents were unsure about what tangible learning outcomes resulted from play, an unease which was not addressed by the schools. Instead, schools turned back to more didactic methods which produced (in their view) the kind of evidence acceptable to parents. Fung and Cheng (2012)

characterise these various perspectives as being focused on what children are learning in play – the product – as opposed to the process – how the children are learning. The authors suggest that what is needed is for schools to document and subsequently communicate to parents the learning which takes place through the play process.

However, it may be that such actions by the schools might not be effective, as Fung and Cheng (2012) point out that the cultural context of Hong Kong is such that parents value academic learning which they see as preparing their children for success in a competitive culture. Research has indicated that in Hong Kong, parental preferences for academic based ECE have proven resistant to all efforts at change (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010). At best, parents struggle with their wishes for their children to experience playful learning but at the same time want evidence of academic learning outcomes. Stevenson (1987) found that teachers seemed very conscious of parents' view of school as being for a different purpose than non-school settings: that is, that school is for learning to read and write. Parental expectations of what their children should experience in school have been identified as pressures on teachers (e.g. Bennett et al., 1997; Stipek and Byler, 1997). McInnes et al. (2011) found evidence of teachers strategically using the word 'work' for all activities, including play so as not to provoke reaction from parents. However, in the context of existing formal practice in kindergarten, and the acknowledgement that teachers and parents had differing definitions of learning for young children, nonetheless Cooney (2004) found that both parents and teachers in two Guatemalan kindergartens were potential supporters of, and advocates for, play pedagogy.

While the research documents diverse findings on parents' perspectives, the conclusion here is that communication and dialogue between school and parents is vital in relation to the introduction of play into the classroom. It cannot be assumed that parents will not support learning through play, and therefore using this assumption to maintain direct

instruction methods in the infant classroom may not be justified. Where parents have concerns, the school will need to respond by reflecting on and addressing the issues.

Fung and Cheng (2012) also found different views between Principals and teachers as to why play based learning was difficult to implement in the classroom. Principals felt that the teachers' professional expertise was inadequate, whereas the teachers felt that the constraints they experienced were responsible. They identified '... lack of time to cover all the required work, insufficient space for children to move around, and not having enough human resources available to take care of the children, as well as the pressure from parents' (Fung and Cheng, 2012, 28), a list of constraints which is very stable across jurisdictions. This gap in understanding between Principals and teachers is a concern, as is the overall lack of understanding among all the stakeholders which was having a negative effect on the potential of play-based learning in the classroom.

Lack of understanding among personnel within schools about the significance of ECE had been identified in other research. Keating et al. (2002) found that teachers in reception classes were being put under pressure by managers (including Principals and governors) with no expertise in ECE who, they suggest, neither value nor understand the work of reception teachers, in particular the importance of play in the classroom. Such poor understanding of the complexities of ECE in schools may have consequences beyond even the nature of practice in the classroom. In the course of a study of the experiences of four year olds in reception classes across a local authority area, Pascal (1990) found a pattern among teachers in such classes indicating that their status was less than that of teachers working with older children. Very few of the teachers involved in the study held promoted posts within the school, and this was very evident among the most experienced teachers who would be expected to have achieved promotion. Pascal (1990) hypothesised that either Principals were identifying teachers with little interest in

career advancement and assigning them to the infant classes, or that teaching in those classes constituted a career block. Either way, the implication is that the status of classes for the younger children in schools, and that of their teachers, is less valued by the school institution than classes for older children and those teaching in them.

In a study on professional identity in ECE, Moloney (2010) included a small number of teachers of infant classes and found that they were concerned about how colleagues teaching more senior classes perceived those teaching infant classes. The participant teachers felt that colleagues perceived the work of teachers in infant classes as less significant in educational terms than work with older classes, and more akin to amusement than teaching. They also suggested that a hierarchy exists in primary schools in which moving to teach senior grades from the infant classes is considered a promotion. While the sample of teachers of infant classes in this study was very small, it certainly warrants further exploration.

Another possible consequence of poor understanding by Principals and other staff within the school of ECE practice is suggested by research on the resourcing of such classes. Differences in approach by headteachers, depending on their level of training and knowledge in the education of children between the ages of three and five, were found to impact on the resourcing of the infant classes (Taylor Nelson Sofres and Aubrey, 2002). In findings consistent with those of Keating et al. (2002), those headteachers who were not trained or did not have a background in early years education were less likely to invest in resourcing the reception classes, or to focus on the Foundation Stage as part of school development. Conversely, those who had training in ECE tended to invest in resourcing the reception classes and to include the Foundation Stage in planning.

Clearly, the attitudes, values and perspectives of stakeholders have an impact on teachers' own attitudes and values, as well as on practice. Schools can work with parents

to communicate the rationale for play in the classroom and its role in children's learning. This assumes that the school has clearly articulated these positions for itself. This, in turn, requires Principals to understand and appreciate the characteristics of ECE and to support it within the school. No research has been identified to date on the role of Principals in case where play is being introduced into the infant class to replace more didactic practice. However, the importance of the Principal in educational change is widely recognised (Starr, 2011), and educational change focused on play is unlikely to be different.

3.2.4 Play and Curriculum

One of the differences identified between ECE in the kindergarten and ECE in schools is the degree to which the teachers have flexibility in decisions about their educational objectives and the content they teach (Goldstein, 1997), and this is rooted in the issue of curriculum. Teachers in schools are generally obliged to implement a given curriculum, specific to their system. In many cases, 'play' and 'curriculum' emerge as contradictory concepts:

> [T]he former has been typically thought of as a spontaneous child-initiated activity that does not serve any practical need while the latter has been associated with intentional teaching designed to accomplish clear instructional objectives. (Bodrova and Leong, 2010,1)

Internationally, there are apparently contradictory developments in terms of curriculum review in relation to play. On the one hand, there are examples of a recognition that didactic formal practice is unsuitable for young children, that curricula associated with such practice are unsustainable and the literature provides examples of consequent curriculum change towards play-based curriculum (Hunter and Walsh, 2013; Martlew et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2011; Maynard and Chicken, 2010; Stephen et al., 2010). On the other hand, where play-based curricula are in effect, there is evidence in the literature of

moves to structure the curriculum in terms of accountability, outcomes and content (Skolnick Weisberg et al., 2013; Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010; Drew et al, 2008; Hedges and Cullen, 2005; Wood, 2004).

Associated with the issue of outcomes driven curriculum is the impact of specific programmes mainly concerned with literacy and numeracy skills acquisition (Keating et al., 2002). At a time when a review of the curriculum for the junior classes in primary school in the RoI is underway (NCCA, n.d.a), a review of the relationship between curriculum models and play in the classroom reveals considerable concern that the specified outcomes inherent in many curriculum models have negative consequences for the provision of play in classrooms. Planning play to meet outcomes is a departure from curriculum which responds to children's emergent learning and development (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010).

3.2.4.1 ECE Curriculum Models

A number of reviews have been conducted on ECE curricula across many jurisdictions (Wood, 2013; Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010; Synodi, 2010; Anning et al., 2009; Stephen, 2006; Bertram and Pascal, 2002). The reviews cover different countries and curricular approaches and are conducted from different perspectives. A full synthesis of all of these reviews is beyond the scope of this study, but the curricula from New Zealand, Sweden and England offer quite different models with different approaches in terms of both curriculum outcomes and the place of play. These three curriculum models have been identified as exemplars of different approaches: one which has outcomes which reflect the learning process rather than achievement; a second which has no outcomes per se; and a third which has specific outcomes related to learning areas with associated assessment processes. Reference will also be made to the place of play in these models. It is hoped that outlining key features of these curriculum models will

provide a comparative context for current curriculum provision for infant classes in the RoI, and for the ongoing revision of the PSC for junior classes.

Te Whariki (New Zealand)

Learning outcomes as manifested in Te Whariki can be characterised as indicative rather than prescriptive, with a view to nurturing learning dispositions and working theories (Wood, 2013; Stephen, 2006). Te Whariki is characterised as a child-initiated curriculum (Moyles, 2010). Outcomes are holistic and do not privilege subject areas (Wood, 2013) but this particular characteristic raised challenges about assessing children's learning which led to the development of the 'learning stories' model of holistic assessment (Stephen, 2006). Another challenge has been to identify learning goals for individual children where learning is based on individual interest. The suggested response relies on practitioner expertise and ability to respond with challenging content to support and extend interest (Wood, 2013; Anning et al., 2009). There is no specific section on play in Te Whariki, but analysis has shown evidence of child-directed play, teacher-directed play and mutually-directed play embedded in the framework (Synodi, 2010; Stephen, 2006), but only in relation to certain areas of learning. In practice, the tradition of informal, play-based practice in New Zealand based on children pursuing individually chosen interests without adult involvement has made the transition to the socio-culturally embedded interactional model of Te Whariki a challenge (Anning et al., 2009; Stephen, 2006). In a small detail, but one which has relevance in the RoI, Te Whariki contains no time allocations for learning areas. Te Whariki applies to children in settings prior to school entry which usually happens at age five.

Sweden

The Swedish pre-school curriculum is held to be different from most others (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010; Synodi, 2010). It is short, begins with a philosophical statement

about the fundamental values of democracy; has goals towards which the children are supported to make progress – 'to strive for' (Brodin and Renblad, 2014b) - but those goals are not prescriptive in the sense of any required attainment; does not specify learning areas or outcomes or the formal assessment associated with outcomes models; settings are given responsibility for decision making about the ways in which children will progress towards the learning goals (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010; Stephen, 2006). While there is no specific section on play in the curriculum (Synodi, 2010), it is represented as an ever-present feature of the preschool through which children's meaning making and search for knowledge is achieved (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010; Synodi, 2010; Stephen, 2006). The Swedish preschool curriculum was revised in 2011 (Brodin and Renblad, 2014a) as a result of a restructuring of provision in which preschool became part of the education system as a whole. Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) reported that inclusion of content areas and changing the focus to promoting children's learning as distinct from striving to promote it were mooted at that time. Brodin and Renblad (2014a) describe the resultant changes as a strengthening of the areas of communication, mathematics, technology and nature science within the curriculum. In addition to changes to content areas, planning, assessment, follow-up, evaluation and development received added emphasis with a view to improving programme quality (Brodin and Renblad, 2014a). In a study of the perspectives of Swedish ECE practitioners' responses to the revised curriculum, Brodin and Renbald (2014, 6) found that their participants '... considered the goals of the curriculum to be compatible with their own views, visions, philosophy and what they consider qualitatively good preschool activities'. Nonetheless, despite receiving considerable inservice training, the participants believed it was not sufficient.

England

Wood (2013) attributes the specific and hierarchical outcomes specified in the Early Years Foundation Stage [EYFS] to an instrumentalist approach to early learning within a school readiness agenda (Anning et al., 2009; BERAEYSIG, 2003). Outcomes are to be achieved and children's achievements are to be assessed using specified Assessment Profiles (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Each area of learning is to be delivered through the medium of play, but there are concerns that the version of play which is authorised by the EYFS is reductive and limiting to children (Wood, 2013). In addition, requirements for achievement in literacy and numeracy based on formal approaches in reception classes have undermined the commitment to play in the EYFS (Moyles, 2010). The EYFS is a statutory document and there is therefore a legal requirement on teachers and schools, as well as other settings, to comply with its provision. There has been considerable change and revision of curriculum provisions for young children in England in recent years (Wood, 2013; Anning, 2010) to the point where it is difficult for an outside observer to grasp the significance or the effects of that level of change. Among the authors cited here, there is considerable disquiet about the impact the EYFS is having on practice, particularly on play for younger children in schools.

These three models of curriculum provision for young children reveal the impact of cultural tradition on curricular approaches (Brodin and Renbald, 2014). Highly specified curriculum outcomes are not universal, but where outcomes are less specific, greater demands are placed on teacher expertise; play can be valued in practice but not explicit in curriculum provision; alternatively, specifying play in curriculum may paradoxically, constrain its potential; and, finally, there is no single, universally applicable model of early childhood curriculum, and each jurisdiction must evolve its own.

3.2.4.2 Impact of Formal Curriculum on Practice

Reviews of the references to play in international curriculum models indicate that play is generally acknowledged as central to children's learning (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010; Stephen, 2006). Given that generality, there are different positions on the conceptualisation of play in educational settings which result from play being used as a method of curriculum implementation. Wood (2007a, 314) expresses concern about the terminology used to describe play in schools, such as 'potentially instructive play activities' and 'well-planned, purposeful play', arguing that there is a danger that such conceptualisations of play run the risk of limiting play to the specified learning outcomes. Rogers (2011) offers the example of play as a context for the development of moral and ethical perspectives, neither of which fits easily with measureable outcomes. Wood (2007a) cautions against curriculum for young children which functions as a 'straitjacket' on practitioners.

The 'straitjacket' model of curriculum is characterised as utilitarian (Goouch, 2008) and reflecting competing perspectives among the social, political and professional stakeholder groups who contribute to its structure and contents (Keating et al., 2002). Such a model is also associated with restrictive forms of assessment and testing (Keating et al., 2002; Anning et al., 2009) and a tendency to propel practice towards direct teacher instruction (Skolnick Weisberg et al., 2013; Fung and Cheng, 2012; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Rogers and Evans, 2007; Wood and Bennett, 1999). However, there is growing evidence of the efficacy of play in supporting children's learning as well as a recognition that didactic teaching is not optimal for young children (Hunter and Walsh, 2013; Martlew et al., 2011; Hirsh-Pasek, 2009; Walsh et al., 2006). Young children are understood to learn in an integrated, holistic way which is not compatible with discrete subject disciplines (Wood, 1999). The propensity of prescriptive curriculum to encourage the prevalence of didactic formal teaching and the restriction of play pedagogy is at the root of efforts to

change curriculum for the early years to reflect current research evidence and theoretical perspectives (Hunter and Walsh, 2013).

Bernstein's (2000) theory of classification, framing and visible/invisible pedagogy is helpful in considering why a curriculum based variously on content, subjects, outcomes, and/or learning areas appears to be connected with a predominantly direct teaching or didactic model, especially in the early years in primary school. This appears to be particularly relevant in the RoI where evidence suggests that the curriculum, although it mandates play as an important learning context, is delivered predominantly through didactic methods (Murphy, 2004b). Classification refers to the space or distinctions between categories, in this case school subjects. A category is not defined solely by what it is, but in relation to what it is not: History is not just defined by its internal organisation but by being distinguished from, for example, English. Siraj-Blatchford (2009, 149) refers to this as the '... boundary maintenance between curriculum subject contents'. The PSC (DES, 1999a) is presented as eleven separate subjects (twelve if Religious Education is included) for the junior and senior infant classes, and is an example of strong classification in Bernstein's (2000, 7) model.

> Thus, externally, the classificatory principle creates order, and the contradictions, cleavages and dilemmas which necessarily inhere in the principle of a classification are suppressed by the insulation.

This tendency of strong classification to mask the connectivity between the subjects is likely to add to the difficulty of teachers in infant classes who are presented with 11 books of curriculum objectives, accompanied by the contradictory caveat that '[t]he child at infant level perceives and experiences learning in an integrated way' (DES, 1999b, 69).

Framing (Bernstein, 2000) refers to the relationship between the protagonists, in this case the pupil and the teacher, and who exercises control in the relationship. Where the

teacher is in control, framing is strong and vice versa (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Where classification and framing are both strong, i.e. when subjects (and their associated curriculum objectives) are clearly distinguished from each other and the teacher controls the delivery of the content, Bernstein (2000) argues that pedagogy is made visible. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) refers to this as the programmed approach and Brooker (2002) refers to it as explicit pedagogy. Where both classification and framing are weak, i.e. where learning is integrated and the child exerts control over the learning context, pedagogy is said to be invisible – implicit pedagogy (Brooker, 2002).

Play is seen as constituting an invisible pedagogy with weak framing within weak classification (McInnes et al., 2011), and this is aligned with a child-centred approach to ECE practice (albeit an extreme version of it) which is exclusively based on the child's interests (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Bernstein's (2000) model provides a context for understanding the connections between strongly classified curriculum and didactic teaching: strong classification of subjects and related content objectives precludes exploration by children as the end point of the learning process is known (see McInnes et al., 2009; Bonawitz et al., 2011). Play, which can be '... anarchic, subversive and unpredictable ...' (Wood, 2013, 15) cannot be relied upon to lead the child along the specific path which will conclude with the achievement of the curriculum objective. Teachers must exercise strong framing and control of the process in order to ensure 'coverage' (Goldstein, 1997, 17).

Teachers operate at the fault line between content and outcomes focused curriculum requirements and the need for play to reflect children's agency. Keating et al. (2002) found that teachers had difficulty in justifying play in the classroom in the context of a content-driven curriculum. However, teachers continued to experience difficulties following the introduction of the Foundation Stage Curriculum in England because the

focus now shifted to accountability for children's learning through play. Accounting for learning through play in the context of a content-driven, subject based curriculum which focuses on specified outcomes can be problematic. This is because play is a highly complex but often poorly understood phenomenon, diverse in its manifestations. This may contribute to the uncertainties among teachers about how to guarantee the educational value of play (Walsh et al., 2011). Wood (2004) cites the example of the misinterpretation of the Desirable Learning Outcomes by schools' Inspectors in which play was relegated to the periphery, leading to inappropriate practice in some ECE settings.

Wood (2013, 4) problematises the place of play within pre-school and school settings, referring to the '...overly structured forms of social control within the educational/pedagogic gaze'. This position is consistent with Kuschner (2012) in asserting that in pre-schools and schools, play is always structured to some degree. However, the greater problem is located, not in the school or classroom itself, but in the policy frameworks within which practice is confined. In summarising a review of play in national policies, Wood (2013) argues that policy is a mixed blessing. While early years policies keep play high on the policy agenda, they also make demands for accountability in ways that are not compatible with best practice in play as described in the literature. These demands are encapsulated in defined learning outcomes. Wood's (2013) response mirrors Kuschner's (2012) argument about contradictions in that she asserts that while research reveals play as complex and demanding, it does not lend itself to the certainty required in the educational system.

> Because play is so diverse, and so complex, the task of understanding play is challenging, and even more so when practitioners need to make connections between this vast research and knowledge base and the expectations of play in practice. ... Therefore play is less likely to produce either tangible evidence of learning or the learning outcomes that are valued by parents and politicians. (Wood, 2013, 41/42)

Wood's (2013) analysis of the tensions created by policy, which simultaneously endorses play and misunderstands it, resonates with the situation in Ireland with regard to *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011–2020'* (DES, 2011a). While this strategy recommends that practice in infant classes should prioritise play (DES, 2011a), it also emphasises the necessity for clarity about the learning outcomes to be expected of children (DES, 2011a). This is consistent with Wood's (2013) comments about mixed blessings, because while the emphasis on avoiding premature formality and prioritising play are very welcome, the equal emphasis on learning outcomes sets up something of a conundrum. Ó Breacháin and O'Toole (2013) conclude that the literacy and numeracy strategy represents a move away from a conceptualisation of education in which children's holistic development is prioritised to one in which education is a vehicle for political expediency.

The focus of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011a) is to improve standards in both areas among children and young people in the RoI, and includes reference to accountability and targets for improvements on standardised tests. It also refers to in-school goals and the monitoring of progress internally. Such requirements, as the literature indicates, are likely to promote didactic practice. This appears to gainsay research findings which indicate that where children have the opportunity to playfully explore a given task, they show significantly more improvement in their performance on the task than those children who were given direct instruction (i.e. the outcome was specified) (McInnes et al., 2009). Bonawitz et al. (2011) found that direct instruction led

to a reduction in children's willingness to explore or find out more because the children seemed to infer that the teacher would have shown them all the possibilities inherent in the task/process. The possibilities demonstrated were taken to be the only possibilities. Specifically in relation to literacy development, there is evidence that a combination of both play and teacher modelling enhances children's creative writing (Whitebread and Jameson, 2005). Children in this study of creative writing who only had teacher modelling in preparation for the task, were more limited in their creativity, apparently feeling they had to follow the teacher's example closely in order to successfully complete the task. Children who had the opportunity (through play with story sacks) to explore the topic in advance of teacher modelling showed enhanced creativity in their writing (Whitebread and Jameson, 2005). This example would seem to support concerns that working to specified outcomes runs the risk of limiting children's learning by excluding other avenues of learning possibilities.

Teachers' responses to the range of tensions represented by the dichotomies illustrated here add to the layers of complexity represented by these dichotomies. Drew et al. (2008) have articulated concerns that early learning standards are reducing the time, space and opportunities for play as didactic methods are seen by teachers as more consistent with those standards. Rogers and Evans (2007) note that early years teachers may respond to the pressures from an increasing culture of 'performativity' in schools by focusing on formal teaching methods rather than on the more appropriate approaches associated with a pedagogy of play. Even where play was facilitated, Rogers and Evans (2007) noted instances where it was 'contained' by the teachers because of noise and space considerations. Even where teachers did not prioritise didactic methods to achieve curriculum goals, having to address these goals required the teachers to interrupt individual children's play in order to, for example, hear reading or teach phonics.

The relationship between play and curriculum as described in the literature and which 'plays' out in the classroom where it is mediated by teachers, is fraught. A particular type of curriculum model focused on accountability through specified outcomes is associated with the likelihood of didactic teaching dominating the infant classroom, even where this is not the intention of such curricula (Rogers, 2011). Considerable disquiet about the reduction in play opportunities for young children is evident in the literature (Nicolopoulou, 2010; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Bodrova, 2008). The evidence repeatedly demonstrates the contradictions between teachers' stated position on the benefits of play for young children and their practice (Hunter and Walsh, 2013; Moyles et al., 2002; Bennett et al., 1997). It is an insufficient response to the predicament of teachers facing the contradictions inherent in the process of curriculum implementation through the medium of play to point out that such contradictions exist and expect each individual teacher to resolve the issue.

In response, Grieshaber and McArdle (2010, 110) reject what they refer to as the 'siege mentality' in which outcomes and play-based ECE are seen to be 'at war'. They suggest that debating these issues offers opportunities to acknowledge the complexities inherent in play pedagogy and to move beyond conceptualisations of play itself as beneficial by default, existing in a vacuum and immune to the messiness of classroom power relations. While dialogue is useful, it is also the case that policy makers have a responsibility to those who will be required to implement that policy to ensure its consistency with best practice in the field, and to support teachers in the pedagogical change required.

McLachlan et al. (2013) suggest that in most ECE curriculum models, the learner has a degree of control over the content and learning process. However, as was noted in the review of Te Whariki earlier, basing curriculum on individual choice raised issues about how to identify goals for individual children in a socio-cultural learning context. Wood

and Bennett (1999) argue that children's self-directed activity will not, of itself, lead to children learning, especially in the area of skills. A child's interest in a topic or phenomenon does not necessarily constitute a learning goal (Wood, 2007b). There is an acceptance that learning through play is not a given and that some support structures are needed to make learning through play more likely (Wood, 2013). Within a socio-cultural approach, there are certain cultural tools (such as reading and writing) which are needed for the child to be able to engage with cultural practices and which, therefore, need to be progressed (van Oers and Duijkers, 2013; Stephen, 2010). The concern is to develop curriculum which is consistent with the particular characteristics of play that make it 'play'.

3.3 Play, Teaching and Learning

If we accept that '... play in educational settings should have *learning* consequences' (Moyles, 2010, 9, emphasis in the original), then solutions must be found for the conundrums which teachers of young children must navigate on a daily basis. Evidence indicates that teachers experience great difficulty in mediating play into practice (Martlew et al., 2011; McInnes et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2011; Stephen et al., 2010). Wood (2013) argues that policy frameworks which guide practice should be structured to enable the integration of play, learning and teaching. This section will consider the place of teaching in relation to play and learning in ECE, and review models of an integrated approach to play, teaching and learning which have the potential to inform classroom practice.

3.3.1 Teaching

The inclusion of teaching in the play, teaching and learning equation requires some consideration as Siraj-Blatchford (2009) has pointed out that a consensus developed

within Western approaches to ECE which precluded teaching as part of pedagogy, favouring non-directive facilitation instead. Ryan and Goffin (2008, 390) define 'teaching' in ECE as 'an interaction among teachers, learners, content, and context'. They argue that teaching in ECE, despite its complexities, has not received adequate research attention because the focus has been on curriculum which begins with and focuses on the child's development, with the effect of making teachers and their teaching less visible. In effect, they assert, teachers and their teaching are 'missing in action'.

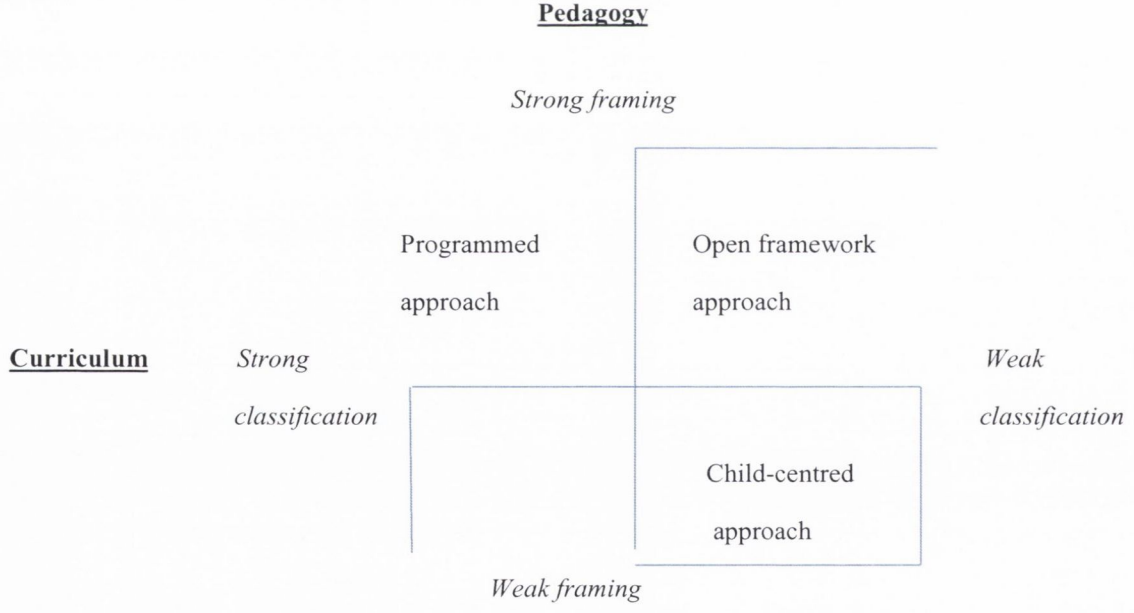
Siraj-Blatchford (2009, 148) argues that teaching is implicit in pedagogy, which she distinguishes from curriculum:

> While curriculum may therefore be understood as denoting all of the knowledge, skills and values that children are meant to learn in educational establishments, pedagogy is referred to as the practice (or the art, the science or the craft) of teaching.

This distinction between curriculum and pedagogy is important in informing practice, but also for establishing the relationship between the two, what Skolnick Weisberg et al. (2013) describe as distinguishing between the 'what' and the 'how'. This contrasts with *Aistear's* (NCCA, 2009) conceptualisation of curriculum as experiential, rather than related to specified content. The relationship between curriculum and pedagogy is especially pertinent when we come to consider how a pedagogy of play could relate to curriculum. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) summarises the debate by noting that, for some, curriculum should be a matter of children's individually chosen activity, but argues in return that '... if there is no legitimate curriculum to be taught in the early years, then there is clearly no need for teachers/educators' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009, 148). In any case, this represents a pragmatic perspective, as some form of codified or 'formal written curriculum' for ECE is applied in many jurisdictions (Stephen, 2010, 17), and certainly in the RoI.

Siraj-Blatchford (2009) identifies three categories of relationship between curriculum and pedagogy, based on Bernstein's (2000) theory of classification (of curriculum) and framing (pedagogical structure):

- The programmed approach is characterised by high levels of teacher-directed activity, little opportunity for child initiative and highly structured curriculum content.
- The open-framework approach is characterised by clearly articulated pedagogy in which the teacher supports the child's engagement within the child's chosen learning environment. Curriculum classification is weak, implying indistinct subject boundaries.
- The final category is the 'child-centred approach' in which the teacher is entirely child-led and practice is primarily responsive.



Adapted from Siraj-Blatchford (2009, 149)

Siraj-Blatchford suggests that, in practice, the application of these approaches overlap and combine. However, a codified curriculum cannot be both weakly and strongly classified at the same time, so therefore it is difficult to understand how the programmed approach could be compatible with the other two approaches. Indeed, neither the open framework nor the child-centred approaches are compatible with a strongly classified curriculum.

In elaborating what a strongly framed pedagogy might look like, Siraj-Blatchford (2009) identified three areas of pedagogy which, she suggests, contribute equally to early learning: pedagogical instructional techniques, the encouragement of affective involvement and the encouragement of cognitive co-construction. Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) redefine 'instruction' away from the traditional understandings of instruction as 'teacher exposition' (Martlew et al., 2011) to include direct instruction which includes modelling and questioning, and indirect instruction, one aspect of which is 'pedagogical framing'. Pedagogical framing includes the provision of an instructive play environment. Affective involvement is necessary for the child to be motivated to engage with cognitive challenge (Moyles, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), and cognitive co-construction is understood as 'sustained shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002).

Wood and Attfield (2005, 173) comment that sustained shared thinking often occurs during sustained shared playing, and Walsh et al. (2011) noted that spontaneous playful interactions could initiate episodes of sustained shared thinking. Sustained shared thinking is defined as:

> An episode in which two or more individuals "work together" in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative, etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend. (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, 8)

The role of the teacher in sustained shared thinking has been elaborated by Walsh et al. (2010b) as part of the articulation of a playful pedagogy, known as 'playful structure', for the early years of schooling. 'Enjoying playful interactions' suggests that if a teacher adopts certain roles in their interactions with children, the ensuing extended interactions have the potential to support 'sustained shared thinking' or co-constructed learning:

- Co-player/play partner
- Co-learner/co-explorer
- Facilitator
- Listener/decoder
- Co-planner
- Commentator

Walsh et al. (2010b) locate some of the dichotomies between play and work in the teacher's style of interaction during teacher initiated/directed tasks. They observed that the teacher's tone became more serious, showing less warmth towards the children, and they encourage teachers to keep the tone of the interaction playful, whatever the nature of the task. Stephen (2010) draws attention to the emotional and social aspects of pedagogical interactions which were observed among teachers and children, and which contributed to the development of positive learning dispositions among the children. McInnes et al. (2011) suggest that it is what might be called the ambient playfulness associated with an activity, rather than the play itself which promotes learning. So, to return to Siraj-Blatchford's (2009) three aspects of pedagogy which contribute to children's learning, all are predicated on the playful qualities of the teacher's interactional style.

3.3.2 Integrated Models of Play, Teaching and Learning

Interactional style represents just one set of considerations in an overall pedagogy of play, which has been defined as:

> ... the ways in which early childhood professionals make provision for play and playful approaches to learning and teaching, how they design play/learning environments, and all the pedagogical decisions, techniques and strategies they use to support or enhance learning and teaching through play. (Wood, 2009, 27)

Despite this broad definition and despite all the attention focused on play, there is no definitive model of a 'pedagogy of play' (Rogers, 2011). Further, trying to establish what such a pedagogy might be has been contentious because of the hegemonic position of the free play, free choice perspective (Wood, 2009). Skolnick Weisberg et al. (2013) argue that preschool pedagogy in practice is often conceptualised as a choice between the extremes of free play and direct instruction. It is hardly surprising that difficulties with play in practice repeatedly feature in the literature (Hunter and Walsh, 2013; Martlew et al., 2011; McInnes et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2011; Christmas, 2005). It is difficult for teachers to be clear when the literature itself is inconclusive.

Synodi (2010) acknowledges the difficulties of putting theory into practice in the classroom and presents a model of play pedagogy which attempts to provide a resolution to those difficulties. Synodi (2010) suggests that a pedagogy of play must be situated in responsive education predicated on the children as active participants and drivers of their own learning. She distinguishes this from directive education based on the delivery of codified knowledge within a play-work dichotomy. In other words, responsive education implies a weakly classified curriculum, and directive education implies a strongly classified curriculum. The further implication is that play pedagogy cannot be reconciled with a strongly classified curriculum.

In the context of responsive education, Synodi (2010) suggests that in practice, a pedagogy of play provides play opportunities in three contexts: child directed play, adult directed play, and mutually directed play. In child directed play, the adult role is as an organiser, observer, listener, and planner, roles which echo Walsh et al.'s (2010b) framework. Teacher directed play is characterised as playful activities through which children can consolidate what they have been taught. When teachers become involved in children's play in ways that respect the children's intentions in the play, mutually directed play can occur. The teacher is a co-player, equally invested in the play and equally focused on maintaining the integrity of the play. Co-construction is at the heart of this integrated pedagogy of play, as is children's understanding of the teacher as a play partner. Where teachers, by their actions, such as disrupting play to engage children in literacy activities, show that they do not value play, children will not view the teacher as a co-player and will not accept the teacher into play, making mutually directed play unlikely (McInnes et al., 2011).

Walsh et al. (2011) responded to the need they identified for an elaboration of what play-based practice means in the early years in primary school, given the specific conditions associated with play in schools and considered in Section 3.2. They acknowledge that in the school setting, there are disjunctions between formal and informal learning, and between play and work, and that these disjunctions have negative consequences for children's experiences, especially their play experiences. They have identified what they term 'playful structure' specifically to provide a bridge or connecting tissue between the contradictory elements of practice in infant classrooms. Playful structure involves infusing playfulness into interactions between teacher and child(ren) and into structured or didactic activities (Walsh et al., 2011). Conversely, playful structure requires the infusion of structure into play, a task which the authors note requires high levels of skill

and which proved difficult for teachers, especially in role play. Playful structure is founded on six pillars of classroom practice:

1. Establishing secure relationships
2. Enjoying playful interactions
3. Creating playful opportunities
4. Providing adequate structure
5. Respecting individual differences
6. Managing progression and transitions. (Walsh et al., 2010b)

The authors acknowledge that individual teacher personality and disposition will have an impact, but they suggest that teacher education could be effective in promoting such an approach, notwithstanding teacher temperament.

The idea of structure in play also features in Wood's (2013) model of integrated curriculum and pedagogical approaches. This is described as a pragmatic acknowledgement that play in school is always structured to some extent by the context and conditions of the school (Wood, 2007a). In addition, there are other considerations that inform the rationale for more or less structure in play: for example, the degree to which free play based on children's interests will have learning consequences (Skolnick Wesiberg et al., 2013; Stephen, 2010; Wood, 2007b; Wood and Bennett, 1999). Wood's (2013) integrated model is based on a continuum between work (non-play) and free play with adult-directed activities corresponding to the work end of the continuum and child-initiated activities corresponding to the play end of the continuum. Play will be positioned on the continuum depending on the degree of structure applied, tending more towards the teacher directed/work zone when more structured and vice versa. Wood (2013) acknowledges that, consistent with both playful structure (Walsh et al., 2011) and

Synodi's (2010) typology, adult directed activities may have playful and imaginative elements.

The balance along the continuum varies according to the children's developing interests and the teacher's responses. The recursive cycle of curriculum planning (Wood, 2013) built into the model supports the teacher's responsiveness. The planning cycle includes planning the play/learning environment; implementing plans; and observing, evaluating, reflecting on and assessing the learning through play. Uniquely, there are four categories of planning activities envisaged in 'Planning the play/learning environment' which are useful in connecting the theoretical underpinnings of the model with classroom practice:

- The first category refers to planning the physical space, both indoors and outdoors; provision of resources for a broad range of activities including creative play, construction play, tech play, literacy, etc. While planning for time to play is not specified, planning daily routines is referred to and this could encompass the time issue.
- The second category of planning refers explicitly to curriculum goals and objectives. Planning for curriculum implementation is characterised as 'planning towards' curriculum objectives in both adult- and child-initiated activities, where the planning takes into account or anticipates what the possible or potential outcomes of the play might be. While short-, medium- and long-term planning are mentioned, the main focus should be on short- and medium-term planning.
- The next category focuses on planning for adult-directed activities, with the emphasis on small group and one-to-one contexts. Adult-directed activities should focus on the teaching of skills and curriculum

knowledge. Such planning should encompass planning for the role of the teacher (see Synodi, 2010 and Walsh et al., 2010b).

- Finally, the teacher needs to plan opportunities for play and other child-initiated activities.

This model is compatible with both 'playful structure' (Walsh et al., 2010b) and the model of play pedagogy proposed by Synodi (2010). All three models address the practical problems associated with the translation of theories of learning through play into classroom practice.

In essence, the teacher '... cannot plan children's play, but can plan for children's play ...' (Wood, 2013, 68), a position echoed in Skolnick Weisberg et al.'s (2013) approach to reconciling curriculum with play pedagogy. They suggest a form of play they call 'guided play' which they locate between the extremes of 'free play' and 'no play'. However, unlike the three integrated pedagogical models described above, Skolnick Weisberg et al. (2013) argue that the evidence suggests that what they call a 'strong curricular approach' promotes academic development. On the one hand, the authors make a very clear distinction between curriculum – *what* is taught – and pedagogy – *how* it is taught. On the other hand, they deplore the trend they have identified in ECE curricula and testing materials to over-focus on content, arguing that '[t]he implementation of such curricula often comes at the expense of other types of pedagogical methods' (Skolnick Weisberg et al., 2013, 104).

Guided play (Skolnick Weisberg et al., 2013) builds on the evidence which indicates that children learn best and achieve better academic outcomes when they learn through playful approaches which have been scaffolded by the teacher. They describe it as a pedagogical middle ground, in contrast to the models described earlier which address a continuum of approaches. In guided play, the adult scaffolds the learning objectives but

the play itself is characterised as child-directed. Guided play is adult initiated, but once initiated, the teacher follows the child's lead with the adult fulfilling the kind of roles envisaged by Walsh et al. (2010b), through processes that are recognisable as sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). The purpose of this type of engagement, however, differs from the purpose of sustained shared thinking. In guided play, the purpose is to focus the child on the learning outcomes the teacher has built into the learning environment, '... to zero in on the key variables' (Skolnick Weisberg et al., 2013, 106) while the child pursues her/his own discovery process. Sustained shared thinking is based on the principle of co-construction (König, 2009) but does not envisage that the teacher would have an agenda other than to co-construct meaning with the child.

It could be argued that guided play as conceptualised by Skolnick Weisberg et al. (2013) is an attempt to deal with the unpredictability of play referred to by Wood (2013) which makes it difficult to guarantee that specific outcomes can be met. However, activity which is always adult initiated cannot be called play as a characteristic of play is that it is child-invented (Wood, 2013), and activity which is always focused on the salient details as determined by the adult cannot be mutually directed play either (Synodi, 2010). Nor is it clear to what extent children - who are known to resist adult framing (Evaldsson and Tellgren, 2009) - will co-operate with the teacher's intentions. Guided play envisages the child as an 'active collaborator', and the teacher is expected to provide 'subtle scaffolding' (Skolnick Weisberg et al., 2013, 106). In many ways, guided play is very similar to, for example, mutually directed play (Synodi, 2010) but there is a fundamental and critical difference in that the teacher is pursuing outcomes rather than for example, drawing on his/her own pedagogical content knowledge to complement the flow of the child's play (Hedges and Cullen, 2005). While Skolnick Weisberg et al. (2013) argue that guided play offers a focused approach to children's learning which promotes positive

academic outcomes, the position argued here is that it privileges adult direction and does not adequately provide for children's initiative or choice. .

While they differ in some respects, the pedagogical models described by Wood (2013), Walsh et al. (2011) and Synodi (2010) suggest that teachers need to think about their practice, including how they might see themselves as teachers in playful interactions. If teaching is not 'exposition' but an interaction involving the teacher, the learners, the content and the context, then teachers need new ways of being a teacher. The models outlined above offer teachers a reconceptualization of 'the teacher' in a play-based pedagogy, and help to counter Ryan and Goffin's (2008) concerns about the invisibility of teaching in ECE. Teachers themselves have to 'see' their own teaching in the context of play pedagogy. Stephen (2010) describes a series of multi-modal pedagogical strategies used by teachers, consistent with what can be understood as playful structure, but found that the participant teachers did not themselves see these actions as 'teaching'. Their own teaching was invisible to the teachers themselves. Stephen (2010) refers to this as the 'taken-for-granted nature of pedagogic actions'. A similar response was identified by Moyles et al. (2002).

Where pedagogic framing is weak, as in these examples of teachers not being aware of the rationale for their own actions, there may be consequences for the children's learning of content. Hedges and Cullen (2005) observe that knowledge construction in the context of play pedagogy or a play-based curriculum (such as Te Whariki) is most likely to occur in interactions which connect with children's interests. They suggest that extensive pedagogical content knowledge has the potential to address concerns about content being inappropriately separated into curriculum subjects. They point out that ECE teachers need broad content knowledge to challenge the children, in addition to enhanced awareness of the opportunities which arise in interactions with children in order to be

able to use such knowledge effectively. Indeed, Hedges and Cullen (2005) found that the teachers in their study did not use their content knowledge in their spontaneous interactions with the children, and the teachers did not pick up on the children's interest in the subject. Haney and Bissonnette (2011) suggest that this is a likely consequence of teachers not recognising the importance of play for cognitive development.

van Oers (2010) has described the mechanism through which teacher pedagogical content knowledge connects with children's emergent conceptual knowledge in the context of maths education as a 'cultural discipline' (van Oers, 2010, 28). van Oers (2010, 26) begins by defining meaningful learning as having two dimensions: the cultural meaning of 'actions, objects, goals, tools/symbols' and the personal meaning the individual attributes to those actions, objects, goals, tools/symbols. 'Young children are not born with these ready-made symbolic tools ...' (van Oers, 2010, 28), and must learn cultural meanings through actions that have personal meaning. The learning process promotes children's autonomous participation in practices which are culturally meaningful and valued. Drawing on Vygotskian (1978) theory, van Oers (2010) outlines three stages in the process through which a child is introduced to shared cultural understanding in the area of maths. The child unintentionally or spontaneously acts in a particular way or articulates a particular thought which is observed by the adult and interpreted by him/her as a mathematical act or utterance. The adult then responds to the child in a mathematical way, helping the child to enter into the cultural (mathematical) meaning of the unintentional act. Over time, and through multiple such interactions, the child's understanding of the cultural (mathematical) meaning of such acts develops in contexts which have personal meaning for the child.

> ... an important condition for the emergence of mathematical thinking in the early years is the adults' act of articulating spontaneous actions of the child and – if appropriate –assigning mathematical meaning to it. (van Oers, 2010, 31)

van Oers (2010) concurs with Hedges and Cullen (2005) that in practice, opportunities offered by the spontaneous interactions between teachers and children are not taken advantage of to any significant degree. He argues that teachers should always be alert for such opportunities in the context of play. Role play, in particular, is cited as the context in which children explore cultural practices, including culturally meaningful mathematics practices (van Oers, 2010).

Saracho and Spodek (2006) locate literacy in the child's world and Hall (2007) situates literacy within cultural values and practices. Literacy learning can be understood in the same way as mathematics learning in van Oers' (2010) definition of meaningful learning as having both cultural and personal dimensions. Hall (2007) examines the split between literacy in school and literacy as a social and cultural phenomenon. He argues, echoing Kuschner (2012), that the imposition of literacy through formal 'ritualistic' (Hall, 2007, 172) practice in school is embedded in the institution of the school. Hall (2007, 171) argues that it is the social and cultural 'real-worldness' of literacy that children need to engage with in school rather than the disconnected practices associated with school literacy. He further shows how culturally meaningful literacy practices can be promoted in ways that are personally meaningful to children through the teacher's pro-active responsiveness to the children's socio-dramatic play. Vygotskian theory posits that literacy knowledge is generated through social interaction and is embedded in social situations, of which play is an example (Saracho and Spodek, 2006).

Integrated models of play pedagogy allow teachers to respond to the challenges of teaching and learning through play in the school context with its focus on accountability for curriculum implementation. It has to be acknowledged that play pedagogy makes demands on teachers' professional expertise, pedagogical content knowledge and

responsiveness, and these capacities will have an impact on the effectiveness of play in the classroom.

3.4 Conclusion

While the tensions between play and the culture and traditions of the school as an institution have been articulated in the literature, the conclusion reached on the basis of this review is that play pedagogy can work in schools. The tensions articulated relate to the school as a cultural institution; issues of time, space and class size; the impact of stakeholder perspectives on practice; the impact of curriculum on practice; and teaching as an aspect of ECE.

Evidence from Northern Ireland [NI] has shown (McGuinness et al., 2009) that schools can adapt to the effects of the implementation of play pedagogy in the infant classrooms. The Principal has an important role to play in supporting this change, and the evidence indicates that Principals are better placed to support such change when they have knowledge and awareness of the particular characteristics of teaching and learning among the younger children in the school. Schools can potentially develop supportive relationships with parents through effective communication of the rationale for play in the classroom, and of the learning which takes place through play.

Time, space and class sizes all feature in the literature as material influences on practice, but there is evidence to suggest that, at least in terms of time and space, the teacher can approach these conditions in ways which mitigate their impact. While tradition seems to dictate that classrooms are dominated by tables and chairs, there is evidence of teachers reorganising the space to make more room for areas of provision (Broadhead, 2004). Planning for play to happen during longer stretches in the school timetable and desisting from interrupting the play for academic activities will address the time issue from the

child's point of view. There is no barrier to this approach in the PSC (DES, 1999a), which mandates the integration of subject learning in infant classes and specifically recommends flexible use of time to achieve this.

Class size is consistently cited as a constraint on play in practice, and is not subject to the control of the school in the RoI. In this instance, the lack of teaching assistants and the pressure on the individual teacher from the number of children is likely to be a substantial constraint on practice. No equivalent for the situation in infant classes in the RoI was found in the literature. Class sizes in infant classes in the RoI need to be reduced, and, as the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD] (2004) recommended ten years ago, infant classes should be resourced with teaching assistants.

The lessons from the literature on the relationship between curriculum and play are clear, and particularly pertinent in the context of the revision of the PSC (DES, 1999a) currently underway. Prescriptive curriculum objectives tend to drive practice into didactic teaching and teacher exposition formats. The curriculum revision should ensure that play is specifically mandated and that the learning outcomes should be compatible with play. There are examples in the literature of integrated models of play pedagogy which can address the need for schools to progress and account for children's learning through play, but the curriculum has to provide the opportunity for them to do so.

Stephen (2010, 26) cautions against '... placing practitioners in a deficit position', but does suggest that practitioners need to articulate their pedagogical perspective. This also resonates with the need for schools to communicate their rationale for play, particularly to parents. Teachers require considerable expertise to implement play pedagogy effectively (Wood, 2007a), and there is a need for those involved in teacher education, both pre- and in-service, to ensure that teachers are equipped to do so. It is very clear

from the literature reviewed here that, notwithstanding the importance of the Principal and other stakeholders, the teacher is the crucial person in determining the nature of practice in the infant classroom. This emphasises the importance of understanding the attitudes, values and perspectives of teachers towards play in the infant classes, as is the purpose of this study.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to add to the knowledge base about play in infant classes in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland [RoI] in the context of the recent policy developments in early childhood education [ECE] here, as outlined in Chapter 1. The overarching research question guiding the study is:

> What are teachers' educational beliefs about play in infant classes in primary schools in the RoI?

The sub-questions associated with this overarching question are:

1. What do the data indicate are the elements which constitute teachers' educational beliefs about play in schools?
2. What do the data reveal about the attitudes, values and perspectives which underpin teachers' educational beliefs about play in infant classes?
3. How do these educational beliefs relate to the literature on play in schools?

4.2 Research Design

This project was designed as a qualitative, exploratory, interpretative process through which the perspectives of the participants on play in infant classes could be considered. The following sections will outline the approach taken to the research and the methods employed to gather and analyse relevant data.

4.2.1 Qualitative Research

The overall aim of this research is to explore and describe in thematic form teachers' beliefs about play in infant classes. A priority is to do these things in a way that honours

the teachers' perspectives and the way in which they articulate their understandings of play in their own terms. As noted by Flick (2009, 59), qualitative research is characterised by an emphasis on the participants' perspectives and on the meanings they themselves assign to their lived experience. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) also emphasise that the qualitative approach to research is about establishing the meaning which people invest in their lives and in the artefacts which surround their lives. They delineate four dimensions of qualitative research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011) – ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods – which comprise what they refer to as research practice, and which must be accounted for by the researcher.

Qualitative research is a broad church which has evolved over time to encompass a range of research paradigms or worldviews (Flick, 2009; Creswell, 2007). It should be noted briefly that there are variations of focus among the authors cited here on the relationship between the overarching concept of the qualitative approach as described by, for example, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) and Flick (2009), and research paradigms as described by, for example, Mertens (2005). The former see paradigms emerging from the qualitative research process and the latter suggests that the research process begins with the researcher identifying her/his own worldview. Mertens (2005) describes qualitative research as a methodological approach particularly associated with the constructivist paradigm. As with other aspects of this research (e.g. educational beliefs, data analysis), distinctions and differences relate to the terminology used rather than any variation in the phenomenon being described. For example, Flick's (2009) description and discussion of qualitative research is broadly similar to Mertens' (2005) description of the constructivist paradigm. The term 'paradigm' itself has also been used to describe quantitative and qualitative research as overarching categories of research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004), and has merited a discussion of its use across the literature (Bergman, 2010). For

the purpose of this project, Hesse-Biber and Leavy's (2011) account of the qualitative approach to research provides the background, and their four dimensions of research provide the structure within which the process is described, but Mertens (2005) paradigmatic framework is applied within those dimensions.

4.2.2 Constructivist Paradigm

Mertens (2005) identified four paradigms in all, of which the constructivist paradigm describes most accurately the perspective adopted throughout this research project. Drawing on the work of Guba and Lincoln (1994), Mertens (2005, 9) describes the constructivist paradigm as follows:

Table 4.1 Constructivist paradigm

Ontology (nature of reality)	Multiple, socially constructed realities
Epistemology (nature of knowledge: relation between knower and would-be known)	Interactive link between researcher and participants; values are made explicit; created findings
Methodology (approach to systematic inquiry)	Qualitative (primarily); hermeneutical; dialectical; contextual factors are described

4.2.2.1 Ontology

The ontological position adopted here acknowledges the complexity of participants' perspectives, the range of those perspectives and the possibility of conflicting perspectives within the participant groups (Mertens, 2005). Diversity is not only acknowledged and accounted for, but the researcher actively seeks to accommodate complexity rather than constrict it (Creswell, 2007).

4.2.2.2 Epistemology

The epistemology associated with the constructivist paradigm provides a framework for understanding the relationship between the researcher and the research participants, and also has an impact on the nature of the research methods employed (Mertens, 2005). Within the constructivist paradigm, the relationship between the researcher and the research participants is interactive, each exerting influence over the other. Creswell's (2007) account of constructivism also acknowledges the interpretative characteristic of the epistemology associated with this paradigm, and notes that the researcher needs to account for the impact of personal, professional and cultural history on his/her interpretation. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) refer to the 'Interpretive Strand' as one of the three main theoretical approaches to research, and it is within this strand that social meaning and understanding is pursued. Despite the differences in terminology, there is considerable overlap between their 'Interpretive Strand' and Mertens' (2005) and Creswell's (2007) description of constructivism, with both focusing on socially constructed, diverse meanings which are understood through a process of interpretation by the researcher, who holds an acknowledged worldview – the axiological assumptions to which Creswell (2007, 18) refers. Indeed, Lincoln et al. (2011, 102) use 'Constructivism' and 'Interpretivist' as interchangeable terms.

Constructivism recognises that the findings from research within this paradigm are created in the process of research, a fact acknowledged by Braun and Clarke (2006) whose framework for thematic analysis is applied in this project. Braun and Clarke (2006) reject the idea of themes 'emerging' from the data as if they exist, pre-formed, waiting to be discovered by the researcher. They emphasise the active role played by the interpreter/researcher in looking for themes, a process echoed in the literature on the dialogic foundations of the hermeneutic approach to interpretation (Rennie, 2012; Kögler, 2011).

4.2.3 Trustworthiness and Rigour

There is considerable debate on the issue of trustworthiness and rigour in qualitative research, much of it related to the terminology. Morse et al. (2002, 15) argue that what they characterise as a 'plethora of terms' is, in itself, causing confusion and has reduced the accuracy with which 'rigour' in qualitative research can be identified. Tracy (2010, 837) suggests that this 'vast array' is problematic, particularly for those new to qualitative research. The argument often focuses on the use of the term 'validity', the construct to which it refers and its origin in quantitative research (Morse et al., 2002; Winter, 2000). However, even where the term 'validity' is rejected, and irrespective of the terminology chosen (Guest et al., 2012; Winter, 2000), the question remains of how, within a constructivist interpretative study, to articulate the grounds on which the rigour, trustworthiness and/or quality (Golafshani, 2003) of the study rests.

A range of responses has emerged among those who advocate a specific set of criteria for qualitative research (Denzin, 2009). There is broad acceptance of what Guest et al. (2012, 80) call 'big V validity', with the elements thereof either translated from quantitative to qualitative contexts or reconfigured to reflect the characteristics of qualitative research (Guest et al., 2012; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011; Thomas and Magilvy, 2011; Mertens, 2010; Cho and Trent, 2006; Golafshani, 2003; Morse et al., 2002). However, even within the literature which accepts the need to answer the question about the rigour of qualitative research, there is no single agreed response (Guest et al., 2012; Golafshani, 2003). For the purposes of this study, Thomas and Magilvy's (2011, 151) definition will be used:

> Rigor, in qualitative terms, and reliability/validity, in quantitative terms, are ways to establish trust or confidence in the findings or results of a research study.

The rationale for using this definition is based on its emphasis on trust being established, the implication being that it is the researcher who establishes trustworthiness and confidence rather than the reader being left to decide on these issues. Morse et al. (2002) draw attention to a shift away from 'ensuring rigour' to 'evaluating rigour' in qualitative research. They argue that where once rigour was ensured by researchers implementing strategies in the course of the research process, rigour has now become a matter of evaluation by the consumer of the research. Currently, it is unclear to what degree this either/or situation persists. For example, Guest et al. (2012) argue forcefully that the researcher must apply a range of strategies which, in combination, provide a convincing case for the rigour of the analysis, but also state that, ultimately, it is the audience for the research who will decide whether it is valid or not. This is the approach adopted for this study.

The strategies referred to above have been codified within a range of criteria and, despite criticisms of 'criteriology' (Barusch et al., 2011), the use of criteria in qualitative research has persisted because they are 'useful' (Tracy, 2010, 838). Tracy (2010) provides a framework of eight criteria for robust qualitative research.

Table 4.2 Criteria for trustworthiness

Eight 'Big-Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research		
1	Worthy topic	The topic of the research is: • Relevant • Timely • Significant • Interesting
2	Rich rigor	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex: • Theoretical constructs • Data and time in the field • Sample(s) • Context(s) • Data collection and analysis processes
3	Sincerity	The study is characterized by: • Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s) • Transparency about the methods and challenges
4	Credibility	The research is marked by: • Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling • Triangulation or crystallization • Multivocality • Member reflections

5	Resonance	The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through: • Aesthetic, evocative representation • Naturalistic generalizations • Transferable findings
6	Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution: • Conceptually/theoretic ally • Practically • Morally • Methodologically • Heuristically
7	Ethical	The research considers: • Procedural ethics (such as human subjects) • Situational and culturally specific ethics • Relational ethics • Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)
8	Meaningful coherence	The study: • Achieves what it purports to be about • Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals • Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other

(Adapted from Tracy, 2010, 840)

This table sets out the eight criteria and lists the 'craft skills' through which they can be accounted for and achieved. Tracy (2010) suggests that these craft skills or strategies are

flexible, various and open to choice and combination by the researcher, much in the way a menu is. This study aims to establish its trustworthiness and rigour by meeting these eight criteria in an explicit and comprehensive way.

4.2.4 Phenomenological-Hermeneutical Approach

In considering the methodological dimension of constructivist research, Mertens (2005) notes that the constructivist paradigm grew from roots in phenomenology and hermeneutics. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) also acknowledge the contribution of hermeneutics to interpretative approaches to research, suggesting that understanding can only be achieved by engaging with participants' perspectives. There is a consistent connectivity evident in the literature (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011; Lincoln et al., 2011; Mertens, 2005) between the constructivist paradigm and a phenomenological hermeneutical methodology.

Kögler (2011) describes the phenomenological-hermeneutical approach (PHA) as providing methodological guidance in interpretative social science in which the focus is on understanding human agency. PHA also specifies a framework for understanding the crucial fact of the relationship between researcher and research participants which is that:

- Social-scientific understanding relates the perspective of the interpreter, which is based on his or her cultural pre-understanding, to the reconstruction of the agents' self-understanding, such that;
- An explanatory and realist analysis of the other's actions based on intentional beliefs becomes possible. (Kögler, 2011, 445-6)

PHA emphasises that the aim is to understand and describe the object of the research based on the research participant's own understanding of the object, i.e. the research participant's self-understanding. Kögler (2011) argues that what he terms the 'object'

(the focus of research) cannot be separated from the subjectivity of the researcher, as s/he must have a self-understood orientation towards the object already, which is operationalised through methodology:

> In fact, the very claim that we can distinguish the method – understood as our subjective approach to the thing itself – and the object – understood as the pure entity that's at stake – would render the intent to do so mute, because the method's goal is to give us the object as it is, which is already presupposed in the distinction. (Kögler, 2011, 447)

The consequence of this position is that the researcher needs to reflect on and explain how his/her pre-understanding of the object impacts on the subsequent exploration and description of the research object.

In an additional dimension of the relationship between the interpreter and the object, Kögler (2011) not only rejects the idea that the object can be represented as separate from the interpreter, but also argues that the interpreter must have a pre-existing perspective or insight into the object. This is a necessary connection if meaning is to be interpreted at all. As interpreted here, the self-understanding of the researcher and that of the research participants engage in dialogic interaction which results in an articulation of the self-understanding of the research participants.

PHA creates a space within which the researcher can engage with the research participants in authentic ways which allow for interaction that acknowledges the prior understanding of each and which envisages this prior understanding as enriching the process, '... indeed makes possible the beginning of the interpretive process ...' (Kögler, 2011, 454). This recasts the issue of researcher bias into a positive contribution to the process of understanding the participants' understanding provided that there is a clear exposition of the researcher's position based on reflection. My position as researcher has been detailed in Chapter 1.

Kögler (2011) also makes an important point which has echoes in Guest et al.'s (2012) insistence that the method of analysis remain firmly associated with the data and resist the further reaches of interpretative practice. He distinguishes between the 'thought behind the text' and the 'thought within the text' (Kögler, 2011, 449), implying that the search for understanding and meaning remain grounded in the text.

4.2.5 Ethics

Taking an ethical approach to research indicates an appreciation by the researcher that research has an impact on participants, and that the researcher has a duty of care to participants. Protecting participants is central to the rationale for ethical research (Creswell, 2008). Ethical behaviour in the research process is also a crucial contributor to the trustworthiness and rigour of the research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011; Tracy, 2010; Creswell, 2008). The population from which the participants were drawn can be described as non-vulnerable: an adult population, in a position to evaluate the costs/benefits/risks of participation, and in a position to consent to participation without feeling coerced (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, 64). A code of ethics (See Appendix A) was adapted from that used in a focus-group study undertaken by Rose and O'Neill (2009) for the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2011b) and is consistent with the ethical guidelines for conducting educational research provided by Trinity College, Dublin. The approach can be described within Silverman's (2011, 153) general principles of ethical research, outlined below.

4.2.5.1 Voluntary participation and the right to withdraw

Participants were invited to attend the focus groups by an intermediary and attendance was voluntary. Participants were offered the opportunity to withdraw before the recording devices were switched on if they felt uncomfortable with being recorded. Point

2 of the code of ethics given to participants in advance of the focus groups makes the right to voluntary participation and withdrawal clear.

4.2.5.2 Protection of research participants

Participants were protected by both confidentiality and anonymity. Participants' anonymity was guaranteed in both the code of ethics and consent letter. Aliases are used in the transcripts and contributions from participants included in the dissertation are anonymous. Confidentiality was ensured in this way, and also in the storage of all recorded material and transcripts in locked storage. Recordings will be deleted once the Ph.D. process is completed.

4.2.5.3 Assessments of potential benefits and risks to participants

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, 75) describe research which presents a low risk to participants as being non-deceptive, involving a non-vulnerable population with a low level of invasion of privacy. While this project is consistent with this position, nonetheless qualitative research is an emergent process which requires ethical responsiveness throughout (Silverman, 2011), and this includes trying to anticipate risk. One possible risk envisaged in the early stages of the research was that an individual participant could feel vulnerable, lack confidence, feel intimidated, or feel out of her/his depth in the focus group discussion. To address this, I ensured that each participant got an opportunity to contribute and all contributions were welcomed. Another risk is one which Watt (2007) felt keenly, and which is equally a risk to the researcher, namely that the findings might cast the participant(s) in a negative light. This situation is an example of 'divided loyalties' (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011), and constitutes a risk in this project. Reflexive writing is one way of addressing risk (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011), as is the researcher being very explicit about her/his presence in the research. Benefits to the participants were envisaged as providing them with an opportunity for professional

development and engagement with peers, and informal feedback confirmed that this was the case.

4.2.5.4 Obtaining informed consent

Each participant was given a copy of the code of ethics and the consent letter (See Appendices A and B) in advance of the focus group. Each participant was given details of what the focus group involved when invited to attend. All invitees had the option to contact me directly in advance of the focus groups if s/he needed more information.

4.2.5.5 Not doing harm

This research presents a low-risk to participants (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011), no deception has been practiced and I was open to discussing the research with any participant at any time as specified in Point 6 of the code of ethics. The participants were drawn from a non-vulnerable population and their interests have been protected throughout.

An important principle of this research is that it should endeavour to understand the participants' perspectives on their terms, privilege their voices and interpret their world view with respect. Dealing ethically with the participants and their contributions is an important facet of such an approach.

4.3 Research Methods

The research methods employed for this study were literature review, research diary, focus groups and systematic data analysis. The rationale and process for each method will be detailed in the following sections.

4.3.1 Literature Review

The literature review is more than a background, perfunctory requirement for the completion of a research project or dissertation. Conducting and presenting a literature review is a complex, multifaceted and valid research method on a par with other research methods (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008; Boote and Beile, 2005). A high quality literature review which synthesises the existing literature can provide new perspectives which allows for evolution within the field on the basis of previous work (Boote and Beile, 2005). The literature review should be approached with the same levels of rigour, attention to detail and explication as other methods employed in the study. There is agreement across the literature that this task should be approached in a systematic, phased way (Mertens, 2010; Randolph, 2009; Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2008). Randolph (2009) provides a five step process which mirrors very closely the process of conducting primary research, consistent with the approach that conducting a literature review is a research activity. The steps are as follows:

- Problem formulation
- Data collection
- Data evaluation
- Analysis and interpretation
- Public presentation.

The literature review was conducted on two distinct aspects related to the research questions: teachers' beliefs and play in schools.

4.3.1.1 Problem Formulation

The research questions to be answered by the literature review are distinct from those being asked of the data (Randolph, 2009). For the beliefs section, the research problem to

be addressed related to how beliefs can be defined and understood, how they impact on practice, what is known about ECE teachers' beliefs, and specifically what is known about teachers' beliefs about play? For the section on play, the questions focused on how play is experienced and implemented in schools, what considerations impact on its implementation, and how teaching, learning and play can be integrated into the school?

The second aspect of this phase is to determine criteria for inclusion and exclusion of literature. For the section on beliefs, all material had to relate to pre- or in-service teachers' beliefs about some aspect of educational practice, to definitions of teachers' beliefs, to ECE teachers' educational beliefs, and to teachers' beliefs about play pedagogy. Material included in the section on play in schools had to, as far as possible, address play provision for four to six year old children in the early years of schooling, or similar contexts. All literature had to be written in English.

4.3.1.2 Data Collection

Randolph (2009) advises beginning the data collection with a search of online academic databases and the wider Internet. Mertens (2010) notes that such databases are only as comprehensive as the material included in them, and Randolph (2009) cautions that this type of search is only likely to uncover roughly ten percent of the relevant materials. To identify the remaining 90% requires a snowball process. This means trawling through the references of the items initially identified for relevant material, then repeating the trawling until no further new items can be identified, thus reaching saturation (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008). This is the process followed for both sections of the literature review. The sources searched for this process included ERIC and Google Scholar. Because of concerns about Internet sources (Mertens, 2010; Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008), any reference sourced through Google Scholar was accessed only through

Trinity College, Dublin Library e-journal database to ensure the authoritativeness of the source.

Mertens (2010) also refers to personal networking as a source of relevant material, and, indeed, colleagues shared material which they identified as being potentially relevant to the research. Other items were identified through other activities such as conferences and seminars, and other professional engagements.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) advise keeping systematic records of the searches conducted, saving the details of each item identified and where possible saving copies of the items electronically, and this was done. Searches were recorded in the Research Diary. Each journal article downloaded was saved to an appropriate file on the computer, and the full bibliographical details noted into a Word document. The same system was applied for both sections of the literature review.

4.3.1.3 Data Evaluation

To evaluate the literature on teachers' educational beliefs, tables were developed to identify the terms and definitions applied in the literature, and to categorise ECE teachers' beliefs by specific focus, summary findings and the degree to which the practice and beliefs were/were not consistent. Literature on play in schools was evaluated to check if it matched the criteria about the age of the children (four to six years), the similarity of the context to the infant classes in primary schools in the RoI, and finally, for the range of issues pertaining to play in schools to which the literature referred. This last category was the basis for the final presentation.

4.3.1.4 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The process of analysis and interpretation of the literature applied in this study was consistent with both Bloomberg and Volpe's (2008) and Randolph's (2009) description

of using the literature identified through the previous three stages. Themes, inconsistencies and relationships within the data were identified and used as a basis for the process of synthesis and integration described by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008).

4.3.1.5 Public Presentation

The themes and sub-themes identified through the analysis of the literature at the data evaluation stage were used to structure the discussion, but as Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) point out, this was an iterative process which required several drafts. Presentation was shaped by the guidelines issued for postgraduate theses in Trinity College, Dublin.

4.3.2 Reflective Writing

Reflective writing has been acknowledged as a method of enquiry in qualitative research (Jasper, 2005), and has been an important method throughout this research process. While I had begun keeping a research diary as a way of recording the procedures I was using to source literature from late 2010, it was not until I read a colleague's draft methodology chapter that I began to use reflective writing in a more qualitative sense:

> 28/4/2011 Reading the methodology chapter ******* had submitted … reminded me how effective a Research Diary can be in capturing reasoning and other thought processes which lead to decisions and then to actions.

While there is very little literature available on the techniques of reflective writing (Jasper, 2005), several authors have evaluated the usefulness of such writing in the qualitative research process. The rationale for the inclusion of reflective writing as a research method is based on the role of the researcher in qualitative interpretative research (Watt, 2007). The researcher is the data collection instrument in interview research (Ortlipp, 2008), and thematic analysis is dependent on the researcher actively identifying themes in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Reflexivity is a feature of such research (Flick, 2009), and keeping a diary as a method of critical reflexivity is

recommended (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Such journals or diaries can form the 'connective tissue' (Slotnick and Janesick, 2011, 1359) between all the different sources of data for the project, including transcripts and literature. Noting such connections stimulates new thinking and perspectives, and such 'generativity' is a feature of reflective writing (Watt, 2007; Jasper, 2005).

Particularly for the beginning researcher, qualitative research tends to be emergent and iterative (Watt, 2007), requiring flexibility in approach and confidence in decision making. Reflective writing provides a permanent record of the process, allowing for review in the ongoing iterative cycle (Jasper, 2005). Such records support improved understanding of research methodology for the novice researcher (Watt, 2007), and enhance developing expertise (Glaze, 2002).

In addition to the benefits to the researcher in terms of understanding and explaining his/her subjectivity as it impacts throughout the research, and facilitating developing expertise, recording both the intrapersonal and procedural progress of the study has another imperative. Establishing the trustworthiness of the research requires the researcher to be explicit about his/her position in the process (Ortlipp, 2008).

Tracy (2010, 840) has noted 'Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s)' as one of the processes which supports the trustworthiness and rigour of qualitative research, and addresses the issue of researcher bias.

This requires more than just a consideration and account of any possible bias which might have an impact, but a more active presentation of the researcher's perspective and presence in the research (Flick, 2009; Jasper, 2005). Presenting researcher subjectivity and familiarity with the research context in this way can be an asset to the research (Watt,

2007). This is consistent with the phenomenological hermeneutic approach (Kögler, 2011) adopted for this study in which the researcher is understood to have a prior connection with the research topic as the starting point for coming to an understanding of the participants' perspectives. Reflective writing is characterised as an internal dialogue (Ortlipp, 2008; Glaze, 2002) through which the researcher explores his/her own perspective, and its development and evolution through the process.

Reflective diaries appear in many different formats (Glaze, 2002). The reflective process for this study has been recorded in a number of ways, as outlined below.

4.3.2.1 Research diary

The first entry in the research diary was made on 22/6/2010, roughly 9 months after I registered on the Ph.D. programme. Each diary generally covers a period of 2 months, and they cover the period from June 2010 to the completion of the dissertation in August 2014. There are gaps which generally reflect periods when the research had been put to one side for professional or personal reasons, (e.g. there are no diaries for the month of December in any year). As the following examples illustrate, these diaries are very varied and cover:

> Procedural records 16/10/2010 'Looking at Hsu-Smith's PhD thesis. Locating all her references to teacher beliefs in ECE and specifically about play. This is delaying what I had intended to do today which was to write up a last paragraph on beliefs about play, but this is the most recent (I think) ref I have'.
>
> Methodological reviews 28/4/2011 'I'm also listening to the recording of the pilot focus group and beginning to evaluate those questions. I'm coming to the conclusion that they are useless and insufficiently open ended to get what I want which is the full range of the connections teachers make on viewing the footage, and the links they see, and the concepts they include in their discussion'.
>
> Clarification 1/10/2012 'Just had a thought. I think that to avoid confusion about the relationship between the terminology of codes and themes, and the relationship between them, that I'll use the term 'strand'

> to refer to the commonalities, issues, ideas and trains of argument which I identify in the data and to which I will apply codes'.

4.3.2.2 Voice diary

Following each focus group, including the pilot, I recorded my immediate reaction to both the discussion and the organisation. These were not transcribed, but were loaded onto an iPod (in a similar way to the recordings of the focus groups themselves) and the computer as MP3 files. They were used to inform subsequent focus groups, the analysis memos, and the analytic process itself. The longest recording is just over 17 minutes and the shortest is just over 7 minutes.

4.3.2.3 Analytic memos

Following each focus group, I opened a document specifically for reflections associated with the recordings and, subsequently, the transcriptions. The centrality of analytic memos to the coding process is noted in the literature on thematic analysis, discussed later (see Guest et al., 2012; Saldaña, 2009). The memos were used as advised by Guest et al. (2012) in that the memos informed the development of codes but were clearly and definitively distinguished from the data. The memos were primarily an 'inner dialogue' (Glaze, 2002) in which possible interpretations were aired en route to final decisions about themes, as in the following example:

> Memo 2: 26/9/2012 'p. 28 '... everything has to be justified' and the context in which this is said seems to indicate that over demanding justification for all teaching actions is being used as a mechanism to corral and limit teachers, and force them into system-conforming modes of action in classrooms. As if all initiative, individuality and informality is being smothered by a deliberately heavy handed bureaucracy'.

The memos were invaluable in preserving insights over the lengthy analysis process, facilitating the deepening of the analysis in an iterative process:

> Memo 1: 31/10/2012 'Beginning the exploratory InVivo coding now on ... B, but informed by rereading my initial analysis from last February. I

> am struck by the insight (which I had forgotten I had so shows the importance of keeping up the memos) that parents are a proxy for accountability, a way of solidifying the concept and giving it focus. Ties in with my view (written elsewhere I think) that the teacher-parent relationship is the space in which teachers work out issues to do with their professionalism, efficacy, accountability'.

4.3.2.4 Reading notes

The final context for reflective writing was in the record of reading kept throughout the process, whether reading for the purposes of literature review or to support methodological approaches. In this context, the generative nature (Watt, 2007) of reflective writing was particularly useful, providing a method through which synthesis and integration of the literature was achieved (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008). These documents are not recorded by date but by the bibliographical details. For example, in notes on Hunter and Walsh (2013), the following connection is made between the literature on play and on beliefs:

> Suggest that rather than just implementing a standardised model, teachers should have opportunities to reflect on (and deconstruct in the post-modern view) their current practice to identify alternatives which are consistent with the needs and interests of children, thereby effecting meaningful change. This is consistent with the literature on beliefs which suggests that reflection on and in practice is the only way to change fixed beliefs and attitudes. Failing to do this runs the risk of reducing play to a standardised one size fits all model.

4.3.3 Focus Groups

This research is focused on teachers' verbal expressions about play in infant classes and issues the participants associate with play. It follows that a method is required which facilitates verbal expressions, and a suitable method in this case is interviewing of participants, either in a focus group context and/or individual interviews. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) have noted, qualitative interviews are designed to facilitate insights into participants' perspectives on specific aspects of social reality. There is precedent for the use of focus groups in investigating belief systems in the area of ECE. In their

research on early childhood educators' beliefs about school readiness among children, Lara-Cinismo et al. (2008) found that focus groups provided a supportive context for participation and enabled exploration of complex issues.

Focus group interviews can be useful in accessing diverse points of view (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Individual interviews may not generate a sufficiently wide range of perspectives, given the limits on the number of interviews possible with a single researcher. Groups of teachers discussing their thoughts are more likely to generate a wider range of views in a dynamic context. For these reasons, focus groups were chosen as the main data gathering method for this project.

This section will describe, in chronological order, the initial design of the focus group structure, the testing of this structure through a pilot process, and finally the implementation of the focus groups which constituted the main study.

Table 4.3 Overview of focus group chronology

Time period/date	*Method*	*Number of Participants*	*Overview of participant profiles*	*Venue*	*Length of discussion*	*Recording method*
10/12/2010	Oral discussion Consultation on suitability of the interview guide and film footage stimulus	6	Lecturers in education and post-graduate colleagues with teaching experience	College	1 hour 30 minutes	Participant feedback sheets
February 2011	Oral discussion Consultation with expert colleague					
10/3/2011	Pilot Focus Group	6	Teachers of infant classes. All female.	College	1 hour 15 minutes	Audio recordings Video recording
22/2/2012	Focus group A	6	Teachers of infant classes including teaching Principals and teachers in multi-class settings. All female. Teaching experience from 7 years to 39 years.	West of Ireland Education Centre	55 minutes	Audio-recorded
23/2/2012	Focus group B	5	Teachers of infant classes including teaching Principal, teaching in multi-class settings, and learning support teachers. All female. Teaching experience from 9 years to 35 years.	West of Ireland Education Centre	42 minutes	Audio-recorded
26/4/2012	Focus group C	10	Teachers of infant classes including resource teacher, learning support teacher. 9 female and 1 male teacher(s). Teaching experience from 1	Band 1 DEIS school,	57 minutes	Audio-recorded

			year to 34 years.	Dublin 10.		
10/5/2012	Focus group D	7	Teachers of infant classes including Reading Recovery teacher, English as an Additional Language teacher, Behavioural and Emotional Needs Support teacher and learning support teacher. 6 female and 1 male teacher(s). Teaching experience from 2 years to 14 years.	Band 2 DEIS school, Dublin 24.	44 minutes	Audio-recorded
17/5/2012	Focus group E	7	Teachers of infant classes. All female. Teaching experience from 2 years to 33 years.	Non DEIS school, Dublin 15	41 minutes	Audio-recorded
22/5/2012	Focus group F	13	Teachers of infant classes. 12 female and 1 male teacher(s). Teaching experience 1 year to 33 years. Teachers from a range of DEIS and non-DEIS schools from South Dublin, Dublin 22, Dublin 24 and Dun Laoighre/Rathdown.	College	58 minutes	Audio-recorded
February 2012 – August 2014 (passim)	Focus group data analysis Writing of report					

4.3.3.1 Initial Design of the Focus Group Structure

Stimulus

Play is not a consistently understood phenomenon and the literature does not provide any singular definitions (Moyles, 2005). Therefore, teachers are no more likely to have consistent, unified concepts of play than those who contribute to the literature. If the aim is to have a discussion on play among a group of teachers in a focus group interview context, then some guidance will be required as to what exactly is to be discussed. There is a certain tension here between beginning with an externally chosen definition and trying to gain insights into teachers' beliefs through inductive processes. However, the entire process could be undermined if it emerged that the participants were talking at cross purposes about different things in the absence of clarity about the focus of the interview. Pajares (1992, 327) recommends '...open-ended interviews, responses to dilemmas and vignettes ...' as ways of accessing teachers' verbal expressions. Both dilemmas and vignettes can be described as stimuli to discussion, indicating a way to provide common ground for discussion, either between researcher and interviewee, or among the participants in a focus group interview.

Kagan (1992) cites context as one of three important ways in which teachers' professional knowledge is situated. Lee (2006) has cautioned against investigating teachers' beliefs through de-contextualised questions which may not reflect teachers' real-time thinking in the classroom context. This research is concerned with teachers' beliefs about play in the context of the classroom, so in order to focus the discussion, it would appear practical to provide a stimulus which locates the topic in the classroom. The research is not concerned with teachers' beliefs about play as a phenomenon but with play in the infant classroom.

The use of film footage to stimulate reflection on teacher beliefs and values has been used in other contexts. Moyles et al. (2002) investigated effective pedagogy among early childhood teachers. In order to facilitate teachers to 'surface' and articulate their beliefs about their practice, Moyles et al. (2002, 131) employed what they termed 'video-stimulated reflective dialogues'. The participant teachers were filmed and subsequently reflected on the film footage with the researcher. The stimulus was necessary because the teachers' beliefs and values emerged as the least well developed areas of their professional knowledge and understanding (Moyles et al., 2002) and it was necessary to provide a scaffold which would support exploration of this aspect of practice.

Bennett et al. (1997) used 'stimulated recall' methods in their study of teacher beliefs in relation to classroom practice, and for much the same reasons outlined by Moyles et al. (2002). They wanted to access the tacit thinking underlying the teachers' practice in play and used video recordings of the teachers themselves to facilitate the teachers' articulation of the reasons for their actions.

In contrast to the studies described above, Lee (2006) used footage which had been produced in the 1970s for the Ypsilanti Preschool Demonstration Project as a stimulus in investigating teachers' beliefs about appropriate pedagogy for four year old children. Her rationale for the use of film footage was that in making assessments about the different pedagogical approaches illustrated in the film, the teachers would disclose their underlying beliefs about preschool pedagogy. This is the rationale underpinning the use of film footage as a stimulus for the focus groups in this study.

As with Lee's (2006) study, the stimulus footage used in this study was publicly available. The focus group participants were asked to comment on the practice carried out by the teacher who had been filmed, and the possibility existed that they could be hesitant in doing so if the teacher in the film was part of the same teaching community as

themselves. In other words, it was important to ensure that there was no possibility that any of the participants would know or know of the teacher who had been filmed, and that the focus group participants would feel no ethical tensions in discussing another teacher's practice.

However, it was equally important that the setting of the film was clearly identifiable to Irish teachers as a school, because of the importance of contextualizing beliefs. The visual stimulus must clearly situate the practice under consideration in the context to which the participants' beliefs will relate (Lee, 2006). The practice presented must also articulate with the current policy frameworks for best practice in early childhood education in the RoI so that teachers' beliefs can be located within those frameworks.

In summary, the visual stimulus for the focus group discussion must:

- Be available for public use
- Provide distance between the focus group participant teachers and the teacher whose practice is the focus of the discussion
- Be situated in a context that is unambiguously identifiable as a school to Irish teachers

Illustrate play provision which is consistent with policy in the RoI on best practice in ECE.The application of these criteria to the choice of the stimulus film footage contributed to the reduction of researcher bias in the direction of the focus group discussion. The footage chosen for the purpose, entitled 'Early Years Role Play: Managing and Changing', matches the criteria listed above and was developed as a resource for teachers in developing their practice. It is available to view online at http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Role-Play-Managing-and-Changing-6083010/ . It is clearly set in England and the teacher whose practice is the focus of the video is

unlikely to be known to focus group participants. The school in which the video is set – a traditional, red brick building – is clearly identifiable as a primary school. There are 27 children in the class which adds to the recognition factor for primary teachers in the RoI. The footage demonstrates both pedagogical framing activities undertaken by the teacher in advance of the play scenario taking place, and pedagogical interactions taking place during the play (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), consistent with practice advocated in *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009).

Questioning route

Once the film footage was chosen, an initial questioning route was devised based primarily on the work of Krueger and Casey (2009), with reference to Stewart et al. (2007). Both advise sequencing the questioning from the general to the more specific. However, this general rule must be tempered by an acknowledgment of the relative importance of the issues to be addressed, with the priority issues dealt with early to avoid running out of time and leaving them unanswered (Stewart et al., 2007). Krueger and Casey (2009, 39/40) provide a framework for a questioning route with the following categories of questions:

- Opening question
- Introductory question
- Transition question
- Key questions
- Ending questions (to include summary and final questions).

Within this framework, questions were devised to be consistent with the 'emic' character of the research with its emphasis on reflecting the participants' views rather than being directed towards eliciting responses to the researcher's world view (Stewart et al., 2007).

This approach, in conjunction with the use of the stimulus film footage, contributed to reducing the risk of research bias influencing the direction of the discussion. Stewart et al. (2007) point out the importance of pretesting the interview guide with individuals and/or a focus group drawn from the target population, and to this end, a pilot process was conducted.

4.3.3.2 Pilot Process: Focus Group Implementation

Once the stimulus and the initial questioning route were in place, a three stage pilot process was implemented to inform the research as follows:

Focus group run-through

A group of six representative participants were gathered to evaluate and give feedback on the suitability of the film footage and the questioning route which had been devised. A Focus Group Run-through Template was provided to each participant on which to record their feedback. The researcher also used the feedback template to record the views of the group (see Appendix C). The rationale for each question was discussed, and a range of amendments to the interview guide was suggested

Consultation with colleague experienced in focus group methodology

The amended questioning route or interview guide was then shown to a colleague with considerable experience in conducting focus groups. Following this dialogue, the interview guide was further amended, with a number of questions being deleted as either superfluous or limiting.

Pilot focus group with teachers of infants

A pilot focus group with participants drawn from the same population of teachers as for the main study was convened. Invitation letters were sent to 25 teachers of infant classes in 9 schools to take part in the pilot focus group. None accepted the invitation indicating

that recruiting participants from a distance is not effective, and some sort of more personal contact is required. Participants were then recruited through a process of 'active solicitation' (Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002). Faculty colleagues were asked to recruit on behalf of the researcher, and a group of 6 teachers was assembled. The film footage stimulus was confirmed by the group as fulfilling the criteria for its use. The interview guide, however, required considerable amendment on the basis of an analysis of the audio-recordings.

On the day, both the introductory question and the transition question were omitted because a considerable rapport and energy had been built up within the group over the meal which had been provided in advance of the discussion. In addition, as researcher/facilitator, I judged that taking time to ask these questions may have reduced the immediacy of the impact of the film footage. From the experience of this pilot, the film stimulus obviated the need for the introductory and transition questions.

Key questions [KQ] 1a and 1b gave rise to a far reaching conversation. The multi-directionality of the answers highlighted the importance of facilitator sensitivity to the nuances of participants' responses, and the need to follow up on each participant's initial response to the film. A prompt was added to the interview guide: 'Have I followed up on all of the initial impressions each of you mentioned, or have I missed something any of you noticed about the film?'.

KQ 2 proved to be counterproductive. When the participants' attention was drawn to the incident of the 'boys in the box', the nature of their responses changed. Instead of what Stewart et al. (2007, 63) refer to as '... response freedom ...', the focus changed to a search for the correct answer. This question was reworded as: 'Was all the play you saw of equal value?' to be used as a prompt question if the response to the value of play was entirely positive (as was the case in the pilot).

In the context of the pilot, it was actually KQ 3 which followed more naturally from the discussion on the value of the play which arose in response to KQ 1b. However, the phrasing of the question appears to have led to a slight misunderstanding. The phrase 'has a place' seems to have been interpreted, at least initially, as a reference to the physical space required in a school for this type of play activity. This question was rephrased to clarify the intention which was to give the participants an opportunity to discuss whether or not primary teachers would, could or should provide these types of opportunities for children.

As part of the discussion, the issue of teacher confidence had arisen and a prompt question engendered discussion on that topic, during which the issue of initial and continuing teacher education arose. This would indicate that these are indeed issues for teachers and valid objects for questions.

The ending question proved very useful, and in fact I asked it twice as quite a substantial discussion emerged on the first occasion, and it seemed appropriate to pose it again. This then led to a shorter discussion which involved issues of differentiation and accessibility for children with special needs.

A topic which entered the discussion which was not addressed by the initial questioning route is what the participants thought about the child's perspective on play in schools. A discussion followed a comment by a participant 'We forget they're only small' in which the age and developmental appropriateness of play was explored. I asked what the participants thought it meant for children not to have play in school, and this led to a discussion on the role of play in children's lives. As a consequence of this discussion, a new question KQ 4 was added: What do you think it means for children to have play opportunities in school?

A general point emerged through the initial evaluation on the use of the term 'play' to describe the activity. The term was deliberately not used in the initial drafts of the questioning route so as not to pre-determine the language which participants might use to describe the activity (which is clearly socio-dramatic or role play). The term 'play' was applied quite quickly by the participants and there was no other descriptor used. It was then possible to use the term 'play' in later questions, once the initial discussion had established what terms the participants used to describe the 'garage activity' sequence.

On the basis of this initial evaluation of the questions, the following is the redrafted questioning route. This draft assumed that, as in the pilot focus group, the participants have had time to meet and have a meal together prior to the focus group beginning. This proved very effective in promoting interactivity among the participants, and was provided for in the subsequent focus groups. The Introductory and Transition Questions were included as an option in case participants did not spend time together in advance of the focus group. This questioning route was used for all six focus groups as a method of reducing researcher bias by reducing any tendency towards personal responses on the part of the researcher which might have imposed a specific direction on the discussion.

Table 4.4 Final questioning route

Opening Question:
Could you tell us your name and what class you are currently teaching?
Key Questions:
1. What were you thinking as you watched the film? 1a. Have I followed up on all of the initial impressions each of you mentioned, or have I missed something any of you noticed about the film?
2. Do you think the activity had any value? 2a. Did all the play you watched have the same value? 2b. Do you think other teachers share your values about play?
3. Would teachers provide these kinds of play opportunities? 3a. What do you think teachers would need if they had to provide play in the classroom? 3b. What about teacher confidence? And training?
4. What do think it means for children to have play opportunities in school?
Ending Questions:
Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to comment on? Anything in the film we haven't picked up on that you think is important?

Following the pilot focus group, as a continuation of the reflective process described in section 4.3.2, particularly in terms of addressing the issue of researcher bias, a review of the recording of the pilot focus group discussion gave rise to considerable personal reflection on the issue of facilitation. As the researcher/facilitator, my lack of experience and skill became very evident. While I was able to pick up on phrases in the participants' responses and follow through with them, and also was able effectively to bring in participants who indicated through body language or facial expression that they had

something to say, my follow on questions were entirely overelaborated, often incoherent and half finished, a perfect example of the dictum that '[i]n general, clarity decreases as the length of the question increases' (Krueger and Casey, 2009, 37).

I did not ask the questions as written because I feared the language of those questions sounded overly formal in what was a very conversational context. In consequence, most of my spoken versions of the questions were over long, with too many sub-clauses. The revised questions were shorter and more colloquial in style.

Summary

While the pilot process raised issues to do with the questioning route used and the facilitation skills applied, it also demonstrated that the focus group method is effective in exploring teachers' beliefs about play in infant classes. The key messages from the pilot process were:

- Questions should be short, open and at a minimum
- The film stimulus obviated the need for Introductory or Transition questions
- Providing an opportunity for participants to meet immediately prior to the event to share a meal created a sociable, interactive atmosphere
- 'Active solicitation' is a more effective method of recruitment than direct contact from the researcher.

4.3.3.3 Main study

For the main study, 6 focus groups with a total of 48 participants were held. The first two were held in February, 2012 and the remaining four took place between the end of April, 2012 and the end of May, 2012. These dates were determined by the necessity to have all the focus groups concluded before the beginning of June which is the last month of the academic year in primary schools in the RoI, and consequently a very busy time for

teachers. The hiatus between February and April was due to personal professional commitments. Field work could not begin until the completion of the Confirmation Interview in the School of Education, TCD, and this took place in December 2011.

Sample for main study

Dunphy (2009a) calculated that 3013 primary schools in Ireland were likely to have children in a junior infant class, and consequently senior infant children also. Every teacher working in a primary school which has an infant class may have taught or could, in future, teach infant classes, and therefore their beliefs about play could be considered relevant. However, in practical terms, it cannot be assumed that every teacher who has taught infants or could teach infants is currently interested in issues related to the teaching of infants. For this reason, only teachers who were teaching infants at that time were included in the sample. Mertens (2010) argues that constructivist hermeneutical research should actively seek the views of a variety of participants in acknowledgement of the complexity of lived experience from multiple perspectives. With this in mind, the sample included not only those teachers who work as class teachers, but also teachers who were working as learning support or resource teachers with this age group.

'Multiple Layer' Focus Group Design

Krueger and Casey (2009) describe designing focus groups around multiple layers with, for example, geographical area constituting one layer and participant variety another layer. The sampling described is consistent with their descriptions of participant variety, and in addition, a number of contextual criteria will be applied for further layers.

Teachers of infant classes work in a variety of school and geographical contexts: urban, semi-urban, rural, single class, multi-class, DEIS (in designated disadvantaged areas) (DES, 2005), non-DEIS. These contextual layers were factored into the planning for the focus groups. Two focus groups (A and B) were held in the west of Ireland in a semi-

urban location with teachers drawn from both semi-urban and rural schools. In an additional (but not unconnected) layer, the participants included those teaching single classes, others teaching in multi-class settings, learning support teachers, and teaching Principals. All participants were female. A third mixed focus group (F) was held in Dublin with teachers drawn from both DEIS Band 1 schools and non-DEIS schools from a range of geographical areas across Dublin and its suburbs. These teachers were all teachers of single stream infant classes, but included a male teacher as part of the participant variety layer.

Three other focus groups were held in schools in three different geographical areas in Dublin. Focus group C was held in a DEIS Band 1 school with the entire range of teachers working with the infant classes. This group also included a male teacher and a teacher who is an *Aistear* tutor. This school has a programme of curriculum implementation based on *Aistear* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009). Focus group D was held in a DEIS Band 2 school (DES, 2005), again with both class teachers and teachers working in support roles in the classrooms. This group also included a male participant. The final group in this category, Focus group E, was held in a non-DEIS school in an affluent area of Dublin. The participants were all teachers of single-stream infant classes, and all were female.

The variation in school type, geographical location and participant variety constitute a comprehensive profile of the contexts in which the teaching of infant classes takes place in primary schools in the RoI.

4.3.3.4 Recruitment

As noted during the pilot process, recruitment via 'active solicitation' (Nassar-McMillan and Borders, 2002) proved effective and a slightly adapted version of this approach was applied in the main study. The researcher approached school Principals known to her,

and asked them to recruit on her behalf. Stewart et al. (2007) recommend between 6 and 12 participants per focus group, while Krueger and Casey (2009) indicate that while the number is usually between 5 and 10, there can be anything from 4 to 12 participants. They also recommend planning for an initial three or four groups. If, on analysis, saturation has been achieved, no further focus groups are required. If new information is still emerging, then additional focus groups will be required. However, for this study, in order to ensure as representative a sample as possible, 6 focus groups were planned and conducted. In addition, as this is the first study of this topic in the RoI, it was important to explore the issue from as many perspectives as possible to ensure as full an exploration as could be achieved.

Morgan (1995 in Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011) advises three steps for successful recruitment: over-recruitment, sending reminders, and offering incentives. No incentives were offered, but a light meal was provided before each focus group took place. However, it appears that being approached by an intermediary with whom the prospective participants had a prior relationship seemed to reduce the need for incentives. It could be argued that the recruitment method, 'active solicitation', reduces the need for over-recruitment as 47 of the 48 teachers recruited attended.

For the two focus groups held in the west of Ireland (focus groups A and B), two long-serving school Principals were approached and asked to recruit up to 7 participants each. The range of contexts and participant types described above was communicated to both. Principal A recruited 6 teachers and Principal B recruited 5. All the teachers recruited attended. For focus groups C and D, the researcher approached the Principals of a DEIS Band 1 and DEIS Band 2 schools, both junior schools with several streams of both junior and senior infant classes to recruit among the teachers in those schools. The target number in each school was 6. However, in focus group C, 10 teachers agreed to attend

and all did; in focus group D, 8 teachers agreed to attend and 7 did. For focus group E, the Principal of a large suburban school in an affluent area was approached by an intermediary Principal. The 7 teachers of infant classes in this target school were recruited and all attended. For the final focus group F, the researcher approached 4 Principals and 1 Deputy-principal and asked each to recruit 2 teachers of infant classes. The aim was to recruit up to 8 participants, but in fact 13 teachers were recruited. Based on the literature, the assumption was that not all would attend, but it appears that 'active solicitation' as a recruitment method is very effective because on the day, all 13 arrived. While Krueger and Casey (2009) caution that an over-large group size can lead to trivial results with no depth to the discussion, in this case the discussion proceeded in much the same manner as the previous 5 focus groups. Perhaps because this group was the final one in a series of 6, it functioned to confirm saturation as the topics raised by the participants were consistent with the issues which had emerged in the previous discussions.

4.3.3.5 Participant profiles

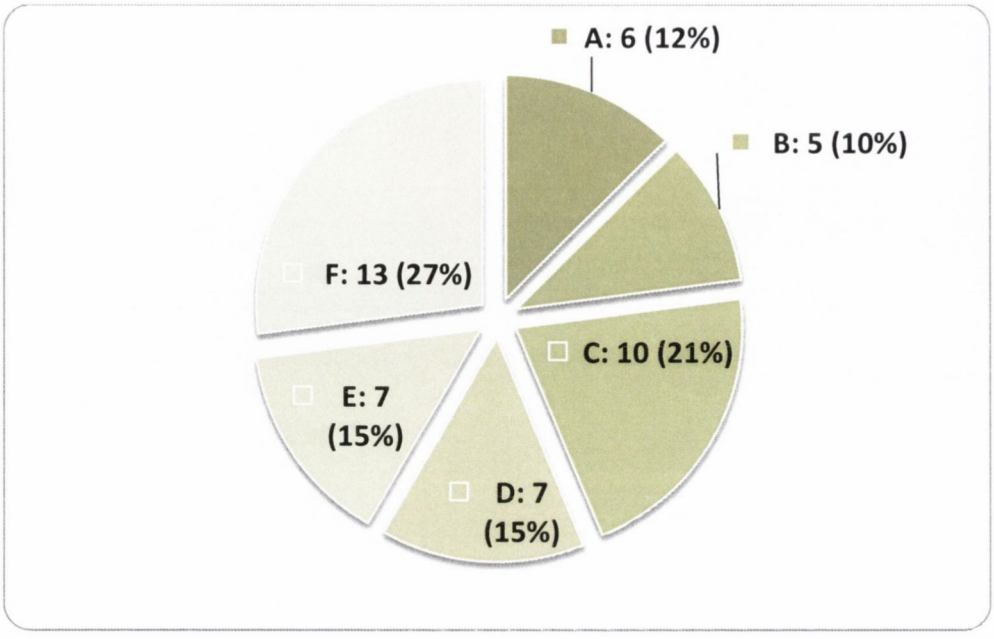


Figure 4.1 Number of participants per focus group

Focus Group	*Number of participants*	*Number of participants teaching full class*	*Number self-reporting play provision*
A	6	6	1
B	5	3	1
C	10	4	4
D	7	3	1 (+ 1 support teacher)
E	7	7	1
F	13	13	3

Table 4.5 Participant self-reported play provision

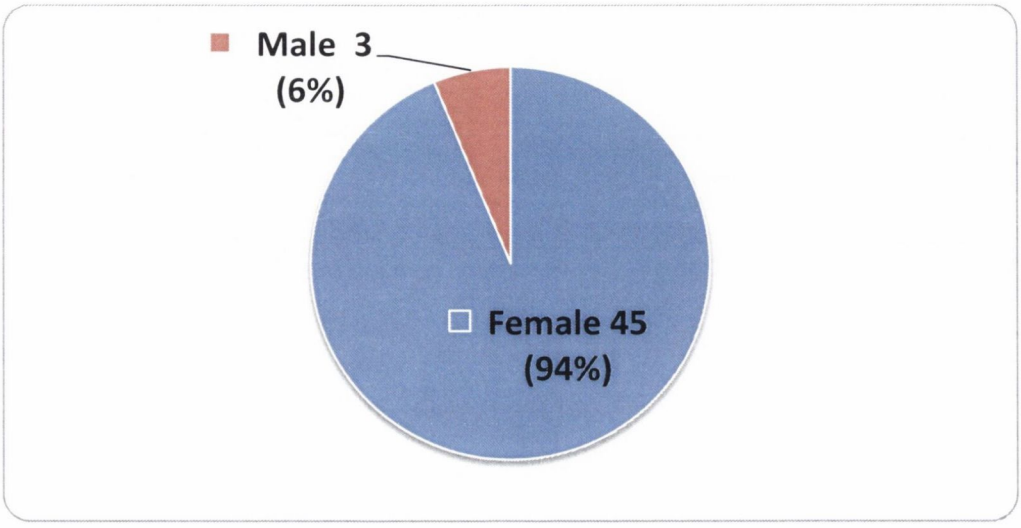


Figure 4.2 Participants by gender

94% of the focus group participants were female, the same proportion found in Dunphy's (2009b) study on mathematics teaching in infant classes. The percentage of females in the primary teaching workforce generally was 84.9% in 2012 (World Bank, n.d.), and this data suggests that a higher proportion of the teachers working with infants are women.

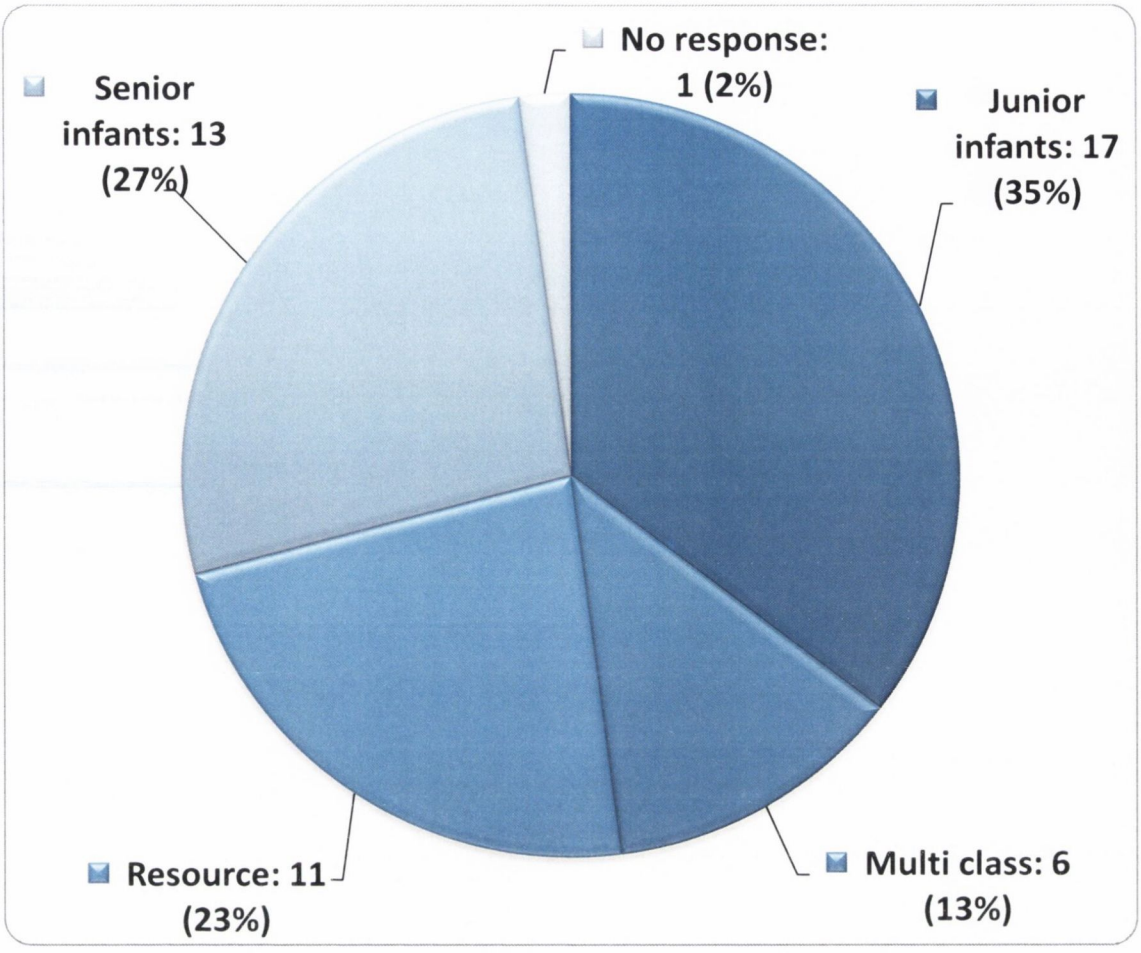


Figure 4.3 Classes taught by participants

Figure 4.3 shows that of the 48 participants, 36 were classroom teachers of infants while 11 participants were working with infant classes as part of their role as a support teacher. These teachers fulfilled several roles, including learning support (maths and literacy), Reading Recovery teacher, EAL (English as an Additional Language) teacher, and providing support for behavioural and emotional needs. Of the six teachers teaching in multi-class situations, four were teaching junior infants, senior infants, first class and second class; that is, the four junior classes in a two-teacher school. The remaining two participants were teaching combinations of two infant classes.

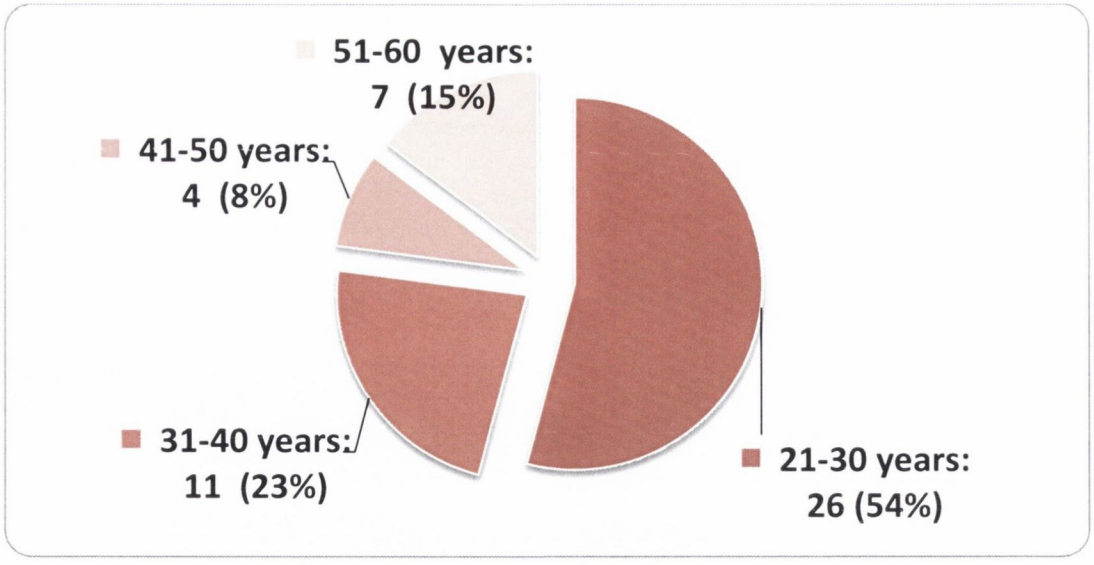


Figure 4.4 Age range of participants

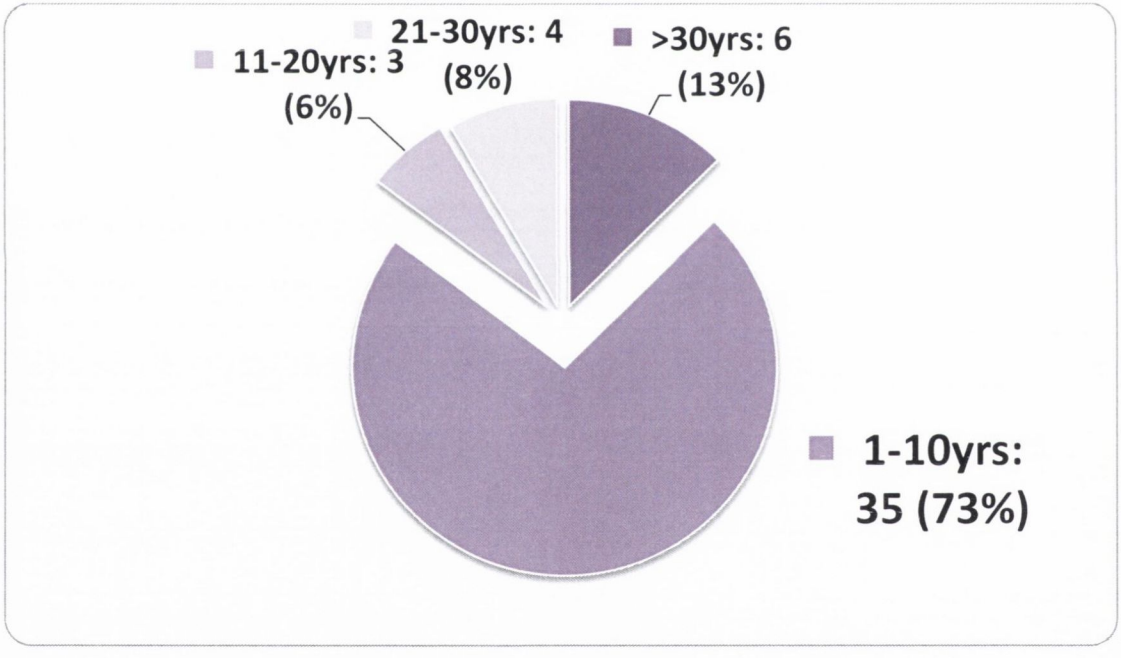


Figure 4.5 Years of teaching experience

Figure 4.5 shows the number of years overall teaching experience of the participants, the vast majority of whom were in the first ten years of their teaching career. This data contextualises the data in Figure 4.6 on the number of years the participants had been teaching infants.

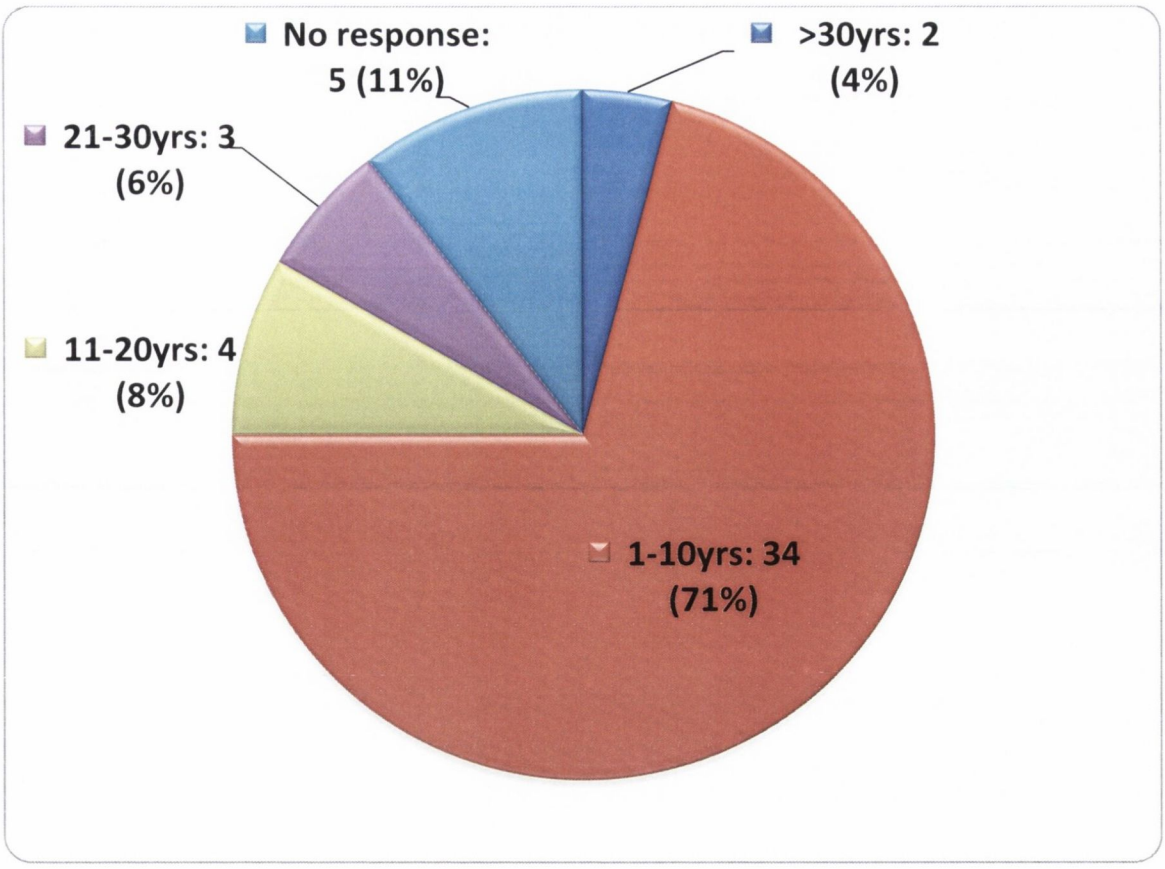


Figure 4.6 Years teaching in infant classes

Of interest is the finding that 54% of the participants were in the youngest age group of 21 – 30, 73% were in the first ten years of their career, and that 71% had been teaching infant classes for less than 10 years. It is hardly surprising that a large majority of the participants (71%) had been teaching infant classes for between one and ten years given that, as Figure 4.5 shows, a similar percentage had been teaching for between one and ten years. What is not clear is why such a very high percentage of teachers of infants are in the early stages of their careers. To date, no similar statistics for the teaching population as a whole have been found which could allow for comparison, and the sample here is not large enough to say definitively if this is the case across the system.

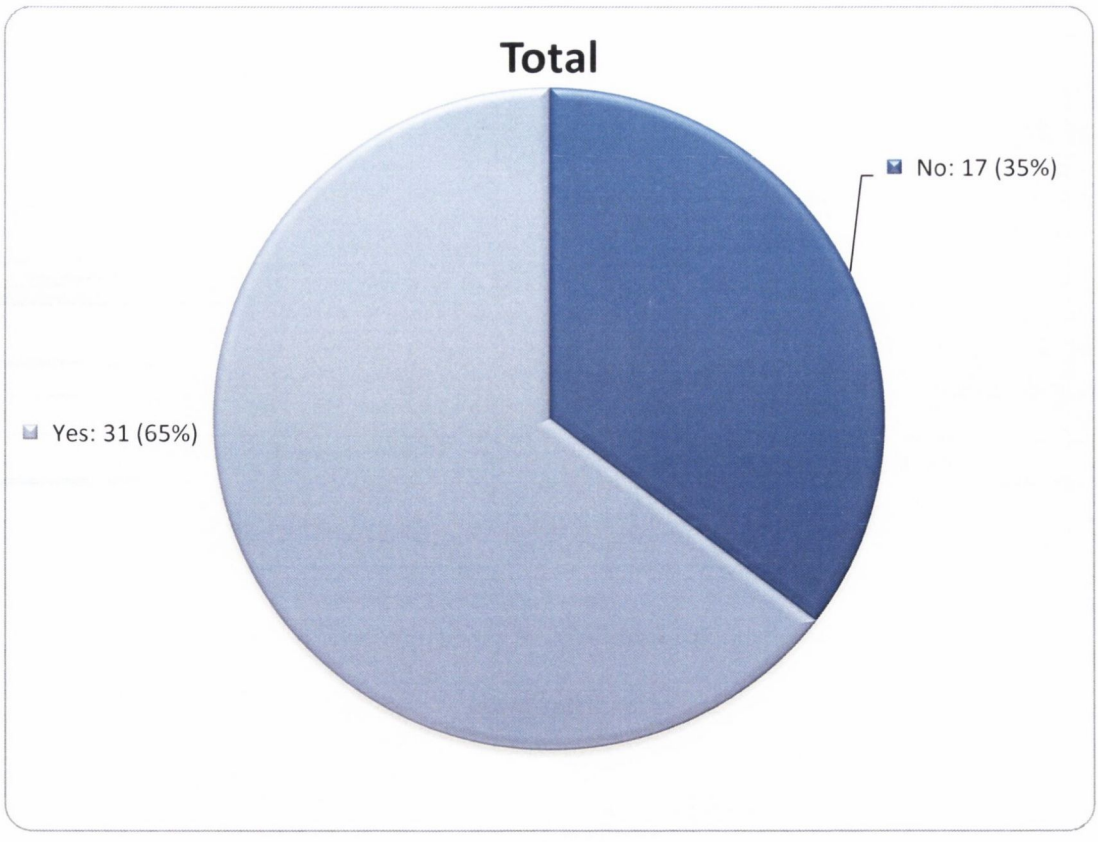


Figure 4.7 CPD in Early Childhood Education

A majority of participants (65%) had completed CPD on some aspect of education in infant classes. Of those participants who had attended CPD, ten specified an *Aistear* course. These are training courses associated with *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009), provided through the Association of Teachers' Education Centres in Ireland [ATECI] in association with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA]. Other courses specified by the participants include training in literacy and maths programmes for infants, play in the infant classroom and programmes focused on promoting positive behaviours.

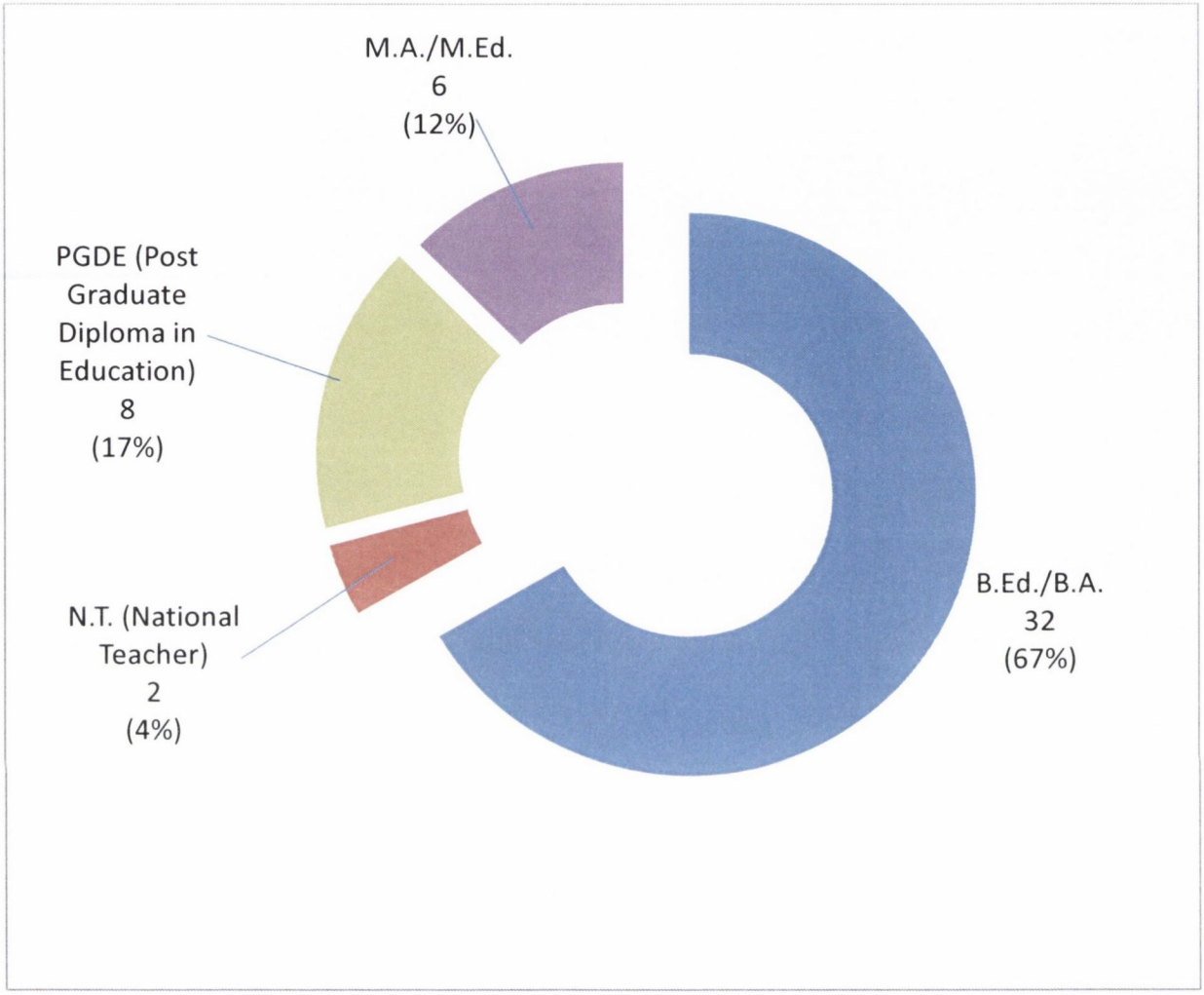


Figure 4.8 Participant qualifications

If the percentages for all primary qualifications are taken into account, 71% of participants have a primary qualification, with 29% having a post-graduate qualification in education. Of the 34 with a primary degree, 22 had engaged in CPD associated with teaching in infant classes and 12 had not (but may, of course, have engaged in CPD on other topics).

Summary

The majority of the participants were qualified to primary degree level, had engaged with some CPD on topics associated to a greater or lesser degree with good practice in ECE, were in the early years of their careers, had been teaching infants for less than ten years and were female.

4.3.3.6 Data management and transcription

In this study, data management refers to the audio-recording of the focus group discussions, the care of these recorded data, their translation through transcription into text, and the care and management of those transcripts. Confidentiality was a fundamental concern at all stages. McLellan et al. (2003) advise that audiotaped materials must be tracked and accounted for, and their security assured. In this case, each focus group was recorded on two digital recorders: a Sony IC Recorder ICD-PX820 and an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-8700PC. Each focus group was recorded in a separate folder on each recorder. The digital recorders were stored in a secure location to which only the researcher has access.

In order to protect against accidental loss, the recordings were transferred onto a USB key, a laptop, and two desktop computers as MP3 files. The computers are all password protected. The MP3 files were also transferred onto an iPod. The desktop computers and the laptop were used for listening to the recordings when the transcripts were being proofread and cleaned as the software allowed for navigation forwards and backwards within each recording. Once the analysis process was completed, the recordings were deleted from the laptop and the computers, but retained on the external hard drive, the digital recorders and the iPod in case they were required during the remainder of the research process. All MP3 recordings will be deleted once the process is complete.

In a review of the literature on transcription, Davidson (2009) noted that there is agreement that transcription is not merely a technical operation but is primarily theoretical in nature. Where the material to be transcribed is recorded speech, as is the case in this project, the relationship between the recordings and the resulting transcript is complex (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011; Silverman, 2011; McLellan et al., 2003; Coates and Thornborrow, 1999). Researchers make choices about the form that the transcription will take based on the research questions being addressed and on the particular analytical approach being taken (Silverman, 2011; Davidson, 2009). In thematic analysis, a transcript is required (Braun and Clarke, 2006), and there has been a tendency to abandon the recordings and not refer to them again (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). While conversation analysis (CA) and discourse analysis (DA) require comprehensive detail in transcription (Silverman, 2011; Davidson, 2009), in thematic analysis, this level of detail is not required. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest a verbatim transcription which they describe as thorough and rigorous, representing accurately the meaning of the words-as-spoken, matching the level of detail required for the analysis, and presented in a useable format.

While agreeing that most qualitative researchers do not require what they term 'exacting precision' in transcripts, Lindlof and Taylor (2011, 214) demonstrate that even a term like 'verbatim' is an ambiguous construct, emphasising yet again the complexity that attends this crucial transition phase in the analysis process.

The question then arises as to who should do the transcription. While Braun and Clake (2006) acknowledge transcription as an excellent method for familiarising oneself with the data, it is very time consuming (Clausen, 2012). Given Guest et al.'s (2012) guide to what constitutes a good fit between the analysis objective, the quality of the data and the time and resources available, having the voice data transcribed professionally was

deemed the best use of the scarcest of all resources on this project, time. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise, however, that transcriptions done by someone other than the researcher must be checked for accuracy against the original voice data. The researcher will also need to compensate by spending more time on the familiarisation phase of the analysis. This is particularly important as, although Lindlof and Taylor (2011) assert that most professional transcribers produce high-quality work, Davidson's (2009) review established that researchers did not tend to return to the data but to focus on the transcripts as delivered from the transcribers.

Researchers also need to decide how much of the data is to be transcribed (McLellan et al., 2003). In some instances, only selections of the data will be transcribed, but where an in-depth analysis is required that describes '... the knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs, or experiences of an individual, a group of individuals ...' (McLellan et al, 2003, 67), lengthier portions of the recorded discussion, if not all, will have to be transcribed. Given the analysis objective of this study, all the recorded focus group data were transcribed.

In practical terms, professional transcription services were employed to carry out the transcriptions; one company carried out the first two transcriptions and a second company carried out the final four transcriptions. The MP3 audio files were uploaded to the transcription companies; in the case of the first company, via a facility on the company website; in the case of the second company, via a dedicated private file on Dropbox. The MP3 files were deleted once the transcriptions were complete and had been returned to the researcher. The transcripts at this point included a 'verbatim' account of the recordings, i.e. each word, including terms such as 'like' and 'you know', was transcribed; any instances of overlap, laughter, inaudible talk or several voices together were noted; participants were named as 'unidentified interviewee' except where

the participant identified her/himself. Pauses were not timed and 'umm' type speech sounds were not transcribed.

Participants were allocated an individual identifier as follows: an initial letter A-F specifying the focus group, 'P' for 'participant' and a number to indicate the sequence in which the participants spoke. 'AP1', therefore, was the first participant to speak in focus group A. Following initial transcription, all transcripts were formatted in a standardised manner (McLellan et al., 2003) drawing on Saldaña's (2009, 16) 'mechanics of coding' advice for manual analysis as follows: Times New Roman font, 12pt, double spaced, three columns with text in left column and two columns for coding. Subsequently, the transcripts were proofread while the audio files were played to clarify any unknown terminology, indistinct utterances, to ensure that the utterances were correctly attributed to participants and that participants names/aliases were correctly noted. Each transcript was proofread three times in this way.

A separate computer folder was established for each focus group in which a copy of the MP3 file, the original transcript, the cleaned and formatted transcript, and a PDF scan of each transcript which had been manually coded was collected. Each of these folders was stored on a USB key, a laptop and two desktop computers; all computers were password protected. All materials were saved to an external hard drive in case of accidental loss. Hard copies of the transcripts were stored in a locked filing cabinet. Aliases were allocated to the participants to preserve their anonymity, and only the transcripts saved to the external hard drive retained the participants' own names.

4.3.4 Systematic Data Analysis

Several authors writing on the issue of qualitative data analysis have noted that both the process and the results have been characterised as inexact, non-specific, non-explicit and 'mysterious' (Mertens, 2010; Neuman, 2006; Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Braun and

Clarke (2006, 77) consider these criticisms accurate in the case of thematic analysis of qualitative data, describing it as '... poorly demarcated and rarely acknowledged, yet widely used'. Theme identification has been described as one of the most important activities in social science research (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) yet this approach to qualitative data analysis suffers from a lack of explicit, specific descriptions of how it is applied or how it leads to the results attributed to it. Both Thomas (2006) and Neuman (2006) have described the identification of themes as 'generic' or a 'general inductive approach'. This is insufficiently specific or detailed for others who have developed systematic, explicit, structured approaches to thematic analysis of qualitative data (Guest et al., 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2006: Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

It could be argued that the continuum of interpretations of what thematic analysis is contributes to its flexibility (Braun and Clarke, 2006), as it is not tied to any particular paradigmatic position. While arguing that thematic analysis is a research method in its own right, rather than a research tool or process for use within different methods or analytic traditions, Braun and Clarke (2006) draw attention to its theoretical and epistemological independence. Ryan and Bernard (2003) note that research within both the positivist and interpretivist paradigms is presented thematically. Braun and Clarke (2006) go so far as to claim that thematic analysis is the essence of approaches such as discourse and content analysis. Guest et al. (2012) adopt a slightly different stance with their systematic approach, Applied Thematic Analysis (ATA). They draw on 'a bit of everything', namely grounded theory, positivism, interpretivism, and phenomenology (Guest et al., 2012, 15). This is different from being theoretically and epistemologically independent – instead it implies a range of theoretical and epistemological connections, and suggests a space in which seemingly contradictory positions (such as positivism and interpretivism) could be reconciled. In making their eclectic sources clear, they are acting

in concert with Braun and Clarke's (2006) position which is that researchers using thematic analysis must make their assumptions clear, including epistemological assumptions. Even though they consider the method independent of theory and epistemology, this does not mean that the research is. Rennie (2012) notes that this is one of the attributes of Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis which renders it consonant with a hermeneutical theory of method.

However, as noted, flexibility could also be construed as indicating a lack of rigour in the method. For the purposes of this study, the approach taken is to be explicit about all aspects of the analytical process as follows: providing definitions of terminology, specifying relationships between the various processes associated with thematic coding, determining the sequence of steps taken to approach the data, and to record the process diligently so as to account for the findings once the analysis is complete.

4.3.4.1 Terminology and Definitions

Being systematic and explicit includes specifying the terminology which will be used throughout the data analysis process, and defining those terms. Braun and Clarke (2006, 79) have described the various layers of the data as follows:

> Data corpus refers to all data collected for a particular research project, while data set refers to all the data from the corpus that are being used for a particular analysis. ... Data item is used to refer to each individual piece of data collected, which together make up the data set or corpus. ... Finally, data extract refers to an individual coded chunk of data, which has been identified within, and extracted from, a data item.

These terms will be used throughout this study.

Saldaña (2009, 3) provides the following definition of a code as used in data analysis:

> A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for apportion of language-based or visual data.

This definition of a code will be applied throughout the data analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2006) conceptualise themes as patterns in the data. Ryan and Bernard (2003) define themes as constructs, thus acknowledging their interpretivist origins and '... the active role the researcher always plays in identifying patterns/themes ...' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 80). For the purposes of this study, a theme is understood to be a pattern within the data identified by the interpretative action of the researcher.

The relationship between codes and themes is another issue which needs to be clarified for the purposes of the analysis. For the purposes of this study, the analysis begins with the identification of features of the data '... interesting to the analyst' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 88) which are given codes to summarise their meaning. Subsequently, codes are grouped to identify themes/patterns for analysis. This sequence can be represented as follows:

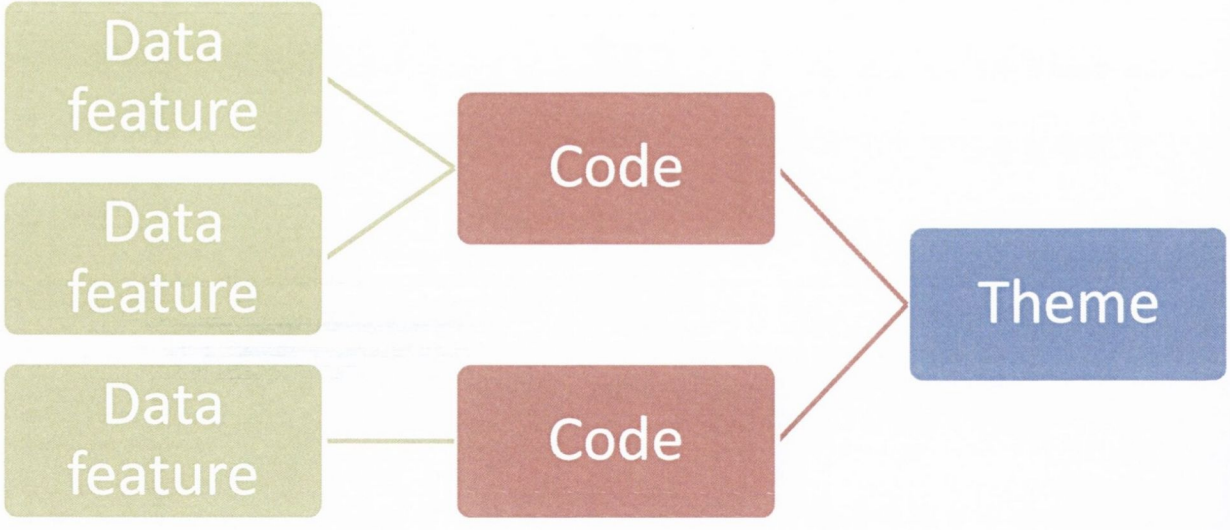


Figure 4.9 Relationship between codes and themes

4.3.4.2 Analysis Objective

Guest et al. (2012, 27) suggest that a starting point for data analysis is the statement of the analysis objective which specifies what the researcher wants to achieve '... through the lens of the data'. They argue that there are three interlocking aspects to a realistic analysis objective: the level of detail or 'view' the researcher wants to provide, the quality of the data, and the resources and time available to the researcher. The analysis objective for this study was to provide a detailed view of the data on the basis of intensive analytic exploration through comprehensive coding. The data quality can be described as 'rich narrative' based on 'verbatim text' (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). While the resources and time are limited to that available to a single researcher, the data corpus is, in Guest et al.'s (2012) frame of reference, small. The analytic approach chosen to achieve this objective is Exploratory Analysis, described as an inductive approach to data which is common in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2012). This approach is best supported by 'rich narrative' data which represents participants' ' ... perceptions, feelings, knowledge, and behaviour ...' (Guest et al., 2012, 8). In Guest et al.'s (2012) terms, for the purpose of data analysis there is a good match between the view to be generated, the data quality and the time and resources available to deal with the data corpus.

4.3.4.3 Analysis Plan

Guest et al. (2012) further suggest that the next step is to develop an analysis plan which will guide the subsequent coding process. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a six phase analysis plan as follows:

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes

4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

This 6 phase approach was used to structure the data analysis. The analysis was conducted on the data corpus. Both Guest et al. (2012) and Braun and Clarke (2006) are relatively brief on the coding process itself, and the technicalities and practicalities of how coding is done. Saldaña (2009) offers a detailed roadmap of the coding process, and this was drawn on throughout the phased analysis.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

While noting that this phase can be time consuming, Braun and Clarke (2006) caution against rushing the process, which they state to be the foundation of the entire analysis. For this project, the familiarisation process was divided into two actions: Listening and Active Reading. This phase began in February 2012 when the first two focus groups had been completed, and certain data features had been identified within these data sets before the remaining focus groups took place. This is characteristic of the iterative nature of data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Listening: There is little attention in the literature to the act of listening as part of the qualitative analysis process, even though Coates and Thornborrow (1999) note that analysts hear new things each time they listen. While Neuman (2006) asserts that the transcribed text, representing lived experience, is the data, this position is challenged by Coates and Thornborrow (1999) who argue that the words spoken by the participants are the original data. However, even Coates and Thornborrow (1999) do not address the benefits of repeated 'listenings' for the analytic process, but rather focus on problematising the 'fixity, closure, and decontextualisation that transcription seems to impose' (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, 211). Clausen (2012) considers the amount of

'listening' time required to validate the transcript as a hindrance to the research process. Even those who recognise listening as the starting point for analysis mainly address listening as a process that exists only in relation to maximising the quality of the transcript (Silverman, 2011). Odegard (2012) refers to listening to the original conversations in the focus groups she conducted, and then listening to the recordings as she transcribed them. However, there is no reference to the recordings themselves contributing to the analysis process, and it is the written transcriptions which are privileged in the literature. It could be argued that the recordings provide information which cannot, no matter how accurate the transcription, be expressed in print; this includes expression, pace, tone and the nuances of attitude (McLellan et al., 2003). Indeed, Coates and Thornborrow (1999, 596) argue that new 'hearings' on repeated listening mean that transcription can never be considered complete.

It is the position adopted for this project that repeated listening to the recordings must be the initial step in analysis, but not just in relation to preparing for or carrying out transcription or proofreading. Repeated listening had the additional effect of embedding the voices of the participants in my memory so as to enhance future readings of the transcripts, and to prevent losing the participants' presence in the intensity of the analysis of the transcripts. Listening to the recordings kept the discussion fresh in my mental ear; the recordings were accessible when transcripts were not yet ready; and repeated 'listenings' functioned as refreshers during the text analysis process.

In practice, I listened to the recordings repeatedly in the immediate aftermath of each focus group, and over a period of months following the conclusion of the focus groups. I listened to the recordings to the point of being able to anticipate which participant would speak next and what s/he would say. To achieve this, the MP3 recordings of the focus groups were transferred onto an iPod (Galvez et al., 2009), which allowed me to listen

while walking, doing domestic tasks and even in the gym. As Galvez et al. (2009) found, the portability of the iPod is one of its strengths, but a drawback is that rewind/fast-forward function was not available on the iPod. This may be a result of my lack of expertise in the use of the technology and not necessarily a permanent feature of the iPod.

Galvez et al. (2009) describe the use of the iPod in survey research, and many of the technical details about uploading audio files are similar to the process of uploading focus group audio files. To date, no literature on the use of an iPod for listening to focus group recorded data has been found. These recordings are the most accurate representation of the focus group event and constitute a very valuable but under-acknowledged resource for the researcher. Indeed, '... we must not lose sight of the fact that it is the original audio- ... tapes which constitute our research data ...' (Coates and Thornberry, 1999, 596).

Active Reading: Once all the transcripts were complete, listening and reading were combined into 'active reading' (Braun and Clarke, 2006), although the interpretation of active reading is applied differently here than in Braun and Clarke's research. This 'active reading' coincided with proofreading the transcripts (McLellan et al., 2003). For the purposes of this study, 'active reading' can be distinguished from the proofreading activity in its purpose, which is to connect the written word to the voices of the participants, to attach their 'personalities' to the textual representation of their expressions. The intention was to avoid the text becoming disassociated in my mind from the participants whose thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and attitudes are represented, and to avoid the process becoming an academic, disembodied exercise. An important principle underpinning this research is that the voices of the participants are paramount, and everything was done to keep those voices clear and in the foreground of the process.

Once the connection had been made between the voices and the text, standalone reading of the text took place. However, listening did not end, and periodic revisiting of the recordings kept the participants' voices fresh in my mind.

For this project, each focus group recording/transcript was reviewed three times through 'active reading', as recommended by McLellan et al. (2003) for the proofreading of transcripts (See Appendix D). Throughout this process, initial thoughts and observations were recorded in a series of analytic memos. Once standalone reading began (when the transcripts were confirmed as accurate verbatim accounts of the recordings), 'pre-coding' (Saldaña, 2009) was conducted. Saldaña (2009, 16) describes pre-coding as '... circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, or colouring rich or significant participant quotes or passages that strike you ...'. No time frame was set for this phase, as familiarisation is an emergent state, and this stage took over 12 months of intermittent work. There was no effort at this stage to apply explicit codes, but to observe how the data from all the various focus groups intersected, what commonalities existed or in what ways they were different (Guest et al., 2012).

Table 3.6 Overview of analysis

Focus group	Phase 1: Active Reading 1	Phase 1: Active Reading 2	Phase 1: Active Reading 3	Phase 1 Pre-coding	Phase 2 In Vivo coding	Phases 3, 4, 5
					23/9/2013 Draft 1 Codes and collated data extracts reviewed and edited following completion of 1st run data coding. 2nd run coding for B, C, D, E and F based on Draft 2 Codes.	22/10/2013 Phase 3 completed. Initial thematic map prepared. 1/11/2013 Phase 4 completed. 8/11/2013 Phase 5 completed. 11/12/2013 Phase 6 completed. Draft 1 of the Presentation of findings submitted to supervisor.
A	3/10/2012 1st clean-up run through with sound recording completed; changes input and PDF saved.	5/6/2013 2nd clean-up run through with sound recording completed, with changes input and PDF saved.	20/6/2013 3rd clean-up run-through with sound recording, with changes input and PDF saved.	5/7/2013 Pre-coding completed.	1/8/2013 In Vivo coding completed. Data extracts collated. 28/8/2013 2nd run In Vivo coding completed. Additional data extracts collated. 14/10/2013 3rd run In Vivo coding as per Draft 2 codes completed. Additional data	

					extracts collated.	
B	31/10/2012 1st clean-up run through with sound recording completed; changes input and PDF saved	11/6/2013 2nd clean-up run through with sound recording completed, with changes input and PDF saved.	20/6/2013 3rd clean-up run-through with sound recording, with changes input and PDF saved.	8/7/2013 Pre-coding completed.	7/8/2012 In Vivo coding completed. Data extracts collated. Codes checked and transcript A reviewed. 1/10/2013 2nd run In Vivo coding as per Draft 2 codes completed. Additional data extracts collated.	
C	29/5/2013 1st clean-up run through with sound recording; changes input and PDF saved	13/6/2013 2nd clean-up run through with sound recording completed, with changes input and PDF saved.	21/6/2013 3rd clean-up run-through with sound recording, with changes input and PDF saved.	9/7/2013 Pre-coding completed.	12/8/2013 In Vivo coding completed. Data extracts collated. Codes checked and transcripts A and B reviewed. 2/10/2013 2nd run In Vivo coding as per Draft 2 codes completed. Additional data extracts collated.	
D	11/1/2013 1st clean-up run through with sound recording completed; changes input and	14/6/2013 2nd clean-up run through with sound recording completed, with changes input and	24/6/2013 3rd clean-up run-through with sound recording, with changes input and PDF saved.	11/7/2013 Pre-coding completed.	24/8/2013 In Vivo coding completed. Data extracts collated. Codes checked and transcript A, B and	

	PDF saved	PDF saved.			C reviewed. 14/10/2013 2nd run In Vivo coding as per Draft 2 codes completed. Additional data extracts collated.	
E	30/5/2013 1st clean-up run through with sound recording completed; changes input and PDF saved	18/6/2013 2nd clean-up run through with sound recording completed, with changes input and PDF saved.	26/6/2013 3rd clean-up run-through with sound recording, with changes input and PDF saved.	11/7/2013 Pre-coding completed.	4/9/2013 In Vivo coding completed. Data extracts collated. 11/10/2013 2nd run In Vivo coding as per Draft 2 codes completed. Additional data extracts collated.	
F	31/5/2013 1st clean-up run through with sound recording completed; changes input and PDF saved	19/6/2013 2nd clean-up run through with sound recording completed, with changes input and PDF saved.	27/6/2013 3rd clean-up run-through with sound recording, with changes input and PDF saved.	12/7/2013 Pre-coding completed.	12/9/2013 In Vivo coding completed. Data extracts collated. 16/10/2013 2nd run In Vivo coding as per Draft 2 codes completed. Additional data extracts collated.	

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Phase 1 ended when, following intense interaction with the text, particular 'data features' had become significant. At this point, the process moved to the generation of initial codes. Saldaña (2009) refers to this as first cycle coding, and suggests a number of coding approaches appropriate for 'beginner' coders. Of these, In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009) was identified as the best fit for 'attuning' to the language, perspectives and worldviews of the focus group participants. Saldaña (2009) defines In Vivo coding as using the participants' own language as code identifiers for significant data features. In keeping with the aims of this project, In Vivo coding also honours the participants' voices (Saldaña, 2009) and emphasises the inductive approach to the analysis. It was at this stage of the process that codebook development began. Guest et al. (2012) emphasise the importance of systematically sorting codes into categories and thereby identifying relationships between them. Codebooks record this system. Guest et al.'s (2012) suggested code structure includes a code label, a brief definition, a full definition, when to use, when not to use, and an example. This structure was adapted for use for this project, with the brief definition omitted as the use of In Vivo coding rendered it unnecessary. Some codes did not require the 'when not to use' information as they did not border any other codes.

Each transcript was coded, and following each coding run, the data extracts were collated into the relevant codes. As each transcript was coded, additional codes were identified in a cumulative process, necessitating reviews of previous transcripts to account for those codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to this recursive process, and the necessity of moving back and forth within and between data analysis phases. Each code and its collated data extracts was reviewed, code names and definitions were checked for

consistency with the data extracts and amended where necessary. Finally, each transcript was reviewed to ensure that all relevant data extracts had been identified..

Phase 3: Searching for themes

For Braun and Clarke (2006), Phase 3 begins when the codebook is complete and the data set has been coded and collated. This phase requires the researcher to make decisions about these codes in order to categorise them into broader, interrelated groupings which can be justified as themes (Guest et al., 2012; Saldaña, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Ryan and Bernard (2003) identify eight scrutiny techniques in searching for themes, of which the first is 'repetitions'. Another technique is to search for similarities and differences (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Guest et al. (2012, 53) refer to the search for '... patterns of relationship between the instances of meaning in the text ...'. These are the techniques which were applied in this study. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), all codes and code definitions were written on individual slips of paper and sorted into categories. An initial thematic map was devised (Braun and Clarke, 2006) at this point to illustrate 'candidate themes' and sub-themes. (See Appendix E). Every code was accounted for, including an outlier code which did not readily fit into any candidate theme or sub-theme. Braun and Clarke (2006) advise retaining all material at this stage for detailed review in Phase 4.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Guest et al., (2012, 67) refer to this phase as 'winnowing themes', as it is often the case that more themes are identified than are entirely useful in the final analysis. The initial thematic map clearly indicated that this was the case. This initial thematic map was reviewed at both theme and sub-theme level and re-categorisation took place. This review was informed by insights from the analysis diaries which tracked the interpretations noted throughout the data analysis process. A second draft of the thematic

map was then devised. All codes and collated data were then regrouped to reflect this second draft. Once this was completed, and in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestions, the themes were reviewed at two levels: first, each patterned set of collated, coded data features was reviewed to confirm that they constituted a coherent theme. Once this review was completed, a second review was conducted on the entire data corpus to assess whether the themes presented a coherent representation of the data as a whole. While Braun and Clarke (2006) note that re-coding at this stage is to be expected because of the iterative nature of coding itself, both these authors and Guest et al. (2012) urge caution towards the siren call of 'endless re-coding'. With this in mind, only one pass was made over the data corpus, and it was not subsequently revisited.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Three themes were identified following the search process in Phase 3 and the review process in Phase 4: Risk, Commitment, and 'Play is so important for children'. The route through In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009) provided a structured set of sub-themes closely identified with the codes detailed in the codebook. Each theme and sub-theme was named with a view to giving the reader an immediate sense of its meaning and significance (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A definition of each theme was written, describing its scope and content, and the sub-themes were checked for consistency with this definition (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Phase 6: Producing the Report

The main concern was that the themes were written up in a way that communicates the story of the data without excising its complexity, while convincing the reader of its trustworthiness and rigour. Saldaña (2009) suggests using the codes developed as a result of the analysis process as section and sub-section headings to structure the presentation of findings, and this is the structure adopted in this report. An additional consideration at

this stage was the choice of data features/extracts to be used as quotes to support the presentation of findings. Quotes are important because '[t]hey bring the raw data – the participants' words – to the reader and are what connect the phenomenological world of the participant to the data summary and interpretation generated by the researcher' (Guest et al., 2012, 95). They suggest inserting one exemplar quote to illustrate each sub-section, and this approach was generally adopted.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the research process designed and undertaken to gather and analyse data to address the questions which animate the project. The description of both the research process and its theoretical and procedural underpinnings is sufficiently detailed to guarantee the 'rich rigor' of the data collection and analysis processes (Tracy, 2010). In Tracy's (2010, 840) terms, 'the study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate and complex theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, sample [and] contexts' to ensure the trustworthiness of the methodology. Ample concrete detail and thick description have been included, particularly about the process of analysis, so as to give the reader a sense of the credibility of the findings, which will be presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Presentation of Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the coded data on teachers' beliefs about play in infant classes in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland [RoI]. Three overarching themes were identified in the data; 'Risk', 'Commitment' and 'Play is so important for children'. Each theme is made up of sub-themes consisting of groupings of codes to which the data has been allocated. Each code is identified with an In Vivo code name, which is a word or phrase a participant has used. The data was allocated to each code on the basis of being relevant to the code but the data within each code represents different perspectives in relation to the issue to which the code refers. Where relevant, these different positions are presented with reference to the relevant code.

In all, 48 teachers participated in six focus groups. The focus groups were held in different geographical areas and the participants were drawn from a range of teaching contexts. Focus groups A and B were held in the West of Ireland. Participants taught mainly in multi-class settings in rural or semi-urban settings, and included teaching Principals and learning support teachers. Focus group C was held in a Band 1 DEIS (DES, 2005) school in a West Dublin suburb. Participants included class teachers and a range of support teachers. Nine of the participants were female and one male. The school in which all participants taught provided a daily play session in each infant class throughout the school. Focus group D took place in a Band 2 DEIS (DES, 2005) school in West Dublin with five female and one male teacher. Participants included class teachers and support teachers. Group E took place in a school in an affluent area of Dublin with seven teachers, all female and all class teachers. The 13 participants in group

F were drawn from a range of DEIS and non-DEIS schools from a range of Dublin suburbs. All were teachers of infant classes, with twelve female and one male participant.

The rationale for recruiting participants from a wide range of teaching contexts, and indeed of the 'multiple layer' design of the focus groups was to explore as full a range of perspectives as was possible in a study of this type. Such diversity provides challenges for the facilitator in terms of ensuring equitable opportunities for engagement by all participants. This is a necessary contributor to ensuring that the data actually captures the full range of perspectives, rather than those of a vocal minority. This also has implications for data analysis in ensuring that where consensus emerges, it is credible because the data is broadly based.

In this case, almost every participant contributed at least twice: In Focus Group F, participant FP13 contributed once, and only when invited to do so. All focus groups were characterised by interactivity and conversation, and there was no evident conflict. Some mild tension emerged in Focus Group B in an exchange about parents, and this is detailed in section 5.2.1 (p. 195). In Focus Group F, at one point, there was evidence of impatience with one participant who had spoken several times, and this was diffused by an invitation to the three participants who had not spoken up to that point to make a contribution. While there were certainly differences in perspective, particularly between those participants with experience of play in the classroom and those with none, (detailed in section 6.3.3), one of the unexpected findings from the focus groups is the level of consensus around the key questions. While there are nuanced differences, and these are discussed and referred to where they occurred, the level of consensus among the participants, despite the diversity of context and experience, is noteworthy. For example, those participants who were providing for play in their classrooms with the support of parents agreed with the majority of participants that parents generally would not support

such practice. Another example across contexts is that teachers working in complex multi-class situations in rural areas and teachers teaching single classes in urban areas were unanimous in their belief that additional staff were required in the classroom to facilitate play provision. The findings presented here have been carefully grounded in the data and established through a rigorous process of analysis. The participants own words are used throughout to support and provide authority for the findings, including the finding about the high level of consensus.

This is an exploratory qualitative study which is not intended to specify how widespread the views of these participants are within the entire population of teachers. The only claim for generalisation is for 'existence generalisation' (Vicsek, 2010); the beliefs identified through the analysis and presented here exist, but the distribution and prevalence of such beliefs cannot be identified from such a small sample. In addition, there may be other beliefs among the population of primary teachers which have not emerged here. While reference will be made in the text to, for example, the number of focus groups from which data related to a particular code was drawn, or to the number of participants who espouse a certain view, or to the number of data extracts associated with a particular code, there is no suggestion that these have any statistical relevance (Vicsek, 2010). Nor is it an indication that views which appear in one focus group and not in another are exclusive to the first group. It merely indicates that the discussion may have gone in different directions, as is wont to happen in focus groups (Vicsek, 2010). The purpose of numerical references is to avoid ambiguity, make the presentation of data more specific and avoid any confusion about generalizability (Guest et al., 2012). Each section ends with a summary table of the sub-themes and codes which have been presented in the text.

5.2 Risk

The data reveal that play represents a risk to teachers for a number of different reasons. These can be summarised as the risks the participants associated with teachers' accountability to stakeholders; their accountability for children's learning and for curriculum implementation; and the participants' perceptions that play is not compatible with such accountability requirements. In addition, play is e seen by the participants as being incompatible with the system in which infant class teaching takes place.

5.2.1 'Accountability to'

The most powerful figure evident in the data is that of the parent. Data on the parent is collated across five codes: 'The parental role', 'Next thing, you have parents in', 'Involvement from parents', 'Parents don't realise how important play is', and 'To educate parents in the value of it'. Beliefs about play provision in school are very closely associated with beliefs about parental expectations, parental power, and these beliefs are influenced by the attitude teachers have towards parents' role in children's learning and the degree to which parents can be involved with the school.

A range of perspectives is apparent in the data on the role of parents in supporting early learning outside school through the provision of stimulating experiences and play opportunities, and on how this relates to play provision in school. One perspective on the parental role is that the school would '*...presume the parents would do those [play] activities with their children'* (AP1). In addition, another perspective suggests that such activities are '*...more suitable for parents to take on ...*' (BP2), and that for the teacher to take responsibility for play provision is to take on the parental role. This appears to indicate that, where such a view exists, that home and school experiences are seen as separate, if not discontinuous. However, in terms of the parental role, a parallel view

suggests that the school has to compensate for what parents can't actually do: '*I would have a problem sort of saying that parents could do it because a lot of parents can't do it'* (BP1). Associated with these perspectives are comments on parents being under pressure, lacking time and/or lacking interest in playing with their children. A different perspective views parents as interested, but in need of guidance.

In four of the six focus groups, in data coded as 'The next thing you have parents in', participants expressed the view that parents would complain if play interfered with conventional work in school:

> *I'd love to go down and play with them more but it is just, say, if I do spend ten minutes with them during play time, being with them, it's just that some children end up going home without their homework or readers changed or word boxes changed. The next thing you have parents in saying – her word box wasn't changed – and you can't say – well, I was doing drama with them this morning and I didn't get their homework checked.* (AP4)

This view exists even among participants (Focus group C) who provide play opportunities on a daily basis with the support of parents: '*Now it is not an issue in our school, our parents are very supportive but I wonder in other schools could it be?'* (CP4). Participants question parental priorities and values ('*She actually thought the child was just coming and playing all day and was actually worried that the child was playing all day and wasn't at all thinking about the fact, well obviously my child is happy in school. That didn't come into the equation at all*' FP2) but it is absolutely evident from the data that the participants believe parental censure to be a very real and immediate possibility if play were to be introduced widely into schools. Paradoxically, there is evidence (code – 'Involvement from parents') that the participants see parental involvement in a more or less positive light: '*It's ok for us all to go and get these resources off people and teachers and parents are very helpful about bringing things in'* (EP1), but such involvement is seen in terms of helping with resources. Feelings about

parents helping in the classroom by interacting with children during play evinced a more complicated range of attitudes. One perspective sees such engagement as unproblematic and enjoyable for the children; another perspective articulated by a participant with experience with play in the classroom and possibly a greater awareness of how complicated such work is, is more cautious:

> *I think parents though ... I don't think anyone can just do that, I think parents would have to know why they are doing it and what they are trying to achieve. It is not like bringing them in for maths games, that they just play a game and that's it, this is kind of a bit different. And we can't undermine teachers and what they put into it by saying anyone can come in and do it. (DP1)*

Insofar as there is any unanimity within any code, there is unanimity in 'Parents don't realise how important play is'. This belief is manifest across all six focus groups, even in group C, all of whose participants provide a daily play session for all infant classes in their school and describe the parents as supportive. There is evidence of sympathetic attitudes on the basis that parents can't be expected to know, but also that parents are overly focused on workbooks and other conventional practices and not open to alternative views: '*I was saying, oh God he is very creative and imaginative. And she [parent] was kind of, like, blowing that to one side and going, yes but what about his reading and writing and numeracy*?' (FP9).

The data indicates a belief among participants that parental expectations and aspirations for their children are closely tied to conventional and traditional practices and this perspective on parental beliefs is likely to exert considerable influence on practice. Again, the view emerged across all six groups on the necessity 'To educate parents in the value of it [play]'. A range of views exist on how this would be achieved and on who should be responsible for such education, and, indeed, whether all parents would be open to such information:

> ***BP2**: My set of parents would be very, very interested in working with their children and they would be reading books.*
>
> ***BP3**: Yeah some people are.*

In group D, one participant suggested that the Home School Liaison teacher could provide the training; others, in groups C, D and E, suggested that it could be included as part of the annual induction talk, and there were suggestions in these groups that the training being made available in conjunction with *Aistear* could also be made available to parents. Included in this strand, in data from groups A and B, was a concern that such engagement with parents represented additional workload for teachers (see also 'But there is just so much else'). The participants in these two groups did not have access to Home School Liaison teachers and, for the most part, had not experienced *Aistear* training courses. In whatever way such education is to be achieved, there is a very clear belief that it is necessary '*[b]ecause at least they know what we are talking about when we mention it then*' (DP4).

Implicit in the data on parents is a belief that parents are powerful actors in teachers' professional lives, and a strong belief that teachers are accountable to parents for their practice. In relation to play pedagogy, the participants do not believe that parents understand the value of play in children's lives and particularly not in school. Parents are believed to favour practice which is consistent with parents' own school experience (see sub-theme '(In)Visibility, code 'Word boxes and readers') and to be in a position to censure teachers when this conventional practice is disrupted. The participants take the view that parents will have to be educated if they are to accept play pedagogy, but questions arise as to how this should be achieved.

While accountability to parents is evidently the main concern among the participants, accountability to other groups and beliefs about those groups' attitudes to play also

feature in the data. The In Vivo code chosen for this strand of data on accountability is 'The Cigire' which is 'The Inspector' in Irish. The participants exhibit uncertainty about the position being adopted by the Inspectorate towards play provision. While those participants who have attended training courses on *Aistear* relay the information that '*...they're [the Inspectorate] on board, from anything that they've been saying at the Aistear courses, the girl who has been giving the course, the Inspectorate are on board'* (EP2), there is evidence that that this message is not universally appreciated:

> *I'd say if you had an Inspector knocking on the door and say in a month's time, you are trying to argue that this hour of play covers your drama, your history, your geography, your science and your SPHE, I'd say you'd be a bit worried, as you said before it's confirmed. (EP5)*

Data extracts from groups A, B, D and F contain similar comments. This level of confusion about the position of the Inspectorate is emphasised by the experience of BP3:

> *... when we had our WSE [Whole School Evaluation] she [the Inspector] asked me – why were they not playing when she came in in the morning? I said – we were told not to let them play that morning because we were supposed to start straight into our Irish but every other day, of course they play and it is an integral part of the day.*

This is a school which is sympathetic to play provision, but was so convinced that the Inspector would not approve that play was abandoned for the duration of the Inspector's visit.

In addition to beliefs about support from parents and the Inspectorate, the data indicate that participants are uncertain that play provision would be acceptable or valued within the school, even, again, in schools which make provision for play. Issues which contribute to this perspective include the difficulties which would arise if one teacher in an infant class made provision for play and another teacher of infants did not (AP4). Those children who played '*...may not write or read as quickly as they would have in the*

other system' (AP5), thereby causing difficulties with parents and '*... colleagues who are teaching further up the line'* (CP1). The accountability to colleagues, who may be dissatisfied ('*...why don't they know their maths ...*' EP7) and unhappy with the behaviour patterns of children used to play ('*messing'* CP7) is crystallised in the 'Cúntas Miosúil' (Monthly Report), in which each teacher logs the curriculum content which has been covered. The 'Cúntas Miosúil' is where 'Accountability to' intersects with 'Accountability For'.

The concern that teaching colleagues would not be supportive of play pedagogy is contextualised by data coded as 'You'd have to get all the teachers understanding it too'. Participants attribute lack of understanding of and support for play among colleagues to a number of factors, according to the data: attachment to traditional teaching methods and subject based learning (CP2); lack of familiarity with play as an approach to teaching and learning (FP5); discomfort with the time needed for play provision (CP3); lack of 'permission' (CP10) (see also code 'Permission'); fear of change (CP2); poor understanding of how young children learn (FP8); discomfort with the age group (see also code 'Infants are their own thing'); '*So even things like that about noise. Like if people didn't know what I was doing'* (CP4); and unwillingness to cede control to children (FP2) (see also code 'Control'). Throughout this code, in data from groups A, C, D and F, there is evident anxiety that, in the absence of support within the school, teachers providing play opportunities in the infant classroom would be seen as less professional and conscientious than their peers:

> *And then when you have your Principal, then, or people who are in charge of developing the literacy and numeracy strategy in the school telling you, well your kids weren't up to scratch at the end of the year, what have you been doing? So for something like that to work it has to come from the whole school plan and for everyone to be encouraging it and then for parents to be aware of that as well. (FP9)*

In the face of these issues, the participants indicated that incorporating play into the infant classroom would require whole school agreement and training for all teachers, not just those working with infant classes.

What these fears about lack of support from stakeholder groups, to whom they believe themselves to be accountable, lead to is an attitude that play needs 'Permission', and this attitude is evident in all six focus groups. For example, participants in focus group C believe that they have '*extra permission*' (CP1) to work with play because their Principal '*... is so on board*' (CP1). This is echoed by participants FP4 and FP5, both of whom also practice play pedagogy, and who describe themselves as:

> *... very lucky as well that we have a very supportive Principal who has embraced it and thinks that it should be done with every infant classroom. So she is prepared to say, if an Inspector comes in and argues with us, I suppose, that our curricular areas haven't been significantly covered. She said, I am happy to stand over it and say that I support what you did and that I think the benefits for the children in our school far out weigh the fact that in SESE, they didn't cover every strand or music or art or the areas that you may have borrowed a few bits from. (FP4)*

The Principal is seen as a key source of permission and as a buffer between the teacher and the stakeholder groups described above. However, the data suggest the existence of an attitude that support from the Principal may not be enough or may not be certain:

> ***FP3**: No I mean the Department of Education stands over it.*
> ***FP1**: Exactly, that this is the way we do it and there's an agreed policy, an agreed framework to work off. I think everyone would feel more comfortable with that.*

This may indicate a perspective among the participants that not all Principals would be supportive, and that teachers in infant classes may need a higher authority to underwrite the introduction of play into the classroom. The data suggest additionally that changing

curricular policy to be more explicit about the particular needs of children in infants and the appropriate approaches would contribute to the strength of 'permission'.

There is a small number of data extracts which hint at an awareness that perhaps permission from other groups is not the full picture. 'Ourselves putting ourselves under pressure' contains only seven data extracts in which participants wonder – and it is no stronger – whether some of the pressure they believe teachers feel is self-generated: '*I could see it [play] happening if we weren't under such pressure for other aspects of the curriculum. Or maybe it's ourselves putting ourselves under pressure*' (BP1). Nonetheless, the overwhelming tide of the data indicates that the participants believe that before play can be adopted, they will need permission from external sources.

Embedded in the aggregate data is a belief that, because the stakeholders to whom teachers believe themselves accountable will not necessarily support the use of play, implementing such an approach is risky. The data suggests that play pedagogy invites such risk because it renders teaching invisible, whereas traditional and didactic methods makes it easy to see the teacher teaching.

Contributing to the perspective of play as making teaching invisible is a perspective evident in the data, coded as 'We did nothing all day, we just played', that play is considered doing nothing. The participants themselves do not necessarily see providing for play as teaching: '*If someone walked in on you, and you were playing, you'd be, like, 'Oh we're doing work in a minute*!' (CP7). This gives rise to concern that the teacher will be seen as less than professional:

> ***DP5***: *Teacher passing the time.*
>
> ***DP4***: *Teacher not teaching....*
>
> ***DP5***: *The teacher is having a rest*

The 'nothing' effect is exacerbated by the difficulty of 'showing' teaching on the timetable where traditionally teaching is made explicit by allocating time to each subject area. Data coded as 'How did it come out of the timetable' details the dilemma for teachers of finding and accounting for the considerable time required for play provision. The timetable is the site at which subject teaching and play pedagogy come into conflict: '*I was just wondering under what say in the timetable, is it drama, is it English?'* (AP6).

While the data suggest that play is not seen as teaching, there is a correspondingly strong perception that conventions built into the system are what is understood by stakeholders as 'teaching'. The data coded as 'Word boxes and readers' very clearly expresses the belief that teaching is about checking word boxes (small boxes with sight vocabulary on small flash cards), checking homework and readers, and completing workbooks and textbooks. These are the products which make teaching visible and these are the products that stakeholders use to assess teaching. Even participants in group C who have consciously moved away from using these conventions suggest that they are what define teaching across the system:

> *Now we are not led by books at all but I know I have friends who have junior and senior infants who have nine or ten books. And I know that a concern for parents might be, well when are they going to do their books? Or maybe from other teachers who are just only unfamiliar, they might think when are they going to do their work? (CP4)*

There appears, from data in groups B, C, E and F, to be some dissatisfaction with the prevalence of workbooks in particular, even among participants who are not convinced of the place of play in schools: *'And an awful lot of those workbooks, ..., they are surplus to requirements'* (EP3). However, the riskiness of play making teaching invisible is

aggravated by the continuing pervasiveness of the conventions of traditional practice, and their acceptance as the norm.

The data suggest that 'Explicit teaching' is seen as the '*...normal day to day classroom situation, where you tell them what to do and they go and they do their work'* (AP4). Furthermore, the data assembled in this code indicate that curriculum implementation is best addressed through '*[e]xplicit teaching, really'* (DP1). Even in focus group C, where play is embedded into the daily routine in the participants' school '*...like I would be wondering, am I covering the curriculum when we are spending an hour playing each day, like'* (CP7). A perspective is apparent throughout this code that, in order for teachers to feel they have covered the curriculum content required of them in ways that allow them to account for their teaching and the children's learning, there is a need to be '*...very formal in what you do in senior infants to get them ready for 1st'* (FP8).

5.2.2 Accountability For

The data in this sub-theme cluster around two key areas of accountability: accountability for children's learning and accountability for curriculum implementation.

5.2.2.1 Accountability for Learning

The data on beliefs about accountability for learning is collated across four codes: 'Difficult enough to track progress', 'It depends on the children you have in front of you'. 'You have to get through the work with them all' and 'It's just what they're like'. According to the data, play makes it difficult to account for children's learning for a number of different reasons. The data coded as 'Difficult enough to track progress' represents a belief best encapsulated as '*...with that number of children all spread out, all going in different directions and different areas. Difficult enough to be very sure that individual children were making progress'* (BP2). A number of perspectives are evident in the data on why this is the case: the number of children in the class (see also code '33

children makes it so much more difficult'); lack of classroom support (see also codes 'You do need help' and 'There is only one of me in my class'); lack of confidence in teacher observation as an assessment method; uncertainty about how curriculum objectives are evidenced in play (see also code 'Hard to plan, then?'); the individualised character of play activity - '*...how do you know who has actually gotten what you want to teach?* (DP1); management tasks taking so much time during play that no time is left for observing; lack of structure to the assessment; concern that play becomes static and does not progress learning; and if play is child led, it will not match what the teacher wants to teach. All of these concerns contrast with the certainty provided by traditional paper based assessment, '*...like a finished project in the copy*' (EP5).

There was virtually no concern expressed about this issue by the participants in focus group C who work with play pedagogy, nor from two of the participants in focus group F who also provide daily play opportunities. One participant in group F, who also provides play opportunities, expressed concern that she is not able to observe all the children sufficiently because she is trying to spend time interacting with a small group, and does not know what is going on at the other groups.

Three of the participants, who had attended *Aistear* training courses, described strategies that could be used for assessment, but these would require adaptation of the school reporting systems. The data represents attitudes of uncertainty and nervousness about play having a negative impact on how teachers can account for children's learning, a fundamental function of the class teacher:

> *And ... the emphasis that we have, I suppose, on assessment, particularly in senior infants, that is where we are particularly coming from, like you do look at children and learning through a very specific lens and role play just does not seem to tap in there at the moment. Well, I don't think so anyway. (FP2)*

Similar concerns are evident in the data in relation to delivery of curriculum content to all children, coded as 'You have to get through the work with them all'. This connects with the data in the codes 'Word boxes and readers' and 'Explicit teaching' in that all address the perception that if every child does the same thing as instructed by the teacher, then the teacher can account for what s/he has 'covered'. Because children follow unpredictable paths during play, the concern is that '*[i]t would be difficult to make sure that every single child had an experience that would allow them to develop a concept of behind, over, under*' (BP2).

In addition, because the teacher works with small groups or individual children during play, s/he cannot account for delivery of content to all children: '*Then again, that's only one adult, you might be only targeting two children for that day, so you technically couldn't even call it your maths lesson*' (AP4). This debate also developed among group C participants familiar with play in the classroom. Those participants talk about balancing play with 'more formal learning' and with subject based lessons, but the tension remains:

> *And it is a balancing act as well because you want to get into the role and play but at the same time you are trying to impart something and make sure that the children are actually picking up the curricular kind of stuff as well. So it is a lot for one person to do. (CP5)*

In addition to beliefs about the incompatibility of play with accountability for assessment and assuring every child makes learning progress, both of these are contextualised by perspectives on the characteristics of children in infant classes, coded as 'It is just what they're like'. Another associated perspective relates to the contingent nature of teaching this age group in which the characteristics of the class and of individual children requires flexibility of approach and provision, coded as 'It depends on the children that you have in front of you'.

A variety of attitudes can be identified in the data towards the characteristics of young children. One the one hand they are seen as showing initiative and being active learners, but on the other as being in a state of knowledge deficit; of immersing themselves in play yet not being capable of lengthy attention; of co-operating during play yet fighting among themselves (see also code 'Are they going to fight over it?'). Play is seen as universally loved by children, but the data includes caveats on this with comments to the effect that not all children can play (e.g. EP2) or enjoy all forms of play (e.g. DP1) (see also code 'Isn't very good at playing'). The principle that play should be child led is challenged by the view that there are children who are vocal and dominant and others who are not, and that the teacher has to protect the rights of the second group: '*Because there would be some very vocal children who would be very convincing and stuff and sometimes you feel like going with what they say but you kind of say, well hang on, or we take a vote about things as well'* (FP5).

The data across the four codes described above imply concerns among participants that play pedagogy represents a risk and a challenge to teachers' ability to meet their obligations to account for the learning of the whole class in ways that are compatible with the school system.

5.2.2.2 Accountability for Curriculum Implementation

The data on accountability for curriculum implementation is collated across nine codes: 'Hard to plan then, isn't it?', 'It is a balancing act', 'There's never time to actually interact with them while they're playing', 'Quality time', 'The four classes', 'Literacy and numeracy', 'Write or read', 'It would need to be very structured' and 'They learn best that way if there is a theme'.

'Hard to plan then, isn't it?' represents data demonstrating participants' concerns that play disrupts curriculum implementation a priori because the content of play cannot be

planned. Play is seen as a challenge to curriculum implementation because it is not compatible with the requirement to pursue curriculum objectives:

> *You can have play, say teaching, I don't know, floating and sinking or something and you can do that through play so you just put out water and let them discover it and that's great. But then your more specific objectives, it is very difficult to achieve them through play, not that you are not achieving them but it is very difficult to pin point them and say, the children are going to learn this and I am going to teach it through a play session. (DP1)*

The view is expressed that this is further complicated if play is planned with the children because the teacher's agenda cannot be guaranteed. Planning for play is also considered a demanding and time consuming task, more complex that subject based planning.

Thematic planning - 'They learn best that way if there is a theme' - is seen as both a solution and adding complexity:

> *If you pick a theme for example and then you're trying to get all the subjects into that theme so that you are not wasting time and that you can say – look at all I have covered. There is a huge amount of effort in sitting down and trying to bring as much as you can into one little activity and that is only in one subject or whatever, for one week. (AP5)*

Data extracts from groups A, D and E suggest that focusing play provision on a theme helps with resourcing. By having resources collected on a themed basis means that they can be rotated among classes, easing the workload and reducing the investment needed in resourcing play in larger schools with several infant classes. Another perspective, articulated by group D, is that a common theme would facilitate planning among a group of teachers.

Data from three participants who teach in multi-class settings, coded as 'The four classes', offer insights into the complexities of teaching in multi-class settings. While there is an acknowledgement that the younger children can learn from the older children,

the provision of play in such classrooms is viewed as problematic because *'[i]nfants are so different to first and second, it's very, very different'* (AP6).

It is evident from the data, coded as 'Literacy and numeracy', that *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy among children and young people, 2011 – 2020* (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011a) has had an impact on practice, and appears to be interpreted into practice as discrete, programme type activities rather than being integrated across the curriculum as it is implemented in classrooms:

> ***BP3**: It is very difficult to find time allocation with the new increases with the literacy and the numeracy. I felt that I had to cut back on my play, you know. That I just couldn't find time. I had to cut off five minutes here.*
>
> ***BP1**: It is interesting that you say that you cut back on the play rather than cutting back, say, on history and geography.*
>
> ***BP3**: No, I mean I cut back on other things as well.*

Participants mention Power Hour and the First Steps programme, the 'hours' for literacy and numeracy, noting that *'...but the day is quite short really when you have all the literacy and numeracy to get through'* (FP11). While the main thrust of the data indicates that literacy and numeracy teaching (as associated with the strategy) is perceived as programme based, discrete from other classroom pedagogical activities, and incompatible with play provision mainly because of time factors, there is another perspective, albeit less evident. 3 data extracts (of 16) provide evidence of an attitude that literacy and numeracy can be progressed through play, that *'...there is a way of getting around it, you can borrow time from literacy and numeracy provided you have stations that include activities to do with those things'* (FP3), and that oral language development particularly will benefit from children's involvement in play (see also theme 'Play is so important for children', sub-theme 'Language').

The participants are as one in their understanding of what the system requires of them in terms of the teaching of reading and writing in infant classes. Even those who question if such requirements are appropriate are clear that they exist: '*But, you know, especially come senior infants, they have to be reading, they have to be writing …*' (FP8). Because of the primacy of this teaching task, the participants' attitudes to play may be coloured by their deep beliefs about what teachers are expected to have achieved with children in terms of reading and writing prior to entry to first class.

Embedded and implicit in the data coded as 'Write or read', are beliefs about how children should learn to read and write (see also theme 'Risk', sub-theme 'Word boxes and readers'). Play is seen as incompatible with practice in which children learn to read through direct instruction rather than through the child engaging with meaningful literacy experiences:

> *And it is not that I don't give them play time, but I just feel that you get a spare chance and you say, 'oh we'll go back over the phonics or something now'. I know in the evening times we have the reading. Some days I might say, ok we have half an hour now and instead of pulling out the activities, we'll just go and do our letters or our sounds again or something like that. (EP7)*

Again, the various perspectives articulated in the data indicate that these attitudes are connected with parental expectations, pressure within the school for evidence of academic progress, and tied into concerns about how teachers' professionalism is perceived: '*And there is an expectation that they will read and write and if the teacher isn't doing that, she's 'what sort of teacher is she'?*' (BP5).

Accountability for curriculum implementation through play would be compromised, according to the data coded as 'There's never time to actually interact with them while they're playing', because the priority teaching tasks are not achieved through play and therefore the teacher could not justify spending time playing. In data gathered mainly

from group C and coded as 'It is a balancing act', a tension is identifiable between the teacher's responsibility to progress curriculum objectives and allowing the children to lead the play. One participant in group F suggested that this tension is due to individual teachers finding it difficult to let children take the lead. A very small group of seven data extracts coded as 'Quality time' provides a different perspective. This data refers to the benefits of interacting with children during play in terms of building relationships and observation. Nonetheless, the dominant perspective is that the difficulties of interacting with children during play, because of higher priorities elsewhere, means that curriculum implementation through play is problematic.

The response which emerges from the concerns about accountability in relation to play is 'It would need to be very structured'. This particular code contains more data extracts than any other code in this sub-theme, and contains data from all groups. While the number of data extracts does not of itself indicate that this particular code is any more significant than any other, it does suggest that this concern is relevant across all teaching contexts. The various perspectives apparent in the data suggest that the uncertainties related to play provision need to be addressed by structuring the following: time allocations and frequency; relationship to subject areas (*'But straight away that [SESE] could be put to your play time instead of this, you know, 'colour in the mechanic' in the book'* EP4); relationship to academic progress (*'...to get the balance right between the unstructured play and the structure that has to follow to bring them on academically'* AP6); space allocation both in the classroom and at school level; thematic planning; additional personnel with specific roles (see also theme 'Commitment', sub-theme 'Everybody would be on board', code 'You do need help); observation systems: and school systems for accounting for learning:

> *So that is why I was saying with regards to a structure for your observations and all the rest, would we nearly be*

> *better getting together and drawing up a structure to say that you just put a copy of it into your reports then at the end of the month. (DP4)*

Implicit in this particular pattern of attitudes is the belief that play needs to fit the existing system rather than the other way round, but it could also be interpreted as an effort by the participants to find a way to bring play into the classroom.

5.2.3 'Our system'

This sub-theme is based on data collated across eleven codes: 'But that's our system', 'We have eleven subjects', '33 children makes it so much more difficult', 'There is only one of me in my class', 'But there is just so much else', 'An awful lot of work behind the scenes', 'They had so much space', 'Practicalities', 'Are they going to fight over it?', 'Under pressure of time, trying to get everything done', and 'Harder than it looks'. System characteristics are the context within which play emerges as a risk to teachers' professional reputations because play is considered a poor fit for 'Our system':

> *That is the word, structured because our system is way more structured and more formal than the English system obviously and other systems but that's <u>our</u> system. And while you do bring the play in, it's almost more formal play although they do have informal play. (AP5)*

When reading the data, there is a very strong sense of all the participants being embedded in this system, believing implicitly in its 'taken for grantedness'. 'Our system' is the rigid scaffolding onto which the participants project their beliefs about what they must do, and be seen to do. This rigidity is primarily located in the Primary School Curriculum [PSC] (DES, 1999a). Data coded as 'We have eleven subjects' describes the incompatibility of play with a curriculum structured into eleven distinct subject areas. The problems to do with planning for curriculum implementation through play have been referred to above. In addition, there is a strong perspective that there are divisions between subjects that require them to be taught as separate areas, and this is translated into the use of

workbooks and textbooks (see code 'Word boxes and readers'). The number of subjects (and there are repeated references to the number of subject areas) is seen as a barrier to thematic planning.

There is also a small number of data extracts which run counter to this very powerful image of the PSC as a constricting imperative. They form part of the picture of how children could experience the infant classes and what would be appropriate experiences (language based and socially constructed) which will be discussed in the theme 'Play is so important for children'. Data coded as 'Is it not in the Curriculum already?' gathers a numerically small – just 3 exchanges in 3 different focus groups – but significant set of data extracts stating that the PSC mandates the use of play in infant classes. '*Are we supposed to be doing it though? Is it not, kinda, in the curriculum already?*' (AP4). It would be incorrect to state that this represents a widespread willingness to challenge the perception of the PSC as inimical to play, but it indicates that there is an alternative view.

The data on curriculum subject learning, coded as 'They are talking in Irish', show the participants identifying curriculum content learning in the following subjects, based either on viewing the stimulus footage or from their own play practice: Maths, Irish, Geography, Drama, SESE, SPHE, English (distinct from 'Language') and Science. The issue for the participants is not whether subject content can be learned through play (this data suggests it can), but the compatibility of the PSC as a whole (a very large whole) with play.

Throughout the data, the support of the Principal is seen as allowing teachers to push back against the rigidity of the eleven subjects (twelve if religion is included as some participants did), and participants who work with play express less concern but acknowledge initial worries:

> *In fairness, the two of you were as apprehensive as I was. I remember saying, no, you'll remember this. We were saying we did consider the other curriculum subjects and say how are we going to have time. We did worry about having that play for a whole hour ... (CP8)*

The number of subjects has consequences for time allocation and management. There is unanimity among participants that considerable time is required for successful play provision and this is incompatible with the current system of time allocations (see also code 'How did it come out of the timetable?). This data is coded as 'Under pressure of time, trying to get everything done' in which 'everything' refers to subjects and the conventions associated with subject based teaching. While group C, whose participants are already providing for play, do not take that perspective, time continues to be an issue for them'*[b]ecause you still have to fit in everything'* (CP4). The data suggest an assumption that play provision will have to be in addition to current activities rather than an alternative:

> *It has great benefits but at the same time, what else are we missing out on in order to do this, you know. The time that would go in to preparing it and say dealing with that programme, it's obviously going to be time lost in something else.* (AP3).

There is also evidence of the view that play needs a separate space within the curriculum in the data coded as 'You get a curriculum for every other subject'. '*There is no guidelines there for play either. There is guidelines for every other curricular area that we are doing*'. (BP3). While, on the one hand, this suggests confusion or mis-understanding among participants about the nature and purpose of play in relation to curriculum, it is also indicative of a desire for greater attention to play in curriculum policy.

Emeshed with views about the impact of play provision on time management are beliefs about workload:

> *I thought it was an awful lot of work behind the scenes. I mean these things don't... That equipment and that doesn't just fall into your classroom, like. I'd imagine there is a lot of behind the scenes, kind of, work, we'll say, involving parents and everything. (AP2)*

'An awful lot of work behind the scenes' connects with the idea of play making teaching 'invisible' (see sub-theme 'Accountability to') in that setting up and resourcing play requires considerable effort which is not seen or appreciated. Participants picked up repeatedly on the fact that the garage role play portrayed in the stimulus film footage lasted only three weeks, and they repeatedly referred to the intensity of behind the scenes work that would be required on a year round basis if that three to four week cycle was to be sustained throughout the school year.

'But there is just so much else' is what underpins this perspective on the possibility of introducing play into the classroom: '*With First Communion, School Photographs, you name it, all the things that are going on, football matches, everything else that is going on in school, I would leave a lot of that to the parents*' (BP2). Data from all six focus groups refer to the fact that 'There is only one of me in my class'. This attitude is not exclusive to the introduction of play pedagogy as the belief refers to the way in which teachers are expected to '*... muddle along with these new initiatives*' (FP8) because in 'our system' '*You know the way sometimes, it is all thrown out at you and you are told – off you go now – you are supposed to pick from this and pick from that*' (AP5). Taking into account data across the codes 'Under pressure of time', 'An awful lot of work', 'There is only one of me' and 'But there is just so much else', there is a strong sense that participants see themselves as being expected to introduce new initiatives, play included, in the teeth of unsustainable workloads, unsupported by those who initiate the change

and abandoned to sink or swim. Significantly, those in groups C and F who have already adopted play pedagogy are relatively silent on the issues of workload, while acknowledging that not having help in the classroom is a challenge. This may be due to the collegiate nature of their work, support from their Principals, the training they have received and other contextual factors (see section 4.3.3.5 for focus group participant profiles).

In addition to the participants perception of the implications of play pedagogy for workload and the way initiatives are handled in the school system, other system characteristics impact on attitudes and beliefs. Multi-class contexts have been referred to earlier, but '33 children makes it so much more difficult' indicates that the participants view current class sizes as a material constraint on their ability to provide play opportunities:

> *I am just trying to visualise doing something like that in my own classroom where I'd have thirty-one children and you literally have your space for your activities and they take them every morning and they put them back again. And it regularly looks like a mess because you just don't have the space. (AP2)*

The only participants who did not mention class size as a difficulty were those in DEIS Band 1 schools in which infant classes have a maximum of 15 children per class. The numbers of children per class is compounded by the lack of teaching assistants: '*I can't see how, with one teacher and 28 to 30 junior or senior infants, that it could be done as effectively as we saw there on the DVD'* (EP3) (see also code 'Commitment', sub-theme 'Everybody would be on board', code 'You do need help').

Not only is class size a constraint, but the size of classrooms into which those classes have to fit is identified as an issue in data associated with the code 'They had so much space'. However, relatively little of the data is focused solely on classrooms being too

small, but includes perspectives on storage space and access to outdoor space. This is not to suggest that participants believe that their individual classrooms are suitable, but they believe that solutions are possible in certain circumstances:

> *Maybe in the bigger schools, if there was a room or an area that could be used for role play where something like that could be rotated, you know, but within a smaller school where there mightn't be the space or the resources or the use that'll be got out of this space, maybe, being used for whatever length of time per week, you know, it mightn't be as realistic but maybe in the bigger schools. (AP3)*

Where play sessions happen regularly, the data suggests participants still find the space limited: '*But I, although our classrooms are really big, compared to <u>that</u>, they are really small and they are really small when all the children are here, but even though you have two or three adults, everyone can feel very much on top of each other*' (CP4) . The need to have space for tables is referred to by only one participant in a way that indicates that the need is self-evident. The need for tables in the classroom is not questioned and is evidently an implicit belief among the participants

Associated with space is the issue of 'practicalities' which have an impact on attitudes towards the feasibility of play provision. A significant practical concern is that of storage of resources which connects with the lack of space previously identified. Other practicalities arise because of the teacher being alone in the classroom: '*This is realistic, like, this is what goes on. If someone is in the toilet too long or – teacher, there is no toilet roll in the toilet- all these things I suppose come into a real classroom situation'* (AP4). There is another perspective associated with 'practicalities' which suggests that if teachers are 'practical' about what they can and cannot achieve, there is a greater likelihood of making some progress, rather than '*...trying to do the devil and all and this beautiful shop with them all and then say, 'no, I can't work this''* (EP3).

A surprising number of data extracts, coded as 'Are they going to fight over it?', reflect concerns about the possibility of children fighting during play over resources, because of difficulty sharing, taking turns or due to lack of social skills; of doing damage with (as was seen in the stimulus footage) real tools; and of taking advantage of open spaces to misbehave because of reduced supervision. A smaller number of data extracts provide a contradictory perspective: One participant in group F with experience of play provision noted that behaviour in her class had improved; another participant in group A suggested that the motivational impact of enjoyable play would have a calming effect on the children; a third, also in group A described a wet day play scenario notable for the co-operation of all the children. But the greater part of the data in this code expresses participants' views that play could stimulate problematic behaviour from some children.

Much of the data generated about 'Our system' was in direct response to the stimulus film footage in which conditions in the school in England gave rise to direct contrast with conditions in participants' schools. What is identifiable in the data is the view, both implicit and explicit, that providing for and using play in a 'real classroom' is considerably more difficult than it appeared in the film footage. It is 'Harder than it looks': '*I probably might see a bit of an issue with how you'd actually organise it in the present set up, the way we are in this country compared to the obvious back up they have over there'* (EP3). What is difficult to appreciate when reading the data is the degree of scepticism and wariness evident in the audio data, where tone of voice contributes a significant layer of meaning. I also got a very clear impression during the focus groups, particularly in groups A, B and E, that some participants felt (and on occasion articulated the view) that the film footage represented an idealised version of what play would look like in a classroom: '*... so I'd say it was selectively edited as well'* (AP6). This scepticism is contextualised by the data on class size, lack of teaching assistants,

curriculum overload, workload, experience of initiatives being foisted on teachers with no support and the practical challenges of play provision. Indeed the data is clear that in 'Our system' it is indeed 'Harder than it looks'.

Table 5.1 Overview of theme, sub-theme and constituent code groups: Risk

Theme: Risk Adopting and implementing play as an approach to teaching and learning in infant classes represents a risk to teachers across a range of dimensions and for a number of reasons.	
Sub-theme: Accountability to ...	
Parents	
"The parental role"	A range of perspectives on the role of parents in supporting early learning outside school through the provision of stimulating experiences, incorporating beliefs about parents willingness/unwillingness, ability/inability to do so.
"The next thing you have parents in"	Parental responses in cases where conventional practice is not adhered to, and parents willingness to voice their disapproval.
"Involvement from parents"	Perspectives on current levels of parental involvement, and the potential for parental involvement in play including involving them by giving them responsibility for making sure children play at home rather than in school.
"Parents don't realise how important play is"	Assertions that parents do not understand the importance of play for children's learning, that they would not understand or appreciate its use in school, but evidence of an awareness that they couldn't be expected to know.
"To educate parents in the value of it"	How and why teachers should/could/might engage with parents to educate them about play as an approach to teaching and learning.
The Cigire [The Inspector]	
"The Cigire"	Teachers' sense of being accountable to other stakeholders in the system – the Inspectorate, other teachers – but accountability in the sense of being open to censure from these groups and a sense of being vulnerable to that censure without an entitlement to independent action. Related to self-efficacy and locus of control.
Other teachers	
"You'd have to get all the teachers understanding it too"	Teachers' lack of understanding that play is an approach to teaching and learning.
Permission	
"Permission"	The need for authorisation from a range of sources (Inspectorate, curriculum reform, Principals) for play provision so that teachers have security in changing their practice. Indications of lack of professional autonomy and self-efficacy.
"Ourselves putting ourselves under pressure"	A suggestion that at least some of the pressure experienced by teachers in terms of curriculum implementation is self-generated rather than emanating from external sources.

(In)Visibility	
"We did nothing all day, we just played"	The status of play as 'doing nothing', rendering teaching invisible and calling the teacher's professionalism and work ethic into question.
"How did it come out of the timetable?"	Accountability for how time is allocated in school across subjects, and the difficulties of accounting for play in the context of a subject based timetable. Extracts indicate that play is not seen as an approach to teaching and learning but as a subject.
"Word boxes and readers"	The conventions attached to teaching in the infant classes, and their impact.
"Explicit teaching"	Examples of participants describing what is required in order for them to feel that they have covered the required content with the children. How teachers prove that they have been covering content with the children, and getting results. How teachers see themselves covering content and academic learning. Instances of participants expressing their need to be explicit (didactic but no one used the word) in their teaching in order to feel that curriculum content is covered.
Sub-theme: Accountability for ...	
Learning	
"Difficult enough to track progress"	Perspectives on how assessment can or cannot be achieved in the play context, and on what is valued as the focus of assessment, i.e. what learning is valued.
"It depends on the children that you have in front of you"	The contingent nature of teaching in which the characteristics of the class and of individual children requires flexibility of approach and provision.
"You have to get through the work with them all"	Accountability for the children's learning and the challenges of tracking each child's learning through play in the context of large classes and individualised learning.
"It is just what they're like"	The characteristics of children in the infant class age group as perceived by the participants and which have an impact on how teachers provide for them in the classroom.
Curriculum implementation	
"Hard to plan then, isn't it?"	The challenges of planning play, ranging from the complexities of integrated, thematic planning to the requirement to plan curriculum objectives for an open learning context like play.
"It is a balancing act"	The tension between the teacher's responsibility to progress curriculum objectives and allowing the children to lead the play, with suggestions that the teacher's unwillingness to cede control is a factor in that tension.
"There's never time to actually interact with them while they're playing"	Spending time with the children during play conflicts with other teaching tasks which are understood to have higher or more urgent priority.
"Quality time"	The degree to which teachers can and/or do spend time with the children, and the value they place on such interactions.
"The four classes"	The specific challenges and conditions associated with teaching in multi-class contexts.
"Literacy and numeracy"	References to the requirements of the literacy and numeracy

	strategy and other programmes focused on literacy and numeracy.
"Write or read"	The connections made by the participants between play in the classroom and the children's writing and reading progress.
"It would need to be very structured"	The necessity for play provision to be structured in a range of different ways (time allocation, relationship to subject areas, 'academic focus', designated space, thematic planning, additional personnel with specific tasks, child access, assessment, etc.) to fit with the school as an institution.
"They learn best that way if there is a theme"	Using themed topics to organise learning through play.
Sub-theme: Our system	
"But that's our system"	The characteristics of the Irish school system, specifically in infant classes, which impact on the nature of practice, including play, in those classes: subject based, multi-classes, no classroom assistants, structure and formality in the curriculum and environment, programme requirements, 1st Communion, etc.
"We have eleven subjects"	The incompatibility of play and a curriculum structured in eleven distinct subject areas.
"Is it not in the Curriculum already?"	The extent to which the PSC mandates the use of play as an approach to teaching and learning.
"They are talking in Irish"	Observations of curriculum objectives being achieved through play.
"Under pressure of time, trying to get everything done"	The difficulty of finding time for the children to play because there isn't enough time in the school day to do everything; 'everything' relates to subjects and the conventions associated with them.
"You get a curriculum for every other subject"	Play characterised as a curricular area or subject rather than as an approach to teaching and learning. .
"An awful lot of work behind the scenes"	Perspectives on the burden of work on an individual teacher to make provision for play in the classroom, primarily in terms of pedagogical framing activities such as the provision of resources, arranging space, eliciting parental involvement, ongoing organisation. The burden is exacerbated by being repeated after a short number of weeks.
"But there is just so much else"	Teachers are already overloaded with work, and for teachers to initiate play provision in the classroom would be too much. Suggestion that play is seen as an add-on, and that integration through play seen as more work.
"There is only one of me in my class"	Participants' sense of aloneness in their classrooms, of not having support, and of being required to implement system initiatives with no support from those who require such implementation.
"33 children makes it so much more difficult"	The impact of class size on the possibility of providing play opportunities in the infant classroom.
"They had so much space"	Space requirements for play provision, including storage as well as the space in which the play takes place, both indoors and outdoors.
"Practicalities"	Examples of specific management issues in the classroom which teachers have to attend to, and which impact on teaching and learning.
"Are they going to fight over	Expectations that children's behaviour will be problematic

it?"	during play.
"Harder than it looks"	The view, both implicit and explicit, that providing for play in a 'real classroom' is considerably more difficult that it appeared in the stimulus film footage.

5.3 Commitment

This theme can be described across two dimensions. First, the need for commitment from a broad range of stakeholders from all strata of the education system to support play in schools: 'Everybody would be on board'. The second dimension communicates how the participants position themselves in relation to the perceived need for commitment in relation to the introduction of play into the infant classroom: 'So, I would, in principle, think it's a great idea'.

5.3.1 'Everybody would be on board'

All six focus groups contained several data extracts coded specifically as 'Everybody would be on board', representing a consistent strand throughout the data. The range of stakeholders identified in the data whose support is necessary if teachers are to engage with play in the infant classroom is closely, but not exclusively, aligned with those alluded to in the Risk theme. The following are referred to throughout the data, but not necessarily in every focus group: the Inspectorate, parents, other teachers (those '*up the school*'(CP4) and in '*resource and learning support*' (DP3)), teacher educators and the Colleges of Education, Principals, Government, '*...top down management*' (EP1), the Department of Education (sic), and those responsible for curriculum development.

As became clear in the data on Risk, participants do not believe that all the stakeholders referred to are 'on board'. The data coded as 'Big shift' indicates that the participants take the view that to change to play based approaches in infant classes requires a major

shift in attitudes as well as practice at all levels of the primary school system, and is not a simple matter of teachers changing what they do:

> *I think that would have to come from the top, the attitudes of everyone would have to change completely, the teachers, the parents and the Department of Education, you know. I mean I think it would be fantastic if they did it but it really is down to the Department to make that decision. (FP7)*

The data indicate that such a shift in attitudes would require stakeholders to understand that the benefits would take some time to become evident. The data suggest that stakeholders would have to accept that in the short term it might appear that there is less focus on what is conceptualised as 'learning', but that '*... in the future, it will pay off ...*' (FP5). This data on changing attitudes implies a belief that current practice is supported by the stakeholder groups in question.

Within the data, attitude change is associated with a requirement for stakeholders to acknowledge that 'Infants are their own thing'. This code refers to the belief that infant classes are a distinct grouping within the primary school and should be recognised as such, with specific measures taken to accommodate their particular characteristics: '... *kind of, give infants a stronger position, kind of, instead of seeing them as just part of the rest of the school, like that infants are their own thing*' (FP5). The range of participant perspectives on the characteristics of young children in infant classes – often contradictory – has been detailed in section 5.2.3.1. While that data indicates that there are differences among the participants' perspectives on the capabilities of young children, there is a consistent view within this particular code ('Infants are their own thing') that infant classes are a '*distinctive group*' (FP1).

Data extracts from all groups were assigned to the code 'If people got together'. This data indicates a belief that collaboration between all staff in the school in the range of

activities involved in play provision is a contributor to the feasibility of providing for play in infant classes. Examples within the data of how this might work in practice include the possibility of '*... the support teachers ... in the room playing with them*' (DP7), as well as '*... an SNA [Special Needs Assistants] or somebody else in the room with you*' (BP3). Another perspective in the data is the role of the Principal in allocating teachers to classes each year: '*I think the Principal will probably have to leave the same people at the level even for a year or two to get the resources together ...*' (EP1). However, the most common perspective on collaboration manifest in the data is collaborative planning and sharing of resources among the cohort of teachers of infant classes.

> *It can be sort of minded between, you know, if we take a theme say per month and we rotate the resources around classrooms. We don't all have to be doing the same thing at the same time and we can, say, one and I think usually a month is about right. Say September I am doing something, then EP1 does it the next month, EP7 does it the next month, that kind of way. (EP2)*

This perspective did not emerge in groups A or B whose participants were mainly working in smaller schools.

Another practical manifestation of support for play at whole school level, specifically in larger schools, is identified through the data coded as 'A play room'. This perspective emerged in group A, most of whose participants taught in small schools. The consensus in group A was that this would not be realistic in small schools, and even in larger schools, there would not necessarily be a room to spare. In response to the stimulus film footage, participants in four of the six focus groups commented on the use of dedicated outdoor play space. There was some speculation about such provision in Ireland, but this was not pursued in any depth.

All six focus groups addressed the issue of the resources required (code 'Resources as well').

> *I think plus resources as well. To come up with these little cars and the little area. It is all good and well saying they had a lot of parents in to help. That mightn't necessarily be the case that parents have time to help .... I don't think that's really realistic, you know. Of course, obviously there isn't really the money within the schools to be asking to buy all this equipment which will obviously be stored away somewhere and be kept for its three week stint in the following year. (AP3)*

There were different perspectives on the degree of help teachers could expect in the gathering of resources, in response to the levels of community support for resourcing play seen in the stimulus film: '*The involvement of the community very much impressed me because that doesn't happen here. Like, they supplied every bit of stuff and like you could be looking for things here and it just doesn't happen,...*' (CP3). There was also the opposite perspective that '*... parents are very helpful about bringing things in*' (EP1). Group C participants work in a DEIS Band 1 school whereas those in group E are based in a more affluent urban area, and this may explain the different perspectives, although in a different context a group C participant referred to their cohort of parents as very supportive.

There are a number of data extracts from group E which explore pertinent issues which might arise consequent to the introduction of play pedagogy involving a group of infant classes. One issue is the question of ownership of resources which have been collected by an individual teacher, especially in cases when that teacher moves out of the infant class. The participants agreed that school policy would need to state that: '*It is not our own resources, it is the resources for the infant level. Say if I had them and I moved up, do I take them with me, as you say, do I leave them behind?*' (EP5). Another issue is care and responsibility for shared resources:

> *So [if] we had a box for the garage, obviously if there are bigger things, a box for the shop or whatever and it was stored somewhere. And obviously, maybe it'd have to be a case of there is a check list, what is supposed to be in the box and it is supposed to be passed on. Because otherwise you are going to lose bits and pieces along the way. (EP5)*

As an aside, this is an example of an instance of a very small number of data extracts being very significant. In this case, these are the only insights into the kind of interpersonal issues which might arise in schools with the potential to undermine an initiative and cause bad feeling, which, in turn, might interfere with collaborative work and successful implementation.

Finally, as something of an anti-dote to concerns about the levels of resourcing required, there is, buried within the data, a recognition that perhaps resourcing can become over-elaborate: '*On the flip side of it, the taxi was a couple of chairs put together, d'you know, you can be as flamboyant as you want to'* (DP1).

This sense of the burden of provision being assigned to the individual teacher is evident with the data collated as 'You do need help', one of the most populated codes in this theme. This is associated with the data coded as 'There is only one of me in my class' (See theme 'Risk', sub-theme, 'Our system'). The data is very clear that, as part of a system wide commitment to play in the infant classroom, all teachers of infant classes would have to be given help:

> *I think the most important thing is people. Yes resources will come, like. Experience, eventually you will get better at but I think to get it up and running and to do it as best you can do you just need as many adults as you can get. (DP1)*

This position was held consistently throughout all six focus groups and was equally relevant across all the different contexts in which the participants taught. It is worth noting, given the strength of the concerns expressed about accounting for individual

children's learning (see theme 'Risk', sub-theme 'Accountability For', code 'You have to get through the work with them all'), that the lack of personnel is a contributor to that problem: '*I think, as well, kind of, on that, if you don't have that many adults, I think it is a bit harder to get something more specific like what exactly have they learned at the end of it* ... ' (EP5). While the participants cite many contexts in which help would be necessary, the core belief about play in the infant classroom which is evident throughout this data is that '*I really can't see how one person could actually effectively organise that'* (EP3). The only exception is the participants in focus group C who work with small classes of 15 children. All other participants, including DP1 quoted above, who provide play opportunities in their class acknowledge the challenge of being unsupported.

Extensive discussions took place in five of the six groups on the need for training, both pre- and in-service (the exception was group E from which there is only one data extract in this code). This is one of the codes in which there is absolute unanimity of perspective among all participants on what is required: '*Train us properly so that we know what we are about ...'* (AP5). Participants mention levels of training ranging from none to specialist early childhood education [ECE] training at pre-service level, including training associated with *Aistear* (see 4.3.1.5 Participant profiles). Implicit in the data on training is the perspective that such training would be evidence of commitment and 'permission' for teachers, indicating the imprimatur of the authorities.

A small number of data extracts from four of the six groups coded as 'An ideal situation' can be characterised as a little wishful thinking: '*In an ideal situation it would be lovely to go to someone else's classroom, do it and walk away when it is all set up for you, and then to go back to your own classroom'* (AP4). Other references to the ideal include '*an ideal world [where] ... they would get a lot more of this at home'* (BP1); there would be no multi-classes; and infants '*... would have their own curriculum*' (FP4). However, the

accumulated data from the codes described in the sub-theme 'Everybody would be on board' indicate a clear belief that a system wide commitment from all stakeholders is necessary to support the change required to implement play pedagogy in infant classrooms. Implicit in the data is a belief that teachers cannot do this alone and should not be expected to in the absence of the kinds of support which would be evidence of commitment, such as training, in-class support personnel, funding for resources, school policy and leadership, and curriculum review.

5.3.2 'So, I would, in principle, think it's a great idea'

Data extracts coded as 'So, I would, in principle, think it's a great idea' distinguish the value of play in principle from the reality of implementation. The value of play for children is juxtaposed with the feasibility of classroom provision in the context described in the previous section, 'Everybody would be on board':

> *If you had loads of support and maybe if people got together, you know, and you had involvement from parents and all that but that also takes a huge amount of work, so I would in principle think it's a great idea. (AP5)*

Data gathered in the group of codes discussed in this section provide insights into the participants' own level of commitment to the possibility of implementing play in the infant classroom. The picture which emerges suggests ambivalence towards implementation, tension between beliefs about play as a phenomenon and beliefs about implementation, and contrast between enthusiasm and reluctance.

While distinguishing their beliefs about the value of play for children from implementation matters, at least one participant in each focus group, with the exception of C, expressed the view that they would be unlikely to implement play in their classrooms. This data is coded as 'I couldn't see myself'. All participants in focus group C worked in a school which provided a daily play session of one hour duration in all

infant classes. The data associated with the code 'I couldn't see myself' indicates an awareness that expressing this attitude to play in the classroom is not currently entirely acceptable:

> *And I think for me, I know, maybe I shouldn't say it, but that would be the first thing to go, if I had my fortnightly plan and I had a list of things to tick off and I was putting this play in every day, I would wipe it until I had caught up on myself. (DP5)*

While there are relatively few explicit statements to this effect, when placed in the context of other data (e.g. 'But that's our system), it is evident that this position has currency. It may be that awareness of the negative reactions which such explicit statements might provoke may be limiting their expression.

However, the data coded as 'It is possible' also contains assertions that, despite challenges, it is possible to provide play opportunities in the classroom and to achieve curriculum implementation through play and playful approaches:

> *It [CPD course] kind of gives you similar ideas to that [practice in film footage] but something that we can do, maybe, on a smaller scale because we don't have all those adults in to help us in the morning. Maybe just one small little group or even if you can take one little thing from it, it is kind of moving things forward. (BP3)*

The data in this code, drawn from four of the six groups, is characterised by a degree of caution about the scale of what could be achieved or attempted within the constraints of the infant classroom.

There was some evidence within the code 'A larger version of the free play we'd have' that the participants were looking for aspects of current practice which could be either identified as fulfilling some of children's play needs or could be evolved into a more comprehensive play provision. Data within this code, incorporating data extracts from all six groups, illustrate participants' estimation of current play provision in infant classes in

comparison to the practice presented in the stimulus film footage. The data indicates an attitude that some provision is better than none, even if such provision is not perfect but that context is a major consideration. The data extracts represent a debate among the participants and across the focus groups, illustrating the negotiations teachers engage in to resolve the conflicts inherent in their various contexts, and balance these with the imperative to provide children with play opportunities in school:

> *It is really important that we try and give the children that experience and facilitate it. In whatever way we can. If we don't have all those extra people to help us, we do whatever we can to try and, sort of, get it up and running in the classroom. Obviously, probably not to that sort of a standard that they had in that school but to try our best. (BP4)*

This is counterbalanced by data indicating that 'We don't do half enough of it' which is less cautious in tone in asserting that play provision should be widespread in schools, but there are relatively few data extracts (7 from 5 participants across groups B, D, E and F) associated with this attitude. Such definitive statements contrast with a much stronger sense, identifiable in the data coded as 'I just see huge possibilities' that, at best, there are possibilities, options, openings and opportunities for play provision which can be identified in infant classrooms without being as definitive as to commit to provision: '*It really is open, the possibilities that you have once you have everybody working with you and in tune with you. But then I suppose within that you have limitations as well, like you were saying, once they get bored, where do you go from there?*' (FP2)

However, this perspective is at best tentative, and these tentative attitudes towards implementation are encapsulated in the data coded as 'I mean, we'd all love to do it …but'. As the following examples of data extracts suggest, participants express willingness followed by regret that it can't be done, and reluctance to engage:

'I mean, we'd all love to do it and it looks brilliant and the children obviously really enjoyed it ***but*** *it is just constraints of time and space and numbers I suppose, really, yeah' (AP2).*

'I would love to do more of it, and I really would, ***but*** *it would take a huge amount of energy ...' (AP5).*

'It would be lovely to just go and play with them and develop that ***but*** *it's just not feasible' (BP3).*

'Just conscious of the practicality, not that I wouldn't do it ***but*** *just those things' (EP1)*

'..., role play and play is so important for children and I do agree with it, ***yet*** *I find the actual practice, it just doesn't translate, I don't have the time' (FP2)*

While there is no evidence to suggest that all of these participants, and the others who contributed to the data in this code, are anything less than completely sincere in their expressions of belief in the value of play in the classroom, the question must be asked whether the constraints alluded to are actually the barriers the participants suggest them to be? However, that question cannot be answered by the data gathered for this project.

Collectively, the group of codes outlined above indicate a complex, sometimes contradictory mélange of attitudes towards implementation. One identifiable attitude is that play is all very well but the conditions in infant classes render those classes unsuitable contexts for implementation. Those conditions engender a negative attitude towards introducing play, but there exists, in parallel to that attitude, one that views play as possible with effort and positive dispositions towards play itself. However, there is no one consistent, unanimous attitude towards play in the classroom and the overall message of the data is that there is no fixed attitude towards the use of play in classrooms, one way or the other.

Aside from the range of constraints related to the classroom context, participants raised a range of what might be called intra-personal issues which have an impact on teachers'

beliefs, attitudes and values around play. Data coded as 'Uphill struggle' reveals an attitude towards obstacles and constraints that *'...if it is going to be an uphill struggle then you will immediately just go – God Almighty that is just too much'* (AP5). While there are only three data extracts in the code (from groups A, D and E), this is an instance of a small number of participants honestly voicing an attitude that others might be reluctant to own.

A perspective apparent in data coded as 'Give it a shot' is that teachers need to be given time to learn without being expected to achieve perfection in a short time. In data coded 'Experience' participants express the view that teachers need time to gain experience, and for that experience to have an impact on their individual sense of competence in using play as an approach to teaching learning. This also allows for the possibility that the experience could be negative:

> *My opinion, I started Aistear this September with my class, but they did it last year in junior infants. ... They did so much in junior infants that when they came to me they were like, we did that, we've done that, we are not interested in that anymore. ... So I stopped using it in January, February and just moved more into, kind of, formal teaching as well because I felt that they are now ending senior infants, that they needed a bit more prep for 1st class, they needed a bit more formal teaching. (FP6)*

This particular data extract is the only one in the data set in which a participant explicitly describes withdrawing from providing play opportunities. The rationale here is that the children no longer wanted to play. It may be that this rationale is perceived as more acceptable than for a teacher to state that s/he does not support the use of play in the classroom, but there is no suggestion that this is the case with this participant who may have been expressing views that others did not feel comfortable in sharing. This perspective may also reflect lack of training, leaving the teacher unable to respond to the children's wish to move on; another possibility is that the demands from senior classes

exerts such downward pressure on a teacher that s/he finds a way to rationalise moving away from play provision which does not give the appearance of 'giving in'.

Certainly, the very small number of data extracts which constitute the code 'Feel a little bit guilty' express feelings of guilt and/or regret because of not providing sufficient play opportunities:

> *I would kind of agree with what FP2 said about you feel guilty, having seen that, what can be done. But, you know, you do feel under pressure to meet all the curriculum demands, and there are all these targets set that you have to meet before the end of the month. And, you know, play really does take a back seat in that. (FP7)*

This is balanced by a view within that data that '*...I don't think we should be too hard on ourselves ...*' (FP8) because of the difficult classroom conditions encountered by teachers in the RoI in comparison to those in the stimulus film footage.

The code 'The confidence to do it' contains data from all six focus groups describing various perspectives on the role of confidence in teachers' decisions about play provision. Understandably, participants who are experienced players express a sense of confidence about play in the classroom: *'... so the most that I'd ever do play with would be with, maybe, three kids, four at a max, and so obviously I have had a lot of practice at that so I am fairly ok playing with kids and that's not a problem'* (DP2). A very small number of data extracts within this code, suggestive but not in any way definitive, indicate a perspective among participants that teachers do not feel confident in exercising autonomy in their decisions about their practice: '*Confidence and we need to be confident what we are doing is right and that we can back it up, we can justify what we are doing. And that is hard when you are finding it hard to integrate play into your plans, your English and you know*' (DP1). This reflects the concerns evident in the theme 'Risk' about the potential damage to professional reputation which might arise

from play: '*We have got to remember that we are professionals, we've got to remember we have to be trusted'* (EP2).Within the code on confidence, the lack of confidence is thrown into relief by the following comment:

> *I think that, you know, looking at the video, I thought that the fact that the teacher was observing and had her clipboard and went around observing and she was taking notes as what was working and what wasn't working and what were the children learning and what maybe they needed to learn more about. That was enough assessment for me about it. (BP1)*

This comment occurred in an exchange in group B related to the code 'Difficult enough to track progress' in which the thrust of the discussion favoured accountability for children's learning through formal methods. The point here about confidence is that this participant is demonstrating professional confidence through a belief that teacher observation is a valid and sufficient method of assessment of children's learning, a view not widespread among the participants in group B. This participant did not express any need for 'Permission' (See theme 'Risk', sub-theme 'Accountability To', code 'Permission'). Data from group C indicated that the participants in that group benefit from the support of the Principal in terms of their own confidence in what they do. The following data extract from group E illustrates one perspective on the impact of system expectations on teacher confidence and autonomy:

> ***EP7**: It is books, there are no more play activities. And then even I find ... I had senior infants before, now I'm junior infants, but I find even now, I'm doing less play than I probably would have started out with in senior infants now in junior infants, if that makes any sense. There is kind of more and I am going 'oh God I could do a bit more now with that and that', and it is just becoming less and less and less.*
>
> ***EP3**: What happens is as you go on, EP7, you actually feel the pressure more. When you were starting off you were so innocent in a way, there is no [unclear 36 04 12[and it was great. But then suddenly you realise that*

> *somebody is going to be knocking on your door saying 'what letter, how many numbers can we make, have you got your addition done?'. And once you have that pressure I honestly don't...*
> ***EP7**: You can't justify it as much at the moment.*
> ***EP3**: No you can't because you feel then that you are trying to defend what you are doing.*

There are several references in the data to teachers having to justify what they do, but it isn't possible to ascertain what impact this has on teacher confidence and autonomy. While there is relatively little data in this code, the implicit evidence of a lack of confidence among some participants in their own autonomy is an unexpected finding.

What is perhaps less unexpected is the data on teachers' sense of comfort and ease in being a player with the children, coded as 'Comfortability': '*I think another factor really that's worth mentioning is the comfortability that a teacher would have with role play themselves*' (FP2). Participants describe finding it difficult to play, '*...difficult to be spontaneous like that with another adult there or in a crowded room or something*' (BP5). The data refers to the importance of enjoying yourself because to be otherwise will interfere with the children's enjoyment. Being able to laugh at yourself is referred to as an important quality, and the willingness to pretend and get '*...down to that five year old level, kind of, rolling around on the ground. You kind of need to do that*' (BP3). Participants acknowledge that not everyone can do that, but that being a teacher of infants requires certain dispositions, such as imagination, creativity and playfulness. This is one of the areas in which training is referred to as a necessary requirement, a need identified equally among those working in contexts where opportunities are provided for play:

> *...it's something that doesn't come natural to everybody, playing, obviously because you are an adult, like, it doesn't come naturally. It is hard to get used to it and not just, like, observe and, like, comment , you know, and not actually get into the play, to get in and be a part of it. It*

> *is very hard to do, like, it is and especially if you are not used to it so I would wonder about training and stuff like that. (CP4)*

An impediment to 'comfortability' is evident in data coded as 'Control', defined as teachers' perceived need to be in control in the classroom, and to have control of the children's actions, decisions and activities. One perspective apparent in the data is a concern that play provision would result in a loss of control of the children: '*I think if I started doing something like that in September the kids would go wild, and you'd have no control'* (DP5). This concern to not lose control may be associated with the beliefs about accountability described in the theme 'Risk'. On the other hand, some participants express the view that it may be related to teacher self-identity:

> *I think some teachers like to have a distance and to be very much, 'the teacher'. And you can't really do that, you have, kind of to let go a little and be willing to not necessarily just be the teacher and be behind your desk, ... you know, some children would never know the first name of their teacher, they are the teacher and they live in the school. ... I'd tell my class what I did at the weekend, ..., just be a person rather than be the teacher. You are the person who happens to be the teacher but you are not just the teacher. ... I know other people don't feel like that and they like to teach in a different way and that is fine for them. But I don't think it would work in this situation. (CP4)*

If such beliefs are '... *engrained in our nature ... And ... control is massive for teachers'* (FP2), then training has to address not only play pedagogy, but also issues related to what teacher identity might look and feel like in a reconfigured 'control' context.

A final intra-personal issue for the participants that impacts on their attitude to play and coded as 'Mary Poppins', is the motivation, enthusiasm and performance required to be a teacher of infant classes, especially in relation to play: '*I think your motivation wanes if you are doing it five days a week as well, it is hard to be motivated and Mary Poppins every single evening'* (CP10).

However, to add to the complexity of the participants' very qualified commitment to play, there was agreement across all six focus groups that 'A teacher-in-role is so important'. In fact, this is an extensively populated code, which does not of itself make it more significant than any other but shows the relevance of the issue in a variety of contexts. There is agreement that the teacher has to be involved in play to enhance its learning potential, but there is considerable consideration of the tensions in balancing teacher modelling with being child led, and the tensions between pursuing objectives and being child led. Participants query the feasibility of being able to maintain role given the constant interruptions they anticipate during play, and the necessity to supervise all the class:

> *... so, not to break role and keep the fluidity of that drama would be very difficult as well, in a big group. Especially if you had any special needs children in the class, it would be a huge issue as well. (AP4)*

Participants discuss the fine line between modelling and directing, '*[n]ot try and direct them so much and just see where they go with it themselves*' (BP4). There is, finally, an acute awareness of the demands placed upon teachers by this necessity of being involved in the play and this is connected to the data described in the sub-theme 'Our system'. This awareness is consistent with the apprehension evident in the data on 'Risk', and suggests that change will be a challenge:

> *... in order for this to be effective it needs a lot of teacher input, a lot, and in fact it would be more demanding, much more demanding than teaching the other alternative way which is of everybody sitting looking up at teacher. (EP3)*

Table 5.2 Overview of theme, sub-theme and constituent code groups: Commitment

Theme: Commitment	
Adopting and implementing play as an approach to teaching and learning in infant classes requires commitment from the entire range of stakeholders including, but not limited to, teachers.	
Sub-theme: 'Everybody would be on board'	
"Everybody would be on board"	The necessity for a cohesive approach to the introduction of play in infant classes among all stakeholders.
"Big shift"	Acknowledgements that to change to play based approaches to teaching and learning in infant classes requires a major shift in attitudes as well as practice at all levels of the primary school system, and is not a simple matter of teachers changing what they do.
"In the future it will pay off"	Issues related to play provision and future learning, either for the individual or for the school system. The need for expectations of results to be long- rather than short-term.
"Infants are their own thing"	Infant classes are a distinct grouping within the primary school and should be recognised as such with specific measures taken to accommodate their particular characteristics.
"If people got together"	Collaboration between all staff in the school in the range of activities involved in play provision, including planning, resource provision and interaction with the children, as a contributor to the feasibility of using play as an approach to teaching and learning in infant classes.
"A play room"	The way in which a dedicated space in a school for play would make it feasible.
"Resources as well"	The implications of resourcing play opportunities.
"I think training is number one"	The impact of and necessity for training in play and playful approaches to teaching and learning.
"You do need help"	Providing play opportunities requires help, specifically additional personnel, to cope with all the associated activities such as observation, toileting, recording, teacher-in-role, provision of resources etc.
"In an ideal situation"	The ideal conditions for providing play opportunities for the children, essentially with space, time, resource and curricular constraints removed.
Sub-theme: 'So, I would, in principle, think it's a great idea'	
"So I would in principle think it's a great idea"	Statements that distinguish the value of play in principle from implementation of play and playful approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom.
"I couldn't see myself"	Indications that the participant is not pre-disposed, in his/her

	current context, to introduce play.
"It is possible"	Assertions that, despite challenges, it is possible to provide play opportunities in the classroom and to use play and playful approaches for curriculum implementation.
"We don't do half enough of it"	There is insufficient provision for play in infant classes.
"I just see huge possibilities"	Options, openings and opportunities which participants identify as offering the possibility that play provision might be achievable.
"I mean, we'd all love to do it ...but"	Expressions of positive pre-dispositions towards play, constrained by the view that play is not feasible in the infant classroom.
"Uphill struggle"	The danger that if play provision becomes a struggle in the early stages, that teachers will not persevere. Associated with the 'give it a shot' code.
"Give it a shot"	The best way to approach play is to begin, to start somewhere but to give oneself time to get used to it, and not to expect perfection.
"Experience"	The impact of experience on a teacher's sense of competence with play, including the possibility of the experience being negative.
"Feel a little bit guilty"	The feelings of guilt or regret felt by a teacher because of not providing sufficient play opportunities, but also arguments that teachers should realise that such provision is not their sole responsibility.
"The confidence to do it"	The role of teacher confidence in play provision in the infant classroom.
"Comfortability"	A teacher's sense of comfort and ease in being a player with the children.
"Control"	Teachers' perceived need to be in control in the classroom, and to have control of the children's actions, decisions and activities.
"A larger version of the free play we'd have"	Participants estimation of current play provision in infant classes in comparison to the practice presented in the stimulus film footage, incorporating the sense that some is better than none, even if not perfect but that context is a major consideration.
"Mary Poppins"	The motivation, enthusiasm and performance required to be a teacher of infant classes, especially in relation to play.
"A teacher-in-role is so important"	Perspectives on teacher-in-role as a strategy, including the tensions in balancing teacher modelling with being child led, and the tensions between pursuing objectives and being child led.

5.4 'Play is so important for children'

In the data collated within this theme, the participants related play to many different aspects of children's lives, both in and out of school. The data is categorised into four sub-themes for presentation: 'Children's lives', 'Language', 'A lot richer' and 'Fun'. In the sub-theme 'Children's lives', the data reveals perspectives on play as a context for children's agency in their own lives, on the problems play poses for some children, on the limitations placed on childhood by socio-cultural expectations, and the degree to which the school is expected to compensate for these deficits. The sub-themes 'Language' and 'A lot richer' contain data on learning through play across a range of dimensions. Finally, and appropriately, the sub-theme 'Fun' presents data on participants' perspectives on the enjoyment inherent in play.

5.4.1 'Children's lives'

Play is seen by the participants as facilitating children's agency in their own lives. There are eight codes associated with perspectives on children's agency: 'In control and confident', 'They are active', 'So personal', 'Connected with the children's lives', 'The one part of the day your kids don't want to miss', 'The kids leading it', 'Great just to see that imagination' and 'It would be hugely beneficial'.

In the data coded as 'In control and confident', participants describe the children as exercising control in their play, of experiencing ownership and of demonstrating confidence. Participants who provide play opportunities in the classroom share anecdotes of how the children represent to their teachers their sense of their right to have play: '*And since we have started it, they never let us, like, not play*' (FP3). Within this code, there is a distinct warmth in the way the participants refer to children's tenacity, autonomy and commitment to play:

> ***CP4**: And they will say at the end of the day, you know the way, and it is all clever thinking, you know the way we didn't get play today, well does that mean we are going to play twice tomorrow? And how come they never say that about maths or anything else, so they have an ownership of it.*
> ***CP1**: They have a sense of their right to play.*

Data coded as 'They are active' illustrate participants' perspectives on children's engagement with play, how the children value and invest in their play. This code has data extracts from all six focus groups and is the most extensive in this theme. Children are seen as valuing play because of enjoyment, and, while enjoyment is valued by the participants, it is also seen as useful for motivating children because of '*the fact that they're just going to love coming in'* (CP2). Engagement and concentration are highly valued by the participants because these are seen as challenges for the teacher of infant classes:

> *And the fact I think they are just engaged in it. In infants you spend so long trying to engage them in work and, you know,... but sometimes they are just zoned out completely .... Whereas I feel during role play or any kind of activity, you know, like that, they are all engaged, if you look around, they are all engaged, and for an infant to actively be involved in something to hold their interest for 30 minutes, without you telling them to do it, is huge. (FP4)*

Children's investment in play is perceived as emotional as well as in terms of concentration and engagement. 'So personal' codes material from focus group C where participants recount episodes in which children became emotionally distressed over the loss of artefacts created during play. Focus group C participants provide all infant classes with a daily play session of roughly one hour. The anecdotes express children's intense investment in their own creations, such as this about junk art:

> ***CP1**: I had an incident where someone used J****'s . J**** fell in the yard umpteen times and her knee was in bits and the face was just stoic, nothing, and then*

someone used her junk. Oh my God, she was hysterical.
***CP4**: For a very emotionless child, she was actually distraught. And you said she doesn't usually bring in anything, it was the one day.*
***CP1**.: It was the one time and someone else used it. And there was nothing that we could do. I said: 'I'll bring in exactly the same tomorrow' and it was no good, it hadn't come from her house. And the parents just think it is rubbish.*

The data coded as 'Connected to the children's lives' indicates, although not extensively, that participants view play as both an opportunity and context for making learning in school meaningful for children by connecting role play scenarios with their life experiences. The participants noted the effectiveness of play for establishing prior knowledge as the starting point for learning, – '*Starting from the children's own experiences as well, that was really evident there, that it was all about what the children knew'* (CP1) - and for connecting school based learning with the 'real world' – '*I thought that it brought reading and maths into the real world which is where we have to have it if we're going to get children to really engage with reading and see the point of reading*' (BP2).

Those participants who provide a daily play session describe the children's responses if and when the play session does not happen in data coded as 'The one part of the day your kids don't want to miss', and they contrast this with the children's attitudes towards subject lessons: '*Well, I have never heard one child say 'we never did Irish, we didn't do Maths"* (CP4). Those teachers who are very familiar with children's investment in play also describe how children plan ahead within the play routine to identify when they and their friends will have a particular play opportunity. A resource teacher participant describes the children's unwillingness to leave the room during play:

Like I am learning support and you cannot take those kids out of that classroom when play is going on, they

> *just love it. When I am talking to them on the way down they talk about what they played. They talk about what they were doing, who they were with, whether they want to be in the sand today or if they are playing with a shop or even if they were in the aeroplane and they went to Spain. But they talk about it all the time and they love it. (CP6)*

While the data within the five codes described thus far is consistently positive about children as active agents in and through play, such agency is not without its complications as perceived by the participants. In data coded 'The kids leading it', issues are raised about the degree to which play is and/or should be led by the children, based on their interests, and the tensions between the principle of working with children's interests and pursuing curriculum objectives:

> *It is all about where the children want to go. The adult is not leading anything. That is fine where role play is concerned but as a teacher you have to. It goes against your instinct as a teacher: 'Lookit, I need you to know this and this please'. ... You can't get away from that. There is a tension there between the two. (BP2)*

A variety of perspectives are represented in the data, but no one perspective is more evident than any other. One perspective queries how curriculum objectives can be stated or pursued in child-led play; another problematises thematic planning if the logic of child-led activity is pursued, as the children's interests would determine future activity rather than the planned themes which are the norm. Concern is expressed that the less vocal children '*who aren't necessarily out there pushing themselves forward ...*'(FP2). (See code 'But what are they learning') might not get the opportunity to lead play or make decisions about play because of being overshadowed by the more vocal and assertive children.

While there are data extracts from all six focus groups in the code 'It [play] would be hugely beneficial', and many assertions that play has multiple benefits, nonetheless these benefits are qualified by the constraints inherent in the system. For example, one

participant suggested that the benefits are perhaps not that easily recognised and there is a need for training so that '*everybody can see the benefits of it'* (AP5); another participant acknowledged, in reference to the stimulus film footage from a primary school in England, that play is beneficial, but noted that *'... the facilities they have [in England] are incredible*' (EP6). The overall thrust of the data on play being beneficial for children is that these benefits are not without cost to the teacher: '*Yeah, you definitely see the benefits of it and it is really hard to try and pack everything else in around it but I suppose it's just a matter of seeing the worth of giving 50 minutes to it every day'* (FP3).

If children's ownership of play is evident through their exercise of choice, in asserting their right to play and in using play to explore their own lives, it is also evident, from the participants' perspective, in the imaginative power they bring to their play. In data coded as 'Great to see just that imagination', participants see this as a gift which adults do not have and which emphasises that play is a child's space, '*because it is amazing what they will come up with. It is something you might not have thought about at all' (*BP4*).* However, there is also a perspective evident in the data that this imaginative, creative engagement is being damaged '*...because they are all stuck on DS's now and X-boxes, and everything' (*AP6*).* Nonetheless, the core perspective associated with this data is of wonder at the '*... stuff that they can make with [blocks], like, you'd never, I suppose, you yourself would never think of things like that'* (FP13).

While play is valued by the participants for offering opportunities to children to be actively engaged in their own learning, participants do not believe that this is true for all children. In data collated as 'But what was he learning?', participants question whether play always results in learning.

In data coded as 'Special needs children', play is seen as potentially difficult for children with special needs because of noise, social demands and opportunities for disruptive

behaviour. Participants see the presence of children with special needs in the class as making play more difficult to provide because there are insufficient personnel to support the children to be able to engage. Participants also identify a group of children who, for a variety of reasons, '*... just aren't good at that kind of thing'* (AP2) (code 'Isn't very good at playing'). Some of the reasons suggested are that children do not like role play and prefer more structured activities, others lack confidence to engage with new experiences, and yet others do not have the social skills associated with play. While there are only five data extracts in this code, each extract involves a participant with experience of playing with children, and it is clear from the data that these perspectives come from experience.

The issue of children becoming bored with play was raised in each of the six focus groups, but from a variety of different perspectives. One perspective is that young children by nature do not stay interested for extended periods; in another perspective, children become bored and role play becomes stagnant if the teacher is not involved as a participant '*...to facilitate it, as I said, and to, kind of, tell them where to go next with it, so that you can maybe ask the question, or to move it on*' (BP3).

This connects to the data in the code 'Wracking my brains', which only contains four data extracts, but is significant in showing perspectives on children being involved in planning as a response to the boredom issue. One perspective is that planning is entirely up to the teacher, another that while it is up to the teacher to pick topics and scenarios, this is done in response to the children's views. Having viewed the stimulus film, one participant articulates a third perspective:

> *And the children involved with the dismantling and all that as well was very poignant. That's something I tend to do when the children have gone home, and they come in and there is a new area, you know. So I think that's a good idea, that they be involved in absolutely every step of the way. (CP1)*

Data coded as 'Haven't we robbed children somewhat?', 'That's their whole social scene', 'The whole pink thing now with girls' and 'Hammer and nails' collectively make apparent participants' concerns about the impact of separating childhood and children from play experiences, not just in schools but through constructions of childhood. The data across these codes is not extensive, but suggests a range of perspectives. These perspectives suggest concern about childhood being confined and children lacking freedom, even if the impetus for this is children's safety; homes and other environments are '*... so neat that hammering and banging and fixing and breaking is just not allowed*' (BP2), and health and safety (code 'Hammer and nails') considerations limit children's activities both inside and outside school. Parents are so busy that they don't have time to interact with their children, and children do not have opportunities outside school to mix with other children because of fears of abuse. Although there is only one lengthy data extract coded as 'The whole pink thing now with girls', the gendering of play is a significant issue:

> *But this has a lot to do with the teacher's attitude ... If we only hand the girls the ponies and only hand the boys the cars, you know what I mean, that we are adding to it. They get plenty of it from outside ... Because the boys love the dress up bag, they love the kitchen, they love the tea set and sometimes, it's the only place they get a chance to use it because they are getting judged other times... (FP5)*

The data associated with perspectives on the constraints being placed on young children's live connects closely with data coded as 'Are we carrying society again?'. This code has only three data extracts, all from focus group B which explored these issues in more depth than any other group. In a significant contribution, one participant locates the debate about how young children experience the early years of school in a wider social context, and the extent to which schools are required to compensate for deficits in children's lives at home or in society:

> *I think you'd be talking to the converted really in the sense that we would all love more of that but it's a bigger societal issue about how we view children and how we view play and not respecting the fact that children learn through play a lot more than they learn any other way. (BP5)*

5.4.2 Language

In terms of children's learning and development, one of the key links the participants made with play was the efficacy of play in promoting language development. The data coalesced around three codes: 'The language development was really interesting', 'So deprived of language' and 'Children that English is their second language'. Language development data featured in all six focus groups, language deficits in four groups, and learning English as an additional language in three of the four urban groups. The main focus of the data is oral language development, but it is contextualised in a variety of ways.

Positive attitudes to play which are evident in the extensive data coded as 'The language development was really interesting' include seeing play as a context for authentic language learning '*... instead of just colouring a picture of a mechanic'* (EP4), where the children's engagement with concrete materials and the opportunity for extensive talk means that '*...it is not, like, me teaching them, they are learning themselves'* (CP2). The data indicates a perspective among participants that play not only offers opportunities for vocabulary expansion and extended utterances, but also for contributing significantly to social competence through enhanced communication skills. In addition to benefits for the children's language, the data indicates that play provides opportunities for teachers to assess children's language competency. Examples provided by the participants suggest that this is particularly the case for children who, for a variety of reasons, do not speak in class or who will not speak directly to the teacher, but are much more likely to talk while

playing. These benefits are contextualised by the data on language deficits (code 'The children are just so deprived of language') which are not confined to children attending designated disadvantaged schools. Data extracts from group B, whose participants work in rural and non-urban schools indicate concern about children presenting with poor language development, as much as those participants in groups C and F who work in urban areas.

Play emerges very strongly as highly effective in supporting children learning English as an additional language (code 'Children that English is their second language'). Virtually all the data extracts in this code are contributions from participants who were working with children for whom English is not a first language, and most from participants with experience of play in the classroom. Only one data extract provides an alternative view to the dominant view on the efficacy of play in additional language learning. One participant, who does not currently use play, expresses concern that children who do not speak English would be excluded from play because class size would preclude her from giving those children sufficient individual support. However, the main perspective apparent in the data is that play is highly effective in promoting the learning of English as an additional language. This is associated with the motivation provided by the enjoyment of the play and peer interaction:

> *... we have about 50% non English speaking as well, and I think the role play has benefited those kids massively because lots of them don't speak at all in class. They come in in junior infants with no English at all, the parents don't have any English and they live in a completely non English speaking environment. And they come in and for the first few months or year of play time, they'll take part but very quickly they start to pick up the language far better in that setting than they would sitting in a classroom. (FP3)*

5.4.3 'A lot richer'

While the participants identify instances – either from the stimulus film or from their own experience – of subject specific learning during play (see code 'They are talking in Irish'), the data suggest that there is a belief that young children's learning should be conceptualised much more broadly: '*Are you not looking for something a lot richer than that ...? ... That is again trying to quantify it in terms of your little list of words rather than an inner experience that the child has*' (BP5). When the data on language learning, social learning and other non-subject specific references are brought together, while not conclusive, strongly suggest that teachers are concerned with a broader range of teaching and learning than is encompassed in the subjects of the PSC (DES, 1999a).

In addition to language learning, the other key element of children's learning and development referred to in the participants' discussion was social skills. 'Even socially, even to take turns' contains data from five of the six groups. Social skills such as co-operation and teamwork, turn taking, sharing, conversation skills, understanding that '*...you don't always get what you want*' (AP4), dealing with dominant characters, interacting with different age groups, and dealing with interpersonal conflict are all cited as aspects of social skills development which can occur in the play context. However, the data suggest that, while teachers value this type of learning, the system does not:

> *...there is no value to the fact how they are working together, playing together, socialising together, like the 'please' and 'thank yous', just 'can I use that when you are finished with it?'. You can't teach that. Plus, like, they deal with their own issues, like. If there is a problem, like before I even have to step in, they sort it out themselves. And, like, using that kind of cooperation together, there's no value... (CP2)*

A range of perspectives can be identified in the data on *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009). *Aistear* is perceived as a major realignment of practice in infant classes, which

will necessitate training (see also 'Big shift' and 'I think training is number one'). It is also seen as a buffer against risk, and there is some evidence of *Aistear* being strategically deployed:

> ***CP10**: Yes and I think in this climate that we are in as well, that there's so much teacher hating out there and if you said to someone, sure we play for an hour a day. Can you just imagine, people don't get how valuable it is for the children. And if you are sort of, they get their language and they get their maths and their numeracy. People, that just goes over their heads, they just think you are playing.*
> ***CP8**: That is why you have to call it Aistear and not play*

Parents, the data suggest, are more likely to accept play in the classroom if they can be convinced by the authoritativeness of *Aistear*: '*I am sure there is a website for Aistear and things like that for them to look at, and then I think they'd understand*' (EP4). The title '*Aistear*' is used in several instances in the data as a short hand for the provision of a daily play session. In a sense, the data suggest that *Aistear* is being reduced to the provision of a daily play session: '*They say an hour for Aistear, but like there is no way we could ...*' (DP1). However, what this data might reflect is a desire for a different way of doing things which conceptualises children's learning as being about more than narrow curricular subjects, and for curriculum policy that is clear about the role of play in learning.

5.4.4 Fun

It seems appropriate to bring this theme about the importance of play for children to a close with a section on fun. The data on fun is collated across three codes: 'The fun that you would get out of a cardboard box', 'I thought it was lovely' and 'The children obviously really enjoyed it'. The small number of data extracts in the code 'The fun that you would get out of a cardboard box' can be characterised as nostalgic. Those participants who contribute to this code associate fun with their own experience of play

as a child: '*... we all remember back to being children and the fun that you would get out of a cardboard box*' (AP6), but there is a sense that modern children are missing out on '*[t]hese kind of simple things'* (EP7) because of the dominance of gaming technology and '*...children's toys that don't involve any play ...press a button and the child ...doesn't have to interact with the toy'* (BP5). This is suggestive of a view of childhood as a space which should be protected from the world, and its innocence and simplicity preserved.

The experience of watching children at play is most often described as 'lovely' or a variant of that, but the most important belief is that the children love play and enjoy it. This belief, evident in data coded as 'The children obviously really enjoyed it', was expressed in each focus group and there was unanimity on this point.

There is ambivalence evident in the same data related to enjoyment as to whether the children's enjoyment outweighs the difficulties for the teacher in providing it: '*I mean, we'd all love to do it and it looks brilliant and the children obviously really enjoyed it but it is just constraints of time and space and numbers I suppose, really ...*' (AP2). One significant perspective, although not supported by many data extracts, is that children's enjoyment of play is just as valid a rationale for provision as any adult agenda around learning.

> *I suppose it depends on how you determine value. Like, if the children are enjoying it, doesn't that have some value for them as well, that they are getting the curricular things at other times, sometimes they are just playing for the sake of playing, like. (CP4)*

Table 5.3 Overview of theme, sub-theme and constituent code groups: 'Play is so important for children'

Theme: Play is so important for children Adopting and implementing play as an approach to teaching and learning in infant classes is imperative because of the importance of play in the lives of children. Recognition that play is an important element in a child's life, not just as a vehicle for learning even though this is the focus of play in school.	
Sub-theme: 'Children's lives'	
Agency	
"In control and confident"	Children's sense of ownership of their play, and the respect for this shown by the participants who note this particular phenomenon.
"They are active"	Children's engagement with play, how they value it and how they invest in their play.
"So personal"	Children's emotional investment in their play and the artefacts that are produced through play.
"Connected with the children's lives"	Observations on play as both an opportunity and context for making learning in school meaningful for children by connecting role play scenarios with their life experiences.
"The one part of the day your kids don't want to miss"	Children's reactions to either the possibility or the reality of missing a play session, and the participants sense of the power of those responses.
"The kids leading it"	Issues related to the degree to which play is and/or should be led by the children, based on their interests, and the tensions between the principle of working with children's interests and pursuing curriculum objectives.
"It would be hugely beneficial"	Observations on the benefits of play for children.
"Great to see just that imagination"	The power of children's imaginations in action during play, seen as a quality which adults don't have and one which is being disrupted by play with technology and manufactured toys.
But what was he learning?	
"But what was he learning"	Observations regarding play in which the learning value of the play is questioned.
"Special needs children"	The inclusion of children with special needs in play provision.
"Isn't very good at playing"	The difficulties some children have in playing, especially role play.
"Sometimes they just get bored"	Teachers' observations that children become bored with play, and perceptions of why this happens, ranging from the characteristics of the age group to having done too much play.

"Wracking my brains"	Instances in which participants indicate their approaches to developing play scenarios in response to children's 'boredom' or other views.
Haven't we robbed children somewhat?	
"Haven't we robbed children somewhat?"	The impact of separating childhood and children from play experiences, not just in schools but through constructions of childhood (such as through toys and gendered expectations)
"That's their whole social scene"	Playing and interacting with other children in school represents a child's entire social engagement with other children because of restricted access to interaction with other children outside school.
"The whole pink thing now with girls"	The gendering of play in schools, particularly in role play and through the toys provided.
"Hammer and nails"	The extent to which health and safety considerations are felt as constraints on play.
"Are we carrying society again?"	Schools being required to compensate for deficits in children's lives at home or in society.
Sub-theme: Language	
"The language development was really interesting"	The relationship between play and language development in the infant classroom, incorporating language deficits, language learning and teacher modelling, EAL and SEN.
"The children are just so deprived of language"	Descriptions of the language deficits observed by teachers: a companion code for 'language development' to illustrate the importance of the positive effects of play on oral language.
"Children that English is their second language"	The impact of play provision on children with EAL, and the potential of play to support inclusion of children learning English as an additional language.
Sub-theme: 'A lot richer'	
"A lot richer"	Implicit references to children's learning as more than curriculum content or achieving curriculum objectives, implying that teaching is more than 'covering' content or pursuing system conventions. Reflects issues to do with meaningful experiential learning, autonomy and control.
"Even socially, even to take turns"	The efficacy of play in developing children's social skills, with reference to the low value placed on such learning by the system even though it is highly valued by participants.
"Aistear"	References to *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) encompassing both the framework and as a synonym for play in the infant classroom.
Sub-theme: Fun	
"The fun that you would get out of a cardboard box"	The view that play in the past was a more imaginative, innocent and simpler experience.
"I thought it was lovely"	Warm comments about children at play, as seen in the film

	footage.
"The children obviously really enjoyed it"	Children's observed response to and engagement with play, and their likely response to play opportunities, should they be provided. Suggestion of juxtaposing the effort required in the face of constraints to provide play, against the level of children's enjoyment and the effects of that enjoyment.

5.5 Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter are unique in the context of the research base in the RoI. For the first time there exists baseline, wide-ranging and detailed data on the beliefs of primary teachers in relation to play provision in infant classes. These data are drawn from participants who currently provide play and those who do not, and the data has benefitted from the range of perspectives the participants brought to the focus groups. The research did not set out to compare the perspectives of those two different groups, but rather to include both perspectives. These findings open up the field for further research into what is an increasingly significant area of development in the primary school system in the RoI.

While the analysis process set out to explore the data and to identify themes, there is no intention here of minimising the evident complexity of the myriad perspectives apparent in the data. There are clearly different perspectives among the participants on many issues, and the different contexts in which the participants work probably contribute to that complexity. This study did not set out to establish the effect of school context on beliefs, but rather to explore the range of beliefs among the participants and to identify what the participants believe to be the salient issues in terms of play provision in infant classes. Such insights were not previously available, but these findings contribute to the knowledge base available to support the changes to practice in infant classes currently being encouraged.

The complexity inherent in the findings suggests that the change process itself will be complex, and will have to involve the entire school and broader education community. The findings may also illustrate at least some of the reasons why practice in infant classes is currently so formal, insofar as there is information about current practice. In particular, the findings about the belief that play represents a risk to teachers may help teachers and Principals understand the dynamics of change and shed light on any sense of reluctance to engage with play in the classroom.

The overall message of the three themes identified in these findings is that the successful introduction of play into infant classrooms requires the explicit support of all stakeholder groups so that teachers are secure in making that change. Participants' perspectives indicate that they believe the status quo in terms of practice is mandated by stakeholder groups. Introducing play provision into infant classrooms is seen as a major change to practice, and while play is valued as an appropriate and happy activity for young children, the infant classroom is not universally seen as a suitable context in current circumstances. There is no evidence of widespread commitment to the introduction of play into classrooms among participants, and this view was generally held by those already doing so. These findings address the research questions on which this project was based, and these, and other issues, will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the implications of the findings from this exploratory study of teachers' beliefs about play in the infant classes in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland [RoI]. The discussion is framed by the research questions and definitions which established the focus of the research. The overarching research question guiding the study is:

> What are teachers' educational beliefs about play in infant classes in primary schools in the RoI?

The sub-questions associated with this overarching question are:

1. What do the data indicate are the elements which constitute teachers' educational beliefs about play in schools?
2. What do the data reveal about the attitudes, values and perspectives which underpin teachers' educational beliefs about play in infant classes?
3. How do these educational beliefs relate to the literature on play in schools?

The definition of teachers' educational beliefs specified for this study is: Pre- or in-service teachers' implicit assumptions and/or explicit statements about teaching, students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught. Thematic analysis was the method chosen to reveal the implicit assumptions and explore the explicit statements within the data. The literature review on teachers' educational beliefs revealed that belief substructures can be understood as attitudes, values and perspectives which are defined as follows:

- Attitude, defined as an individual's disposition, either negative or positive, toward a topic, object or phenomenon.
- Value, defined as the worth an individual associates with a topic, object or phenomenon.
- Perspective, defined as the standpoint or position the individual adopts in relation to a given topic, object or phenomenon, and which provides a context for both attitudes and values associated with the topic, object or phenomenon.

The research questions were pursued through an exploratory interpretative process enacted through various methods which included an intensive, six-step analysis. These have been described in detail in Chapter 4 to ensure transparency. In any interpretative study, however, the researcher is the instrument of interpretation. Kogler (2011) noted that prior understanding of the research participants' lived experience on the part of the researcher enabled the interpretative research process. As described in Chapter 1, I identify with primary school teachers, having worked as a primary teacher for many years. However, having stepped out of that role into teacher education has provided the opportunity for a perspective less embedded in the classroom. I advocate for play pedagogy in primary schools, and work with teachers and relevant agencies to support change in practice towards play based approaches to teaching and learning in infant classes. I am familiar with the systems pertaining in primary schools, with school culture in the RoI and with conditions in infant classes. This then, constituted my prior understanding of the lived experience of the teachers who participated in this study.

There were both benefits and limitations for the study from this prior understanding. One of the more practical benefits was my knowledge of the various contexts in which infant classes are taught, and the range of teachers that engages with children in infant classes. This benefitted the representativeness of the focus group participants, thereby benefitting

the quality of the data collected. The stimulus footage proved very effective in prompting discussion, and this again was a benefit of my understanding of what would speak to the participants' experiences.

Of more profound benefit was my ability to see beyond the participants' explicit statements to the implicit assumptions underpinning those statements, which made the data analysis more effective. I could empathise with the immediacy of the practicalities which participants referred to and could understand their significance in the classroom. Because I understood the processes associated with accountability, for example, I could also identify the anxiety that lay beneath the explicit statements about the 'cúntas míosúil' and the difficulty play represented for that system.

However, prior understanding can also be a limitation, particularly in terms of over-identification with the participants, with the danger of empathy tipping over into an unwillingness to take a critical stance. I have acknowledged at all times that the intention was to honour the voices of the participants and to explore their world view, but this had to be balanced with a very careful approach to data gathering and robust analysis. The findings had to be very firmly grounded in data, the participants' own words, to avoid the interpretation becoming a rationalisation for the positions adopted by the participants.

This also addressed another limitation about which I was particularly concerned, that interpretation would incline towards, or become, speculation. I was very aware that my insider knowledge could lead me to extend the meaning of the participants' words on the basis of my own experience, turning theorising into conjecture. For this reason, not only the findings, but this discussion have been rooted in the data.

The major contribution of this project is that it provides, for the first time in the RoI, broadly based information about teachers' views on play in infant classes. This is

significant in light of current initiatives, both at practice and policy level, to introduce play pedagogy into the infant classes of primary schools. This research has the potential to inform initial teacher education and in-service Continuing Professional Development [CPD] on the development of play pedagogy in infant classes, as well as contributing to the resources available to teachers to guide practice. In particular, the insights provided by this research will allow for CPD to address those issues which have been identified as significant for teachers in changing their practice.

There are considerable similarities between the findings of this study and other studies cited in the literature on play in classrooms, particularly to do with accountability; curriculum outcomes and content coverage; constraints of space, time and class size; parental expectations; challenges of child-led play; and the 'taken-for-grantedness' of the current, formal system of curriculum delivery. For the first time, the beliefs of teachers in the RoI vis à vis play in the classroom can be contextualised by the experiences of teachers and educators in other jurisdictions, and their concerns can be informed by those experiences. However, there are aspects of the findings which are not reflected to the same extent in the literature, such as the risk to teachers' professional reputations which the participants associated with play in the classroom.

The chapter will begin by addressing the elements which constitute teachers' educational beliefs about play in infant classes. This will be followed by a discussion on the attitudes, values and perspectives which form the sub-structures of belief (Pajares, 1992). Finally, the broad similarities and differences between the findings and the literature on play in schools will be considered.

6.2 What Elements Constitute Teachers' Educational Beliefs about Play in Schools?

The data gathered for this project indicate that the following three elements constitute teachers' educational beliefs about play in infant classes: Play in the infant classroom represents a risk to teachers' professional standing and leaves them open to censure from stakeholder groups; Play in the infant classroom requires commitment at all levels of the educational system if teachers are to feel safe introducing such practice; Play in the classroom would benefit most children but not necessarily in ways that are recognisable within current educational expectations and systems of accountability.

6.2.1 Play as risk

The riskiness of play to teachers is entirely implicit in the data and none of the participants mentioned the term. However, the data that accumulated around issues of accountability and the participants' sense that the Irish system is incompatible with anything other than formal methods which provide curriculum 'coverage' clearly indicate that the participants feel vulnerable and exposed in making changes they believe are not supported. This vulnerability and exposure is characterised here as risk. While much of the data resonates with the existing literature, the risk posed to teachers by the implementation of play pedagogy has not been identified in the literature related to play in schools. The data associated with risk raise issues of locus of control, teacher morale, autonomous professionalism and the space available in schools in the RoI for teacher initiative and creativity. While this study is focused on play in the infant classroom, the data raise bigger issues of how teachers respond to educational change, and teachers' perceptions of how the various stakeholder groups and system levels interact to support change (Fullan, 2001).

The elements of risk identified in the data relate to forms of accountability experienced by the participants, and the poor fit between play and the primary school system. The impact of accountability requirements is a key issue in the literature on play (Skolnick Weisberg et al., 2013; Wood, 2013; Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010; Drew et al, 2008; Hedges and Cullen, 2005; Wood, 2004: Goldstein, 1997). Generally, systems of accountability are not compatible with the kind of learning consequences which emerge from play activity, and one impact of this disjunction is a tendency to drive practice towards more didactic methods (Skolnick Weisberg et al., 2013; Fung and Cheng, 2012; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Rogers and Evans, 2007; Wood and Bennett, 1999). However, the conclusion drawn from the findings of this study is that accountability in primary schools in the RoI is powerfully focused on the figure of the parent. Play makes teaching invisible to parents, primarily because of the lack of paper based 'product', and consequently causes an accountability gap.

While there is data that indicates that parental involvement is welcomed and that good relationships exist between teachers and parents, a very strong strand in the data about accountability relates to participants' expression of worry about potential disapproval from parents, and this belief persisted throughout all focus groups. A number of possibilities can be suggested to explain this significant element of the data.

First, teachers' internal locus of control may be weak: Hall and Higgins (2002) considered teachers' professional beliefs in the context of changing practice in early childhood education [ECE] with the introduction of Information and Communication Technology [ICT] into the classroom. They suggested that internal locus of control, the individual's sense of being able to exercise control in their context, is not always robust enough to allow the individual to innovate in the classroom. In the context of locus of control, they also refer to teachers responding with a mixture of helplessness and hostility

to instances where the new practice did not integrate with the teacher's existing practice. Given the information, described in Chapter 1, attesting to the prevalence of didactic teaching in infant classrooms, play is unlikely to integrate with current practice but to represent something of a revolution. While this was not the case for all participants, it was certainly the case for many. The imperative to account to parents for their work may well be a manifestation of helplessness which has less to do with parents and more to do with the individual participant's intra-personal characteristics. The position argued here is that, even in those cases where participants were including play provision in the classroom, there was a belief that play is not compatible with current practice, is at best, a 'balancing act', and that parents generally would not be supportive.

Those participants who had begun to provide play in the classroom were all in large schools with a committed and supportive Principal, and that support was described in terms of dealing with disaffected parents. It could be the case that those participants' locus of control, their ability to innovate, was based on the protective factor of the Principal. There is no certainty that they would introduce play into the classroom were they to find themselves having to effect change as an individual without the support of the larger group and the Principal.

The second possibility is that the figure of the 'parent at the door' may function as an expression of teachers' uncertainties about, even opposition to, play pedagogy and their consequent reluctance to engage with its demands. Participants may be attributing these perspectives to a figure they believe has the power to resist where they don't feel they have that power themselves. It may be that the parent with power to censure is less a reality than a symbol of teachers' sense of powerlessness. There is some evidence from the data to suggest that this sense of powerlessness is associated with low morale connected to a belief that the teaching profession is under attack and under-valued. In the

absence of evidence about parents' attitudes to play in the classroom, it is very difficult to say whether the attitudes being attributed to parents towards play in the classroom are based in reality or are a facility which allows participants to express their own attitudes and perspectives without having to own them, and without fear of contradiction. The participants are likely to be aware that the zeitgeist favours play pedagogy in schools in the RoI, and they may consequently not be willing to explicitly express negative attitudes but prefer to reveal them through other channels.

Or, a third possibility is that attributing this veto to parents might be explained as a mechanism employed by teachers who have learned '... not to take change seriously unless central administrators demonstrate through actions that they should' (Fullan, 2001, 81). By asserting that parents will not agree to the change, teachers can stave off what experience has taught them may well be an ephemeral initiative. This could serve to provide breathing space in which to assess what change is actually necessary and what change is avoidable; much will depend on the individual's and the school's attitude to change.

What all these possibilities have in common is that the figure of the parent functions as a proxy for a range of intra-personal and institutional attitudes, and evidence from this study supports this perspective. However, there is absolutely no evidence from the findings of this study that teachers are consciously using the figure of the parent as a vehicle through which to express views that they do not want to make explicit. These perspectives and attitudes are entirely implicit. The conclusion reached here is that the 'parent at the door', as constructed through the data gathered here, represents resistance to change. Further research is required to establish the congruence or otherwise between participants' stated perspectives on parental expectation and belief and parents' own statements, but it is worth remembering that previous research has shown that teachers

did not identify parental views entirely correctly (Kernan and Hayes, 1999). Such research could also explore teachers' views on their own professional autonomy and whether and to what degree teachers experience a sense of powerlessness in negotiating the educational system. Research could also investigate why teachers might use a proxy instead of expressing directly their reservations about, in this case, play pedagogy, but more generally about change, and what this reveals about the state of professional confidence among teachers.

The data suggest that teachers are not convinced that play pedagogy is real teaching and the concept of being a teacher which is implicit throughout the data is of 'teacher exposition' (Martlew et al., 2011). This is emphasised in the data on the invisibility of teaching through play, its 'doing nothing' reputation, and the corollary of fears that the teacher's professionalism will be called into question. This is also likely to be part of the beliefs associated with the data on the need for permission for teachers to provide for and engage with play in the classroom. If, as appears to be the case, teachers do not see play, especially teacher engagement in play, as 'teaching', then the implication is that teachers in the infant classes in primary schools in the RoI will need a new conceptualisation of what teaching is if they are to commit to play pedagogy. Such reconceptualisation has implications for pre-service teacher education in particular, but also for serving teachers who would benefit from opportunities for reflection which could be incorporated into CPD. It should be noted that there is no evidence in the data that the participants conceptualise play in terms of a pedagogy of play as defined by Wood (2009) and cited in section 3.3.2., an important finding in terms of any provision for CPD for serving teachers.

Based on the data presented here, the concept of teaching and of being a teacher in infant clases in the RoI is a very narrow and circumscribed space in which only certain

mandated actions and behaviours are considered valid. The mandate and validation come from external sources, and this was evident in all focus groups. There were virtually no expressions of professional confidence in initiating or promoting change. This study strongly suggests that teacher initiative and creativity, at least in relation to play in the classroom, is in a fragile state. The data is clear that participants believe that the scope for change in infant classrooms is severely limited. Whether or not this belief is justified needs further investigation.

All the evidence supports the conclusion that the participants were convinced that the existing system of provision for junior and senior infants is inimical to the introduction of play. The system is seen as a pre-existing immutable fact, and didactic teaching is justified as the only way to fit the system. Even in those cases where teachers had introduced play, those participants felt they were doing something that had to be defended against the system. While there were examples of expressions of frustration that change was being blocked, there were many more explanations of why it would be useless to try. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the findings suggest a degree of abdication of responsibility on the part of at least some teachers who choose to keep doing what they have always done on the basis that no one wants them to change. This is not to suggest that the reasons for that abdication are not complicated, which they are, as the findings of this study attest. The lack of commitment to play pedagogy within the system, discussed in the next section, is a contributory factor.

6.2.2 Commitment

The data suggests that the participants see two separate dimensions of commitment: the commitment of the individual teacher and the commitment of stakeholders (Principal, Inspectorate, parents, teaching colleagues) at local and national level. The issue of risk is closely intertwined with the issue of commitment from stakeholders, and it can be said

that the absence of commitment is one of the sources of risk. The absence of support is one of the factors which can lead to resistance to change (Fullan, 2001). The data presents a picture of stakeholders associated with the school as disparate entities and groups, rather than a cohesive interconnected, interactive, mutually influential educational community focused on the wellbeing of the child. There are virtually no connections made in the data between the various stakeholders, except for the connections between the Principal and parents, and the Principal and the Inspector, with the Principal seen as a protective barrier between the teacher and the dissatisfied parent or Inspector. Even these connections are only identified in the data where the participants speculate that the stakeholder might endeavour to censure the teacher, adding to the image of the individual teacher as vulnerable.

Leadership from the Principal in relation to play pedagogy is conceptualised in the data as protection and permission, but not in terms of leading learning. While the Principal is seen in some instances as providing 'extra permission' for innovation in practice, the data suggest that such permission is not certain, although there is no criticism of any Principal in the data. There is evidence of a belief that an agent with authority in relation to the Principal would have to mandate play in the classroom so as to either bypass the Principal or convince her/him. This uncertainty about where the Principal might stand in terms of commitment to play in the infant classroom has been noted in the literature (Kemple, 1996; Rusher et al., 1992), but there is no research available which might elucidate the position of Principals of primary schools in the RoI in relation to play pedagogy. There is an urgent need for research to explore Principals' perspectives on the introduction and promotion of play pedagogy in infant classes. Nothing is known, for example, about the level of experience in infant classes among Principals in the RoI. Lack of experience has been shown to have an effect on Principals' attitudes towards the

work of teachers in infant classes (Keating et al., 2002; Taylor Nelson Sofres and Aubrey, 2002). Neither is there any information available here on what Principals expect teachers to achieve with children in infant classes. If those expectations align with didactic, text- and workbook based practice, then that raises serious issues about the degree to which teachers can be expected to effect change in practice in the absence of commitment from Principals.

The data on the relationship between teachers of infant classes and colleagues teaching older children raises concerns about the status of the former. According to the findings of this study, teachers in infant classes feel accountable to colleagues for having the children prepared for more senior classes in specific ways and there is little evidence that the participants believed that their colleagues would understand or be sympathetic to the kind of learning to be expected from children who have learned through play. The literature suggests that teachers of infant classes believe themselves to be at the bottom of a hierarchy within the school, in which teachers of more senior classes have greater status than those teaching infant classes (Moloney, 2010). The findings of this study support Moloney's (2010) findings on a hierarchy as the data are clear that accountability runs one way, from the teachers of infant classes to those teaching more senior classes. There is no evidence in the data of the participants expecting accountability in return.

Even those teachers who provided play opportunities in their classrooms with the support of the Principal, expressed concern at what their colleagues 'up the line' were thinking about practice in the infant classes, indicating that this belief has currency in a broad range of school contexts. Relationships with colleagues in the school are a 'critical variable' in the change process (Fullan, 2001), and indeed difficulties in these peer relationships emerged in the data as constraints or as potential difficulties. These were mainly expressed in the data as practical difficulties, such as one teacher implementing

play pedagogy and another teacher in the same grade level not doing so. The evidence is clear that participants were of the view that teachers working with more senior classes are not supportive of play because play does not prepare the children to fit in with the academic focus of those classes. The conclusion must be that all teachers in the system will need training in play pedagogy because the introduction of play into infant classes has repercussions for the whole school (McGuinness et al., 2009). All teachers need to be supportive of those implementing play pedagogy if it is to be sustainable and integrated into the school's overall approach to teaching and learning.

While, according to the evidence from this study, the Inspectorate is clearly of less significance than parents and Principals as a stakeholder group, nonetheless the lack of an explicit position statement on play from the Inspectorate creates uncertainty in cases where engagement with an individual Inspector is likely. Uncertainty among teachers appears to favour maintenance of the status quo until such time as the Inspectorate's position is clarified. However, it should also be noted on the basis of this study that the lack of stated commitment from the Inspectorate has not prevented some schools from introducing play. The Inspectorate did not feature in the discussion in Focus Group C, in a school which provided play in all infant classes. In the case of two participants in Focus Group F who were also providing play opportunities, the Principal was perceived as being able to deal effectively with any dissatisfaction an Inspector might voice, although there was no evidence cited of any such occurrence. The degree to which the lack of explicit commitment from the Inspectorate is justified as a rationale for maintaining current practice needs further exploration. It can, however, be said on the basis of the findings of this study that the Inspectorate appears to function as a proxy for officialdom, in the same way as the figure of the parent seems to function as a proxy for resistance to change. Commitment from the Inspectorate would represent commitment from the

amorphous entities which constitute the policy and larger administrative context, but to which teachers do not have access. Entities mentioned in this context in the data include the Department of Education and Skills [DES] and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA].

While there is evidence in the data that at least some teachers are aware that play in infant classrooms is mandated, primarily by *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and to a lesser degree by the Primary School Curriculum [PSC] (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999a), the overwhelming conclusion from the data is of a distinct belief that participants can detect no consistent mandate or commitment from external agencies or relevant personnel within the system for the provision of play in the infant classroom. This indicates a real deficit in leadership within the system on the issue of play pedagogy, and it would appear that this lack of leadership is likely to be inhibiting the introduction of play into many schools. It also provides an effective excuse in cases where teachers and school personnel are resistant to change.

Issues to do with the beliefs identified in the data about the need for parents to be 'on board' with the introduction of play pedagogy into the infant classroom have been referred to extensively in the discussion on risk. The overall message of the data is that the participants believe that there is no comprehensive and cohesive commitment among the significant stakeholder groups to a change in practice in the infant classes. If practice were to change to incorporate play into the classroom, the data indicates a clear belief that commitment to such practice would have to be explicitly stated and evidenced by the provision of resources.

Individual commitment to the provision of play in the infant classroom was generally conceptualised as extra work. The work referred to could be categorised as consistent with pedagogical framing activities (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). The provision of

resources was perceived as a very demanding extra burden on the individual teacher, but, significantly, not by those already providing play. However, having identified the implications of the provision of resources, all groups began to identify possible solutions which can generally be described as collaborative solutions in which colleagues would work together in agreed ways to source and share resources. Collaborative planning was another example of solutions to the problem of provision. The main solution to the problem of workload on the individual teacher was identified as help in the classroom. This finding is particularly pertinent as the dominant perspective on the need for the teacher to interact with the children during play was the impossibility of doing so in the context of a single teacher in the classroom. These findings suggest that while teachers can find solutions to resourcing and planning challenges, they are unlikely to initiate interactive practice in the current context of a very high pupil/teacher ratio in infant classes. The evidence from this study is unequivocal that teachers believe that, as recommended by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2004), every infant classroom, and every classroom with infant class children, should have a teaching assistant. The DES will have to demonstrate commitment to the introduction of play pedagogy by funding the appropriate level of staffing.

The evidence is mixed on the current levels of commitment of the participants to play in the infant classes. While some of the participants, in Focus Groups C and F primarily, were clearly committed to play provision, it is not comparing like with like to compare their commitment with that of those participants who do not currently provide for play. It is difficult to be committed to something of which one has no experience. The only indication of commitment is related to the extent to which a participant will consider introducing such practices in the future. On the basis of the findings of this study, there is no widespread expressed intention among those participants who were not providing for

play at the time the focus groups were held to begin to do so. In the data associated with the sub-theme 'So, I would, in principle think it's a great idea', it is clear that there is no particular enthusiasm for the implementation of play pedagogy in the classroom among the majority of participants. It would be a very useful extension of this research to investigate if the experience of discussing this topic in the focus group had any effect on the attitudes of the participants towards implementation. There is evidence that discussion and reflection among groups of teachers can change perspectives (Ertmer, 2005; Bennett et al., 1997).

6.2.3 Play is so important for children

The participants' evident appreciation of children's agency in play was an unexpected finding and it appears to be inconsistent with the concerns expressed in the other themes about teachers fearing a loss of control over children if they are playing every day, and the belief that play needs to be very structured in the classroom. Beliefs, of course, can be very inconsistent and even contradictory (Mansour, 2009). In overview, the data referring specifically to children's agency in play in the infant classroom in the RoI was generated by those teachers actually providing play. Across all focus groups, the data on children's agency through play emerged from commentary on the stimulus film footage, rather than from reflection on direct practice. The contradiction between the data on the participants' beliefs on the need for play in the classroom to be structured by the teacher and the findings on play as a context for children to exercise agency could be attributed to the former being about classroom reality for the participants, whereas the latter is a theoretical position.

The data consistently indicates a pervasive belief that play is fundamentally important for children's lives, but there is an equally consistent belief that children's opportunities for play have been increasingly curtailed. A combination of over-exposure to individualised

electronic game playing in combination with children not being allowed out of the house to play because of concerns for their safety is credited with damaging childhood. The type of play which the participants believe children should be experiencing is one which the participants associated with their own play experiences as children, most clearly articulated in the data associated with the sub-theme 'Fun'. This perspective could be characterised as romantic, even sentimental, and does not include acknowledgements of fights and arguments or other problems which can happen in play, although this is raised as a possibility in relation to play in school.

The contrast between the practical provision for play in the classroom with the more abstract phenomenon of play in the child's life is evident in the findings about children who do not/cannot/will not play. There is relatively little data associated with the sub-theme 'But what was he learning?', but this sub-theme is where the distinctions between play as a phenomenon and play in the classroom are most clearly drawn. Implicit in the findings about children who have learning disabilities, who are not imaginative or who are bored is the belief that play may not be up to the task of ensuring that all children learn, which is the overall responsibility of the teacher. Such caveats are not found in data which concerns play as a feature of the child's life outside school. What this suggests, but not explicitly, is a belief that perhaps bringing play into school is overstretching what is really just meant to be an enjoyable, imaginative, carefree and recreational activity into classroom contexts which require more evidently educational, targeted strategies.

This implicit perspective that play is a generalised, non-specific approach to teaching and learning is discernible in the findings about the effectiveness of play as a vehicle for language learning. The participants in all focus groups valued play as a powerful context for oral language development, currently a major consideration in schools following the

introduction of the national literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011a). The data suggests that participants believe play does not have, as one participant put it, '*...the structure that has to follow to bring them on academically*' (AP6). The effectiveness of play as a context for oral language development is perceived as a positive attribute of play, but it does serve to illustrate what might be seen as the juxtaposition between play and work which has been referenced in the literature as a feature of schools (Walsh et al., 2010a; Sestini, 1987). The other key area for which the participants valued play as a learning context was social skills, often conceptualised as the Social Personal Health Education [SPHE] subject area on the PSC (DES, 1999). Overall, the findings suggest that teachers believe that learning through play is a more broadly based concept of learning than that which is represented by the PSC.

There is little evidence in the data of the participants having a comprehensive knowledge base about children's learning and development in the early years. While there are instances of participants expressing the view that '*... the way we are doing it isn't optimum for children of that age*' (FP5), and this was the basis for the introduction of play provision in those cases where it had happened, the focus was on the method of provision. There were no references at all in the data to any theoretical, philosophical, psychological or other perspective on how children in the four to six year old age group learn and develop. This is likely to be a reflection of the fact that that the most common qualification among the participants was the B.Ed. degree. This is a generalist teaching degree which qualifies a teacher to work with children from junior infants through to sixth class. None of the participants had a post-graduate degree in ECE, but 65% had attended some form of CPD related to teaching infants. Given that level of CPD, it is very surprising that the data do not show a much greater awareness that didactic teaching and paper based work is not appropriate with young children. The conclusion drawn here

is that early learning and development does not currently form part of the professional knowledge base of primary teachers in the RoI. To date, no audit of the ECE components of initial teacher education courses, past and present, across the various Colleges of Education in the RoI has been identified, so it has not been possible to evaluate whether this is a factor. Certainly, a greater level of post-graduate work related to teaching in infant classes would be beneficial. However, as CPD is the most commonly accessed form of post-graduate engagement, it is imperative that early learning and development be included to enhance teachers' ability to make informed decisions about appropriate approaches to teaching and learning for young children.

In drawing together the findings from the themed data, the conclusion is that teachers do not feel confident or competent in changing current practice, and introducing play into the classroom represents such change. Their beliefs about play are inextricably linked with their beliefs about change. Lack of training and of a robust knowledge of early learning and development are significant contributory factors, but more significant is the lack of professional confidence, along with the associated anxiety and nervousness implicit in the findings which contribute to the tendency to maintain the status quo.

6.3 Attitudes, Values, Perspectives

The findings demonstrate that the participants' beliefs about play are often not about play but the associations they make with play. Attitudes, values and perspectives about play are expressed with reference to the attitudes, values and perspectives of other groups such as parents and other teachers. However, in the following sections, the focus will be on identifying teachers' attitudes, values and perspectives on play drawing on the evidence provided by the findings.

6.3.1 Attitudes

There is no evidence of a prevalent negative attitude towards play itself underpinning teachers' beliefs about play as a risk to teachers' professional reputations. There is evidence of a positive attitude to play as a worthwhile experience in the child's life. There is also evidence of positive attitudes towards play as beneficial for children's learning. However, these attitudes are contextualised, even constrained, by attitudes to implementation. There is a distinction to be made in teachers' attitudes to play and attitudes towards the possibility of introducing and sustaining play in the classroom. Negative attitudes towards introducing play into the classroom emerged in each focus group except for group C which took place in a school which provides a daily play session in all infant classes. This is not to say that such attitudes are not held by any participant in group C; they might well be but the participants may not have felt able to express them given the school's commitment to play in the infant classes.

The sub-theme 'So I would in principle think it's a great idea' demonstrates the range of attitudes towards the prospect for the individual teacher of introducing play into the classroom. These attitudes are informed by issues of confidence, lack of experience, 'comfortability' and others which could be characterised as showing nervousness, uncertainty and anxiety. There are instances in which individual participants show enthusiasm for the prospect and a willingness to try, but this is a minority position. It cannot be assumed, therefore, that those teachers who may feel threatened by the change in practice will develop positive attitudes towards play in the classroom; on the other hand, those who feel positively and enthusiastically disposed towards play could be seen as a resource within the teaching profession, one which could be developed as a support for infant teachers. Riojas-Cortez and Flores (2004) identified such complexities in

attitude among teachers, but emphasised the importance of making attitudes explicit so as to better support change in practice.

Overall, the participants' dispositions towards the implementation of play in the classroom can be characterised as wariness about the implications of such change. On the evidence of the focus group discussions, this wariness is not allayed by the experience of teachers who have introduced play into their classrooms, and who describe continuing challenges in balancing curriculum requirements with play-based learning. The participants' cautious attitude is associated with their experiences of large classes, small rooms, poor resourcing and no classroom assistants. It is difficult to see this attitude as anything other than sensible given the belief that the only people being required to bear the burden of this change are the teachers in the classrooms who feel that '*it is all thrown out at you and you are told – off you go now*' (AP5).

6.3.2 Values

Play, in school or in other contexts, is valued for its positive associations with a good childhood. This does not extend to technological play which is seen as part of an impoverished childhood, associated with a loss of freedom and parental disengagement from children for a variety of reasons. The value of play with non-manufactured objects, such as a box, which participants associated with their own childhoods is consistent with Nespor's (1987) concept of 'alternativity'. 'Alternativity' is a characteristic of belief systems and refers to the individual's belief in an ideal reality, which could be described as nostalgic and to a degree, sentimental. There is evidence to suggest that teachers may value certain types of play based on their own idealised memories of play. These values may be at odds with the problems with play identified in the literature; play is not always the benign space conjured in this strand of the data (Evaldsson and Tellgren, 2009). There may also be the possibility that such idealised, romantic views of play can

undermine play's reputation as serious activity, what Fung and Cheng (2012, 26) refer to as seeing '... play as mere play'.

In school, play is valued particularly for language and social learning. While language learning is a central aspect of the PSC and is allocated the longest time slot in the suggested minimum weekly time framework (DES, 1999b, 70), social learning as understood in SPHE is allocated the shortest time slot of all eleven subjects in the PSC. A substantial part of the learning for which the participants value play is not a curriculum priority, and this is one example of the disconnect between the PSC (DES, 1999a) and play in the classroom.

The participants value play as a space for children's agency. Agency is understood through the data as children being confident and in control, being assertive in getting play opportunities, in exercising imagination, being engaged, and being personally invested in their play as an important dimension of their lives. What is most evident in this data, ostensibly about play, is that these participants value the children, and play is almost a subsidiary value. Nonetheless, the participants express concern that the adult inability to cede control will interfere with children's agency; a valid fear as the literature indicates that teachers do find it difficult to accept child led play and have concerns about loss of control (McInnes et al., 2011; Walsh and Gardner, 2006). The benefits of play as an opportunity for children's agency are mitigated by the participants' perspective on their obligation to use play to progress curriculum objectives, and to a much lesser degree by their concern for those children who may find play difficult or find themselves excluded.

An important issue to do with values that emerges from the evidence of the data is that teachers are concerned that providing play in the classroom undermines their professionalism. Walsh and Gardner (2006) speculated that the teachers in their study

were reluctant to change their roles to be consistent with play pedagogy because they were concerned by the possible deskilling of their professionalism. The findings from this study support that hypothesis. However, the evidence suggests that it is external assessments of their professionalism that teachers are concerned about and value, and one of the questions raised by this research is how teachers in infant classes value their own professional status. If we take, for example, the data on 'permission' and '(in)visibility', the conclusion is that teachers lack self-confidence and a sense of autonomy in their professional judgement which inhibits or undermines their ability to engage with stakeholder groups. In summary, the data suggests that teachers of infant classes do not value their own professional judgement and status.

6.3.3 Teacher perspectives on play in schools

The participants were positioned differently towards play, indicating the possibility of a range of perspectives within the teaching population. The main difference in perspective was between those currently providing play opportunities in a planned way in their classrooms, and those who were not. These positions can be imagined as groups on either side of a wall, one group having jumped and the other group maintaining position. One of the really intriguing questions raised by this research is why those who jumped have done so, and what are the critical factors? This is a significant issue for further research, as this is the first evidence in the context of primary schools in the RoI of these clearly differentiated perspectives. Those teachers who position themselves as valuing play but considering implementation too difficult and risky because of system constraints and stakeholder perspectives are much clearer about their motivation for their position than are those participants who have engaged in innovative practice. An investigation of the specific factors which led to the decision to introduce play into the classroom could be useful in encouraging and persuading more schools to make that jump.

Some positions are adopted absolutely consistently throughout the data: for play to be used effectively in the classroom, teachers need additional personnel in the classroom; teachers need specialist training in play pedagogy; parents have to be educated about educational play; class size, the specific conditions of multi-class contexts, classroom design and the provision of resources have to be addressed; consistent leadership is required in terms of play pedagogy throughout the school system; the PSC (DES, 1999a) in its current form is not compatible with play in the classroom. These positions are very clear and unequivocal.

But it has to be acknowledged that the data presents contradictory perspectives:

- Play is valued for social learning yet concerns exist about the possibility that children will fight over resources;
- Parents are seen as supportive of the school but in the case of playful practice, will disapprove;
- Children demonstrate active agency in their play but teachers have to establish control of the classroom before the children are allowed to play;
- Children invest and engage in their play yet there are concerns about short attention spans.

There is a possibility that at least some of these contradictions are due to inexperience, as those participants who were providing for play did not express concerns about behaviour, concentration or control issues. Those participants who do not provide play on a systematic planned basis may maintain more contradictory perspectives due to a lack of experience of play in the classroom, and a lack of training.

It may be that in order to change these perspectives, teachers will first have to experience play in the classroom. This is essentially the scenario suggested by Ertmer (2005) (see

2.3.5). Teachers need to experience the innovative practice in the context of existing practice, with a view to incremental implementation, and incremental belief change. The purpose of this evolutionary process is to enhance the individual teacher's self-efficacy in relation to the innovation on the basis of reflective practice, leading ultimately to successful implementation. While some teachers may believe in the value of play, they may not as yet be ready for full implementation (Riojas-Cortez and Flores, 2004). The conclusion drawn here is that CPD to support changing practice in infant classes will need to be carefully calibrated so that play is presented as an effective approach to a current need. Given the findings of this study that teachers value play for oral language development and SPHE, those could be the starting points for the process described by Ertmer (2005). While the findings from this study indicate that, like the teachers in Riojas-Cortez and Flores' (2004) study, many teachers are not ready to let go of the familiar current practices, there is no evidence of negative attitudes towards play. The negative attitudes and perspectives relate to the structural aspects of the school, the classroom context, and 'our system' as a whole .

6.4 Literature

This section considers the findings of the study with reference to the literature on teachers' educational beliefs, teachers' beliefs about play, and the literature on play in schools.

6.4.1 Teachers' educational beliefs

One of the main issues which emerged in the literature review on early childhood education (ECE) teachers' educational beliefs was the consistency or otherwise of beliefs with practice, as detailed in table 2.2. What is evident from that analysis is that there is no single relationship between beliefs and practice in ECE. Indeed, in the literature

review on the relationship between beliefs and practice (section 2.3.4), there is no single model which explains the route from belief into practice, although the range of constraints and enabling factors which have been identified are consistent throughout the literature. One of the possibilities not addressed in the literature on the consistency/inconsistency of ECE teachers' beliefs and their practice is that where practice is inconsistent with beliefs about, for example, appropriate practice, it may be that it is consistent with other beliefs that are stronger for the individual than the beliefs about appropriate practice. In other words, it is inaccurate to conclude that beliefs are inconsistent with practice, when it may be that the wrong beliefs are being assessed for consistency.

The literature on the structure of beliefs (section 2.3.3) indicates that some beliefs are stronger than others. Where practice is inconsistent with the beliefs being assessed, it may be useful to consider if the practice is actually consistent with other beliefs which are stronger than the beliefs which are the focus of the research. It would then be useful to determine which beliefs are stronger and more powerful than beliefs about, for example, play pedagogy. This is an important consideration in the context of changing beliefs, as discussed in section 2.3.5. Intra-personal issues, including beliefs, have been identified as constraints on teachers enacting their beliefs about appropriate practice for young children, but the literature review did not identify any consequences of the relative strength between beliefs or belief clusters. Addressing intra-personal constraints will require identifying beliefs which exert stronger influence on practice, thereby inhibiting enactment of beliefs about appropriate practice.

The findings from this study, while not focused on the relationship between beliefs and practice, shed light on the relative strengths between beliefs held by the participants, particularly as evidenced by the data coded as "I mean, we'd all love to do it …but",

contextualised by the data in the sub-theme 'Our system'. The participants' beliefs about the primary school system in the RoI, and about the practice which is perceived as conforming to its demands, appear to supersede beliefs about the appropriateness of play as an approach to teaching and learning in the infant classes. The participants' beliefs about play are firmly rooted in the specific context of the school and classroom, and exist in counterpoint to beliefs about 'coverage'. Teachers believe their job is to achieve curriculum coverage, and this belief (among others) exerts a strong inhibitory effect on beliefs about play for many – but not all – participants. In this case, supporting teachers in the RoI to change practice towards a play-based pedagogy will require changing beliefs about curriculum implementation. Further research with teachers who have introduced some provision for play could provide insights into the conditions which foster a shift away from the 'coverage' model. Providing professional development on play pedagogy without also addressing the inappropriateness of the 'coverage' model is unlikely to be effective in promoting systemic change in infant classrooms in the RoI.

This consideration is also pertinent to the question of the relationship between beliefs and knowledge. Following an extensive literature review (section 2.3.1), the position adopted in this study is that educational beliefs constitute an overarching category and knowledge is subject to interpretation on the basis of those beliefs. New information or knowledge, once encountered, is either accepted or rejected on the basis of existing beliefs. If accepted, it is then filtered to become part of the individual's idiosyncratic personal pedagogy (Mansour, 2009), representing the integration of beliefs and knowledge. Such personal pedagogy has also been characterised as 'know-how', teachers' beliefs about what does and does not work in particular teaching situations (Bennett et al., 1997; Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2011). 'Know how' has been categorised as implicit belief, distinct from explicit beliefs which have developed on the basis of professional

development (Sakellariou and Rentzou, 2011). The findings of this study support and reinforce this conceptualisation of the relationship between beliefs and knowledge.

The findings of this study indicate that there is a low base of awareness among participants about play pedagogy as exemplified in the literature, and little evidence of awareness of current perspectives on young children's learning and development. While there was evidence of dissatisfaction with the prevalence of workbooks, there was less awareness evident about the inappropriateness of formal methods of teaching for young children. Beliefs about system requirements superseded, or at least limited, beliefs about children's affinity with play. For example, data from the sub-theme 'Accountability for learning' coded as 'It would need to be very structured' powerfully suggest that across all settings, the participants' personal pedagogies or 'know how' positions the school system in the RoI as the immutable reality for which play will have to be modified. In other words, teachers 'know' what will work and believe that play will not work unless adapted in some way to fit into the system.

Participants who articulated explicit beliefs with reference to the benefits of making provision for play in the classroom also held implicit assumptions about the compulsory nature of system requirements, evidenced in the data coded as 'It's a balancing act'. The explicit beliefs based on training had not entirely displaced implicit beliefs about the school system, but had intertwined into a new version of 'know how'. However, while it is clear from the data that the strongest evidence in the data is for 'know how', there is also a very clear demand from the participants for training. The participants are very explicit, and there was unanimity within the data coded as 'I think training is number one', about their own lack of knowledge about play pedagogy. This is not simply about knowledge acquisition but is also associated with beliefs about self-confidence, further emphasising the intricacies of the beliefs/knowledge relationship.

The findings of this study indicate that participants' beliefs about the system, including beliefs about stakeholder perspectives, exert a drag effect on the potential of new information or knowledge to impact on teachers' professional expertise and ultimately to impact on the practice experienced by children in the infant classroom. If, as the findings of this study show, teachers believe that play in the classroom represents a risk and is unsupported by key stakeholder groups, and if their 'know how' is based on the immutability of current systems, then this has implications for the acquisition of knowledge among teachers. If practice is to be dependent on implicit beliefs about what will and will not work within an embedded school system, how can the knowledge available about child development, play pedagogy and other aspects of ECE extant in the international literature impact on practice? This is the issue most clearly raised by this study about the relationship between beliefs and knowledge among teachers in the RoI; how can that relationship, which is crucial to educational change, be managed to ensure that knowledge with the potential to support play pedagogy in the infant classes is neither rejected as not practical nor manipulated to support the status quo?

While the literature review on changing beliefs indicate that such change is difficult, particularly in terms of implicit beliefs (Nespor, 1987), there is also evidence that belief change is triggered where teachers recognise that they need to change approach (Herron, 2010) and through reflection on practice with peers (Bennett et al., 1997). However, only Ertmer (2005) addressed the issue of belief change where such change presents a risk to the teachers, and she suggests that in those cases teachers need an enhanced sense of self-efficacy in terms of the new practice. Ertmer (2005) suggests that this kind of profound belief change needs an incremental approach in which the innovative practice is introduced and aligned with current practice, leading to opportunities for reflection on practice. This is contextualised by observing peers in the new practice, and becoming

involved in communities of practice. Given the evidence that teachers of infant classes in the RoI have strongly held implicit beliefs about what is currently required of them, incremental processes as described by Ertmer (2005) are needed to effect systemic change. Currently, no such supports are available to teachers, and the conclusion has to be that providing new information or training will have limited effect given the strength of existing beliefs.

An additional issue which was not identified in the literature about teachers' educational beliefs was the relationship between individually held beliefs and collective beliefs which could be characterised as elements of educational Zeitgeist. This is most clearly seen in the data from Focus Group C on parental attitudes to play in the classroom. The participants described the parents of children in their infant classes as very supportive, but were all in agreement that parents generally would have negative attitudes towards play. This last belief was held consistently across the six focus groups, and the possible meaning of this collective belief is discussed in section 6.2.1. Another example is the belief among those participants who were providing for play in the classroom that a key role for the Principal is to protect teachers from censure by both parents and the Inspectorate in order to allow them to continue to make such provision. Yet, there were no incidents cited in which such protection was actually required. Those participants believed, along with participants not providing for play, that such provision was a risk even though provision was going ahead with no apparent challenge.

The data do not provide an answer, but it may be that these collective beliefs have arisen, not from experience but as a response to the leadership vacuum which is identified in the data in the sub-theme 'Everybody would be on board'. The findings suggest that teachers perceive no authoritative discourse or source of leadership outside of their classrooms within which they can locate their practice, and the collective beliefs referred to have

evolved to help teachers find solid ground amid the shifting sands of unsupported practice. The literature on the uses of beliefs (section 2.3.2) is very clear that where teachers experience uncertainty, they create their own 'maps' (Kagan, 1992) and it is these beliefs that teachers draw on when faced with uncertainty. There are two conclusions to be drawn: first, that the DES needs to exercise leadership in relation to play pedagogy in infant classes; and, secondly, it is imperative that teachers receive support to align their 'know how' with current knowledge about the education of young children.

6.4.2 Teachers' beliefs about play

Literature on teachers' beliefs about play is quite limited, and this study expands the range available. This study did not set out to establish connections between the participants' beliefs and practices, so this section will focus on the small number of studies which explicitly addressed teachers' beliefs about play. There is no one approach to the study of teachers' beliefs about play. In the literature sourced and reviewed in Chapter 2, several investigated the beliefs of teachers who were identified as providing play opportunities in the classroom, (Brett et al., 2002; Bennett et al., 1997; Kemple, 1996) and others who were not necessarily doing so (Riojas-Cortez and Flores, 2004; Keating et al., 2000). Some studies focused on beliefs about cultural aspects of play provision (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2004; Sanagavarapu and Wong, 2004) and others on play with older children (Quance et al., 2008; Ranz-Smith, 2007). This study explores teacher beliefs from a different perspective, including both teachers who are implementing play and those who are not; it includes beliefs from both pre- and post-implementation. Through thematic analysis, it goes beyond what the participants say to understand their implicit assumptions. While there is no reference in the literature reviewed for this study

to play being a risk to teachers, the beliefs, attitudes, values and perspectives identified through this study resonate with aspects of the literature.

The differences in perspective between those participants who were implementing planned play opportunities for children in their classrooms and those who were not resonate with research which indicates that it is not classroom, school or policy contexts that are the determining factors in play provision, but the teachers' beliefs (Bullock, 2011; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Kemple, 1996). Positive beliefs about self-efficacy and robust internal locus of control enable teachers to promote play in the classroom (McMullen, 1999; Kemple, 1996), and indeed to go beyond established frameworks into the creation of novel discourses about play (Moon and Reifel, 2008). The conclusion of this study is that beliefs about play in the infant classroom, and the likelihood of teachers introducing play into the classroom are strongly negatively affected by lack of professional confidence, and teachers' apparent fragile sense of self-efficacy.

In terms of the findings on beliefs about the incompatibility of the PSC (DES, 1999a) with play, there is evidence in the literature that while teachers identified curricular expectations as constraints, when the curricular documents were analysed it transpired that play was suggested as a methodology (Ranz-Smith, 2007). The point made was that this is an example of a belief which has developed independent of objective knowledge, and which is resistant to change even when shown to contradict demonstrable fact (La Paro et al., 2009b). This is exemplified here by the data coded as "Is it not in the Curriculum already", a very sparsely populated code given that it is, indeed, in the Curriculum already (Murphy, 2004a, 2004b). Given that the PSC (DES, 1999a) emphasises the importance of play in the junior classes, the findings of this study suggest that the segregation of curriculum content into eleven subject areas over-rides the mandate for play in the PSC (DES, 1999a). The findings here are unequivocal, that

teachers believe the PSC to be a significant barrier to the implementation of play, and a significant imperative to the maintenance of didactic, text- and workbook based practice. As the PSC is revised, play needs to be explicitly and prominently mandated so as to remove all ambiguity.

6.4.3 Play in schools

The concerns articulated in the literature about the compatibility of play with various aspects of the school as institution can be identified in the findings from this study. Space, time and class size are clearly identified in both the literature and the data as constraints, or at least challenges, to the implementation of play pedagogy in the classroom. What is different about the context in the RoI, and not reflected to the same extent in the literature, is the impact of the very high pupil/teacher ratio in infant classes. The literature reviewed, mainly from neighbouring jurisdictions, does not reflect the data coded, for example, as 'There is only one of me in my class' and 'You do need help'. There is evidence from the literature that small group work, for example, is made possible by the availability of classroom assistants, which is not a possibility in infant classes in the RoI. There are examples in the data of suggestions that resource teachers of various kinds might come into the classroom during play sessions both to help the class teacher and to work with their pupils in situ. However, as is also made clear in the findings, this is only possible in big schools which have a cohort of such teachers, and is predicated on their willingness to rearrange their workloads and timetables, which will not be feasible in every circumstance. Smaller schools will not have this option. Given that help in the classroom is one of the key supports the participants identify as enabling play in the classroom, strategies (but perhaps not solutions) are needed to address this challenge. There does not appear to be a significant body of literature addressing this particular challenge of very high pupil/teacher ratio in infant classes.

The data on parental expectations resonates with the literature in that teachers are clearly very conscious of the views of parents, and there is evidence of teachers conforming to what they think parents want rather than trying to persuade parents of the benefits of play (Fung and Cheng, 2012). What was not as evident in the literature and requires further investigation in the context of the RoI, is the power relations between parents and teachers as perceived by the teachers. While the literature on parental expectations indicates that these can be a constraint on practice, the literature review revealed no sense of threat among teachers from parental censure requiring the protection of the Principal as a buffer in the context of playful practice. One possible contributory factor is the extent of teaching experience among the participants in this study. 73% of participants (the overwhelming majority of whom were female) in the focus groups had less than 10 years teaching experience. There is no data available to verify if this is a feature of the primary school system. Hall and Higgins (2002) noted that young female teachers had weaker locus of control than other categories of teachers, and this may be a factor here. Pascal (1990) suggested that teachers in reception classes had less status than teachers of older age groups, and this may also be a contributory factor. This also appears to be the case among teachers of infant classes in the RoI (Moloney, 2010), although the views of teachers of senior classes and of Principals on this issue have not been explored. Further research could elucidate the relationship between teaching experience, locus of control and status of teachers of infant classes in the RoI. Indeed, specific research to establish perspectives on the status of teachers in infant classes in relation to the status of teachers who work with older children could shed light on the findings here about the participants' sense of concern about their accountability to colleagues teaching more senior classes.

The issues to do with the impact of curriculum outcomes on play pedagogy have been referred to earlier, and similar concerns are evident in the data and in the literature. However, the structure of the PSC (DES, 1999a) appears to be a more extreme version than the curricula described in the literature, particularly in neighbouring jurisdictions. Wood (2013, 56) suggests that teachers should choose not to follow policy agendas 'slavishly' but the participants in this study do not see that as an option. Wood (2013) further argues that policy frameworks can be a guide rather than a prescription but again, this is not how the PSC (DES, 1999a) is understood as evidenced by the findings of this study. The eleven subjects are presented and taught as highly defined content, and no data on the level of integration in infant classes specifically has been found to date. The findings indicate that teachers are concerned to account for each distinct subject on the timetable and to achieve 'coverage' for each subject. The assumption across all participants is that such coverage is compulsory and not achieving it requires special dispensation in the form of the Principal defending the teacher.

The concept of play in the classroom which emerges from the data is of a process which is distinct from, indeed at odds with, the 'coverage' imperative which underpins curriculum implementation in the infant classroom in the RoI. Play in the infant classroom is therefore confined to a space defined by the strength of this imperative, consequently limiting the way in which play can be conceptualised by teachers. The concept of play which has emerged is instrumental and more accurately described as a methodology rather than an overarching, holistic approach to young children's learning. Indeed, the literacy and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011a, 48) refers to to play 'as a methodology for facilitating learning', although there is no evidence that the participants' conceptualisation of play is at all influenced by the strategy. To the contrary, the literacy

and numeracy strategy (DES, 2011a) is perceived as part of the mandate for direct teaching methods.

The data suggest then, that progress from this point in terms of practice in infant classes requires a dual approach: namely, addressing the inappropriateness of the 'coverage' approach, and expanding the current conceptualisation of play in the classroom into the space currently occupied by 'coverage' considerations.

This then has implications for the usefulness of the integrated approaches to play pedagogy reviewed in Chapter 3 (Wood, 2013; Walsh et al., 2011; Synodi, 2010). All are predicated on teachers being able to provide open ended, child initiated and child led play opportunities in balance with teacher initiated, teacher led activities focused on specified outcomes. The findings from this study suggest that such integrated approaches do not connect with current perspectives on curriculum implementation in infant classes. The model of guided play (Skolnick-Weisberg et al., 2013) in which the teacher has always framed the play with specific curriculum outcomes in mind appears to be the model most compatible with the current curricular context, and understanding of play, in infant classes in the RoI. However, it is argued here that guided play as defined by Skolnick Weisberg et al. (2013) is a teacher directed activity and that children cannot lead in a situation where the teacher's interactive strategy is to highlight the salient learning points for the child. Those might not coincide with the child's interests. The findings from this study suggest that the PSC (DES, 1999a) is not compatible with integrated models of play pedagogy which make space for child-, adult- and mutually led play in the infant classes, and that new curriculum policy is required which is in harmony with play pedagogy.

6.5 Conclusion

The findings from this study show that much of what teachers believe about play is not about play but is about change. It is clear that they believe that introducing play into the classroom would be a risk, not because of the play itself but because play means a change from the status quo. Those who have introduced provision for play believe that their circumstances are different to the usual circumstances pertaining in primary schools. Teachers believe that there is no commitment to change within the system of primary education, and that therefore there is no commitment to the introduction of play into infant classrooms. They believe that play activity is beneficial for children but there is no evidence of a widespread belief that didactic practice is currently having any negative effects on children's learning and development in infant classes. Play in the classroom appears to be perceived in instrumental and procedural terms rather than as a holistic pedagogical approach to all aspects of young children's learning and development. The conclusion is that while there are no negative attitudes to play identifiable among teachers, neither is there any decisive imperative towards the introduction of play into infant classrooms.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Thesis Summary

This was a study of teachers' educational beliefs about play in infant classes in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland [RoI]. The rationale for the study was based on the conviction, evident in the literature, that what teachers believe has a significant impact on classroom practice. Further, in the context of considerable policy change in relation to infant classes in the RoI in recent years, the rationale for the study is based on the argument that educational change depends on what teachers think and do (Fullan, 2001).

The study examined literature on teachers' beliefs and found that 'belief' as a construct is subject to considerable variation in both the terminology used and in how the construct is defined. This variation contributes to the difficulty of establishing consistency across the literature. The conclusion drawn from the review is that the terms used for individual studies need to be specified and defined to provide clarity in terms of what is being studied. Therefore, this study specifies that it is teachers' educational beliefs which are the focus, and the following belief sub-structures (Pajares, 1992) were specified as the elements of educational beliefs:

- Attitude, defined as an individual's disposition, either negative or positive, toward a topic, object or phenomenon.
- Value, defined as the worth an individual associates with a topic, object or phenomenon.

- Perspective, defined as the individual's standpoint in relation to a given topic, object or phenomenon, and which provides a context for both attitudes and values associated with the topic, object or phenomenon.

The nature of belief was considered in terms of the relationship between belief and knowledge, how beliefs are used, how belief systems are structured, the relationship between beliefs and practice and whether beliefs can be changed. The conclusion from the review is that beliefs can be characterised as personally invested values with affective connections in contrast to knowledge which is externally validated through consensus, with knowledge being interpreted on the basis of pre-existing beliefs. Beliefs tend to be stable and are useful in the highly contingent environment of the classroom. The review established a consensus in the literature that beliefs are a significant influence on the practice of teaching, but the relationship between beliefs and practice is mediated by both constraints and enabling factors which can relate to the environment, or to intra-personal issues such as self-efficacy. Beliefs are resistant to change, but there is evidence that opportunities for reflection and initial positive experience with a new practice can effect change in beliefs.

The definition of beliefs adopted for this study, following a review of both general definitions and study-specific definitions was:

> Teacher educational belief is generally defined as pre- or in-service teachers' implicit assumptions and/or explicit statements about teaching, students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught.

A review of early childhood education [ECE] teachers' beliefs revealed that the field is very diverse with no consistent definition of what is meant by beliefs, and the topics considered are very diverse. In terms of beliefs about play, the literature base is limited, and no consistency of approach was identified. However, belief systems in which beliefs about play intersected with beliefs about, for example, self-efficacy or constraints

emerged as significant in influencing practice. No consistent relationship between beliefs about play and practice was found, and there are examples of teachers practicing according to their beliefs and being constrained in doing so. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that beliefs which are underpinned by positive attitudes and values towards play can enable teachers to overcome constraints on practice, but these beliefs about play are likely to be influenced by other beliefs, such as those about self-efficacy.

A review of the literature on play in schools revealed that the culture of the school as well as classroom conditions, curriculum provision and stakeholder perspectives were found to act as constraints on children's experience and teachers' implementation of play in the classroom. However, the literature also provides evidence of schools and teachers adapting to playful practice, both in terms of attitudes and practical strategies. Dialogue with parents, for example, is identified as a strategy in garnering support for play in the early school years. While the literature identifies issues with teachers' expertise in play pedagogy, there is also clear evidence of the effectiveness of, for example, reflection on practice in enhancing teachers' understanding of children's learning through play. There is sufficient evidence to conclude that many of the barriers to play in schools can be addressed, some by the teacher and some at school level. Other issues such as class size must be addressed at government level. The challenge in terms of curriculum is to devise curriculum which is compatible with play pedagogy.

The literature review established that a number of models of play pedagogy are available which address the particular demands on teachers for accountability for children's learning in school. These models incorporate child led, adult led and co-constructed play contexts which offer pragmatic responses to system requirements for curriculum implementation and accountability, but also embed children's agency into playful classroom practice. However, these models are predicated on the curriculum allowing

space for playful learning, and the conclusion here is that the Primary School Curriculum [PSC] (DES, 1999a) is too highly classified, in Bernstein's (2000) terms, to be compatible with such models. The conclusion is that there are effective alternatives to didactic teaching available to teachers, but the revision to the PSC (DES, 199a) currently underway must ensure compatibility with play pedagogy.

Adopting an exploratory, qualitative, interpretative approach within a constructivist paradigm, this study was designed to focus very clearly on the voices of the participants, and to ensure that their perspectives were prioritised and honoured at each stage. Focus groups were the chosen data collection method as the most suitable way to engage with multiple perspectives. A highly systematic six phase thematic analysis was conducted which resulted in the identification of three themes in the data.

The research design was clearly focused on establishing the trustworthiness and rigour of the study, and Tracy's (2010) eight 'Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research' were used as the framework:

1. **Worthy topic**: The research is relevant, timely, significant and interesting as it articulates with the changing policy and practice context associated with play in the infant classes in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland [RoI].
2. **Rich rigor**: The theoretical constructs underpinning this study have been elaborated through the extensive literature reviews. The number of focus groups through which data collection was achieved exceeded the appropriate number for a study of this size as described in the literature. The sample and contexts for the research were representative of the target population. Data collection has been comprehensive, with careful attention to the detail of recording and transcription. The data analysis process was detailed, intensive and comprehensive, as well as extensively documented.

3. **Sincerity**: The reflective writing incorporated in the research methodology accounts for the need for 'self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher' (Tracy, 2010, 840). The researcher profile included in the introduction provides evidence of my background and perspectives. The detail with which all aspects of the methodology have been described provides transparency.
4. **Credibility**: Reporting of the research process is characterised by thick description and considerable concrete detail. Analysis has identified tacit (implicit) knowledge, and the level of methodological detail shows how the data was arrived at. The data and findings are characterised by multivocality and an acknowledgement of multiple perspectives.
5. **Resonance**: The research resonates with the experiences of teachers and with the concerns of a variety of groups engaged in supporting change in practice in infant classes.
6. **Significant contribution**: The research is a significant contribution to the knowledge base on teachers' beliefs about play, and about practice in infant classes. It provides, for the first time, information about the issues which are likely to impact on initiatives to change practice in infant classes. It provides practical lessons for the provision of both pre- and in-service teacher education, as well as a context for the management of educational change in infant classes.
7. **Ethical**: Anonymity and confidentiality for participants have been observed. All data have been kept secure and all recordings will be deleted when the PhD process is complete. The participants' contributions to the data have been treated with respect and sincerity.
8. **Meaningful coherence**: The study set out to explore teachers' beliefs about play in infant classes and it has achieved its purpose. The methods and procedures

used fit the goal of the research, and the research questions, literature reviews, findings and discussion present a coherent whole.

The major findings and recommendations will be presented below.

7.2 Major Findings

The major findings from the literature reviews on teachers' beliefs and play in schools are as follows:

- There is no agreed conceptual framework or terminology within which to conduct research on beliefs, making it difficult to situate individual studies within the literature. The study of teachers' beliefs needs to be underpinned by consistently defined, clearly understood and precisely used terminology and definitions.
- Teachers' beliefs about play have received insufficient research attention, and the relationship between beliefs about play and classroom practice is not consistently understood. While some teachers are able to overcome constraints and practice according to their beliefs, others have not been able to do so. The literature reveals a range of possibilities to explain why such different outcomes occur, but there is not as yet sufficient evidence to identify the most salient factors. One area which could provide insights is research on the comparative strength of beliefs about play and beliefs about system requirements.
- There is consistency in the literature about the range of constraints identified as having a negative impact on play in the classroom. While some, such as curriculum requirements and class size, are structural and environmental, others are associated with teachers' personal characteristics, such as beliefs about self-efficacy.

- Policy can inhibit and limit play by making demands for accountability for learning which are not compatible with play's complexity and diversity.
- While tensions exist between play and the school as an institution, many of these can be addressed through practical and flexible approaches at classroom and school level, and through communication and dialogue with stakeholders. Some resolutions require government action.
- Highly specified curriculum objectives tend to encourage didactic practice in ECE classrooms. Curriculum for infant classes should be compatible with learning through play.
- Play pedagogy requires considerable expertise on the part of teachers, with pedagogical content knowledge an important component of that expertise.

Analysis of the focus group data has identified the following major findings:

- A remarkable level of consensus exists among teachers about play in the infant classes of primary schools in the RoI, crossing school context, diverse classroom conditions, and teacher profile.
- The most powerful figure evident in the data is the 'parent at the door'. Teachers believe that parental expectations are tied to the products of didactic teaching, and therefore represent a powerful rationale for the maintenance of the status quo. The figure of the 'parent at the door' represents the argument for resistance to change, and throws issues of teachers' professional autonomy and self-confidence into sharp relief.
- Play represents a risk to teachers because it signifies change which they believe will disrupt established modes of accountability to stakeholders, who do not or are unlikely to support the new practice. These beliefs reveal anxiety about the consequences for teachers if they act in advance of system wide 'permission'

which would serve as a clearly articulated imperative for play pedagogy. This anxiety and fear of censure raises further questions about teachers' professional identity.

- Teachers believe that the introduction of play into infant classrooms is not an issue for teachers alone, but will require consistent and cohesive commitment from the entire range of stakeholders associated with the school, and with the primary school system. Teachers believe the school Principal is a critical figure in the introduction of play into the infant classroom.
- While teachers believe that play is important for young children as part of a good childhood and across a range of domains and learning areas, there is no evidence of an understanding of play as pedagogy among teachers.
- Play is valued as an effective context for language development and the learning of social skills.
- Teachers believe that implementing the Primary School Curriculum [PSC] (DES, 1999a) is not compatible with play because of the number of subjects and teachers' understanding of the requirements of curriculum 'coverage'.
- Teachers believe that play is not compatible with the primary school system in the RoI because of class size, lack of in-class support personnel and insufficient training.
- There is a clear distinction between attitudes towards play and attitudes towards play provision inthe classroom. The data indicate positive attitudes towards play but wary and cautious attitudes towards implementation.

7.3 Recommendations

Arising from the major findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- The DES needs to exercise leadership both through articulating a vision for practice in infant classes and in providing supports for teachers and schools to enable the development of a pedagogy of play consistent with the international research and knowledge base.
- An agency is required to coordinate and drive the development of play pedagogy in infant classes. The agency nominated must be given resources to provide comprehensive CPD for all serving teachers, including opportunities to consider the inappropriateness of didactic, paper-based practice in infant classes.In addition, teachers need in-class support for provision for play, access to exemplars of good practice in play pedagogy, and opportunities for reflection in communities of practice. The nominated agency should also work with stakeholder groups to develop their knowledge and understanding of play pedagogy and its implications. The National Early Years Quality Support Service [NQSS] (Pobal, 2014) has been established to support enhanced quality practice in pre-school services. Specialists will be provided to work with pre-school ECE services, but infant classes have been excluded from these supports. This is despite the fact that the State regards infant classes as part of ECE provision in the RoI (Moloney, 2010; NCCA, 2009; CECDE, 2006; OECD, 2004). The remit of the NQSS should be expanded to include primary schools, and those teachers who have been trained as *Aistear* tutors should be recruited to provide in-school support for the introduction of play pedagogy.
- The National Parents Council Primary should be resourced to work with parents to promote their understanding of the importance of play pedagogy in infant classes. Of equal importance, such a campaign should educate parents about the inappropriateness of work- and text-book based methods for young children,

thereby helping to ensure that parental expectations are consistent with best practice in the early years.

- Pre-service teacher education programmes should include dedicated modules on play pedagogy.
- Colleges of Education and the Association of Teachers' Education Centres in Ireland [ATECI] should collaboratively explore the possibility of providing accredited ECE post-graduate programmes on a distance learning basis to facilitate and encourage the development of teacher expertise in appropriate approaches to teaching and learning in the infant classes.
- Class sizes in infant classes must be reduced and teaching assistants appointed to classrooms with junior and/or senior infant pupils.
- The revision of the PSC (DES, 199a) currently underway must ensure that the learning outcomes specified are consistent with the characteristics of play, and explicitly create space for children's learning through play. The revised PSC should avoid the strong classification which characterises the current version, and reflect the thematic structure of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009).

7.4 Limitations

This is a small scale study, conducted by a single researcher which limited the amount of data collected and the number of focus groups held. As a part-time student, the time frame for the study was more extended than for a full-time candidate. As with all qualitative interpretative studies, the specific perspective of the single researcher means that there may be aspects of the data which have received insufficient attention. With a team of researchers, additional attitudes, values and perspectives may have been identified. Nonetheless this does not render the interpretations offered here invalid. As a

qualitative study, there is no claim to establish the prevalence of the beliefs, attitudes, values and perspectives presented here.

7.5 Areas for Further Research

The findings from this study raise a number of issues for further investigation:

- Within the field of research on teachers' educational beliefs about play, there is a need for a research framework or agenda. Within such a framework, research could be accumulated across consistently understood categories, facilitating comparisons across findings.
- Additional research could establish the prevalence of the beliefs about play identified in this study.
- Given the significance of the findings associated with teachers' beliefs about parental expectations and the impact of such beliefs on practice in infant classes, research to establish the beliefs, attitudes, values and perspectives of parents on play in infant classes would be a critical contribution to knowledge in this area.
- Principals are clearly crucial to the process of educational change, but nothing is known of their perspectives on play in the infant classes. Research to explore their beliefs, attitudes, values and perspectives on this issue would be a substantial contribution to the knowledge base.
- Further research in schools and among teachers who are making provision for play in their classrooms could explore the particular characteristics of those who have done so, and the specific conditions which made such change possible.

7.6 Concluding Reflections

After years of believing that the work of teachers in infant classes in primary schools has been undervalued and given insufficient attention, it has been very satisfying to have the opportunity to conduct this research. This entire process has been characterised by goodwill from start to finish. All of the focus group discussions could be described as sincere, engaged and animated, and from my perspective, unexpectedly enjoyable. All the participants took the topic and the process seriously and contributed accordingly. Some of the data was expected; for example, I was aware from my work with teachers that play pedagogy is not understood as a broadly based approach to ECE and play is seen as an activity with a beginning and end point. However, the findings about the figure of the parent (as distinct from parents themselves), its associations with anxiety about censure, and the worrying sense of risk associated with an individual making a change all came as a complete surprise. That has caused me to reflect on how I interact with teachers, and made me realise that my approach to the issue of change would not connect with many teachers. It was not part of my thinking or my experience as a teacher that parents should be the arbiters of classroom practice. Nor did I appreciate that the prospect of change could be so daunting, especially change that appears to me to be so desirable and so justified. Clearly, there are teachers who have embraced play in the classroom, and I hope to learn more about how and why that happened so that we might find solutions for those who need support.

I leave the last word from this study to participant FP5:

' [I]nstead of seeing them as just part of the rest of the school, ... ***infants are their own thing'.***

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Appendices

Appendix A: Research Code of Ethics

- The researcher recognises the right of all those who participate in this research project to have their contributions treated confidentially and have their anonymity protected at all times.
- Voluntary informed consent will be sought before any focus groups are conducted. This consent will be in writing before the focus group commences. Individuals have the right to refuse participation and will not be coerced into taking part in the research. Participants have the right to withdraw from the process at any time and will be informed of this right.
- The researcher is under an obligation to describe accurately, truthfully and fairly any information obtained during the course of the research.
- There is an obligation on the researcher to incorporate accurately the data collected during the course of this research into the text of the Ph.D. thesis or other publication related to the research, and to insure that individual opinions and perceptions are not misrepresented.
- The researcher will protect the sources of information gathered from the focus groups. All data will be securely stored in the Church of Ireland College of Education (CICE) until the Ph.D. process is entirely completed. All voice recordings will be deleted at that stage. Anonymous transcripts will remain as Appendices to the Ph.D. thesis.
- The researcher will make herself available to discuss the procedures, conduct, or findings of the research with any party involved in the research process.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Letter

PhD Research Focus Group

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group discussion. The purpose of the group discussion is to gather information from your perspective about teaching and learning in Infant classes. The focus group is part of my Ph.D. research which is being supervised by Dr. Carmel O'Sullivan of Trinity College, Dublin.

The discussion group will involve watching a film of an infant class (13 minutes) and discussing what you have observed. For the purposes of the research, the discussion will be taped using digital voice recorders. Individuals participating in the focus groups are entitled to have their identity and comments protected. The focus groups are being conducted according to a code of ethics (see attached) which guarantees your anonymity and the safeguarding of all the data generated from the discussions. The anonymised data from the discussion group will form part of the finished Ph.D. thesis, and may also be part of academic publications and presentations based on the thesis.

In order to maintain the ethical requirements of this project, please complete the form below to indicate your consent to participation.

Should you have any questions after this event, please feel free to contact me:

Jacqueline Fallon,
Lecturer, Early Childhood Education,
CICE,
Upper Rathmines Road,
Dublin 6.

Tel: (01) 497 0033

jfallon@cice.ie

I have had the purpose of the focus group about teaching and learning in Infant classes explained to me. I have been given a copy of the code of ethics. I understand that my anonymity will be protected throughout this study and that my name will not be used in any documentation.

I give my consent for information which I give to be used to inform this research.

Name [please print]: _____

Signature:_____

Date:_____

Appendix C: Focus Group Run-through Feedback Template and Exemplars

Question	Comment	Suggested rewording
[Opening] Could you tell us what class you are currently teaching and what numbers you have in the class?		
[Introductory] How does your school situation compare to the school in the film?		
[Transition] What struck you most about the film?		
[Key]How would you describe what the children were doing in the outdoor garage?		
Question	Comment	Suggested rewording
[Key]What are your reactions to what the boys in the cardboard box were at?		
[Key]Looking back, can we remind ourselves of the teacher's actions before the garage was set up? What do you think the teacher hoped to achieve from these actions?		

[Key]Again, can we remind ourselves what the teacher was doing out in the pretend garage? What do you think the teacher hoped to achieve with the kids?		
Question	Comment	Suggested rewording
[Key]How do you think teachers in Irish schools would feel about these kinds of teaching activities?		
[Ending] What kinds of things made it possible for the teachers to work in this way?		
[Ending] Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to comment on? Anything in the film we haven't picked up on that you think is important?		

J. Fallon 9/12/2010

Focus Group Questioning Route Feedback Template

Question	Comment	Sugge
[Opening] Could you tell us what class you are currently teaching and what numbers you have in the class?		
[Introductory] How does your school situation compare to the school in the film? All respondents seemed to understand the question but then some difficulties.	class size important Multicultural class good. Number of adults TA - mother tongue - different School money. - Making trips possible	+ Visit one the similarities between that + your school
[Transition] What struck you most about the film? Easy to answer. All could respond to this question Probe/suggestion: interactions, Reality of the situation, etc	Question works.	
[Key] How would you describe what the children were doing in the outdoor garage? Maybe use a series of questions: Describe, tell me about. How would you characterize what you saw?	Problem with the wording. Respondents don't	Maybe find another word for "label".

J. Fallon 9/12/2010

Question	Comment Sample answers :	Suggested rewording
[Key]What are your reactions to what the boys in the cardboard box were at? Enjoyment suggested by one respondent.	As this about structured + Advantages / Disadvantages learning + What learning, if any ? + What value is there. + ~~How does~~ What were the boys doing? What do you think about what they're doing? ⇒ Then ask for the main question	
[Key]Looking back, can we remind ourselves of the teacher's actions before the garage was set up? What do you think the teacher hoped to achieve from these actions? Interviewer Reminds Respondents of the actions.	Feeling that respondent know the desired answer but not sure the question achieves this. Contribution to children independent learning ⇒	Why did she do the preparatory work? Answer: to get them thinking Establish prior knowledge. Identify a shared experience.
[Key]Again, can we remind ourselves what the teacher was doing out in the pretend garage? What do you think the teacher hoped to achieve with the kids?		Why was the teacher doing this ?

J. Fallon 9/12/2010

Question	Comment	Suggested rewording
[Key]How do you think teachers in Irish schools would feel about these kind of teaching activities?	Would include issues & constraints.	
[Ending] What kinds of things made it possible for the teachers to work in this way?	What role does training play in what about teacher confidence?	* If it was possible to do this?" + Question using terms like "competence + confidence"
[Ending] Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to comment on? Anything in the film we haven't picked up on that you think is important?		

Appendix D: Sample Annotated Transcript

Date

Interviewer: So as I said all I am going to ask you is what do you think. So it might be easier, maybe, if we did a little bit of a round robin, DP1 I might ask you to put you on the spot and ask you to go first. Could I just remind you as well if you think of it to say your name before you talk the first time. So DP1, what did you think?

DP1: Overall I think that role play as a method of teaching is harder than it looks because I have tried it this year after doing the *Aistear* course. It's brilliant, it's fabulous, it has loads of benefits but I have found it very hard to sustain it in the classroom. I think for me the hardest part is the observation..? because … Actually, no, the hardest thing is to be able to do role play, obviously, you have to be able to model, you have to be able to play yourself and I think as an adult, it's very difficult. It is very difficult to

Phase 2 In-vivo coding

9/7/2013 Phase 1 Pre-coding Finished 11/7/2013

Completed 24/8/2013

4/10/2013 (Blue) 2nd run

- Children that Eng is their 2nd lang
- In the Curr already
- Write or read
- In the future it will pay off
- So deprived of lang.
- Whole social scene
- Robbed children somewhat
- All the teachers understanding it too.

We have 11 subjects carrying society again?

- Curr for every other subj
- Pink thing now
- Big shift
- Practicalities
- Feel a bit guilty
- Play is so important
- It is possible
- Wracking my brain
- But what does he learn

As in difficult rather than hard work. So connect with 'teaching' through play

Harder than it looks

Talking

Beneficial

Connect to B+C, v. clearly.

~~Observation~~ Assessment

Comfortability.

skill rather than disposition.

be thinking on the spot. I think you are very good at it DP2, coming up with class. I do behaviour support here, so the most that I'd ever do play would ideas and I just don't have that skill. So for me, role play, that's kinda the be with, maybe, three kids, four at a max, and so obviously I have had a lot hardest part of it for me, and just getting in there and showing the children of practice at that so I am fairly ok playing with kids and that's not a how you can extend the play. And observation as well, like we do role play problem. But I can see where DP1 is coming from, where in a class, I can in small groups but the other children are constantly over at you. It is great imagine it could be very, very difficult and it's really overwhelming. I think if you have a few people in the classroom, that is brilliant, you can just You probably need to pace yourself if you are to do it with a class. But I dedicate your time and watch the children and, like, stay with that group. noticed about the video, I was trying to count how many kids there were, I But when you are in here on your own and you've got all your children at couldn't get a number but I'd imagine it was less than 15 if even, maybe not the other play stations it is so hard to keep the role play going. So that was much more than 10, even. So the class size is crucial. We are lucky that our my experience. But I still would be all for it, I think I just need more junior infants only have 15, so I think, for our junior infant class I think experience and practice at it.

Aistear is doable, if we were really trained up in it and you, generally that confidence to go with it and to learn from mistakes as well. One of the

Interviewer: Thanks, DP1. DP2, seeing as you got honourable mention, things with play, if you try to get it perfect straight away, if you go in with could I put you on the spot and ask you what did you think? that attitude, it's not going to happen because you will give up and as soon as you are not fully behind it, the kids will pick up on that as well and they

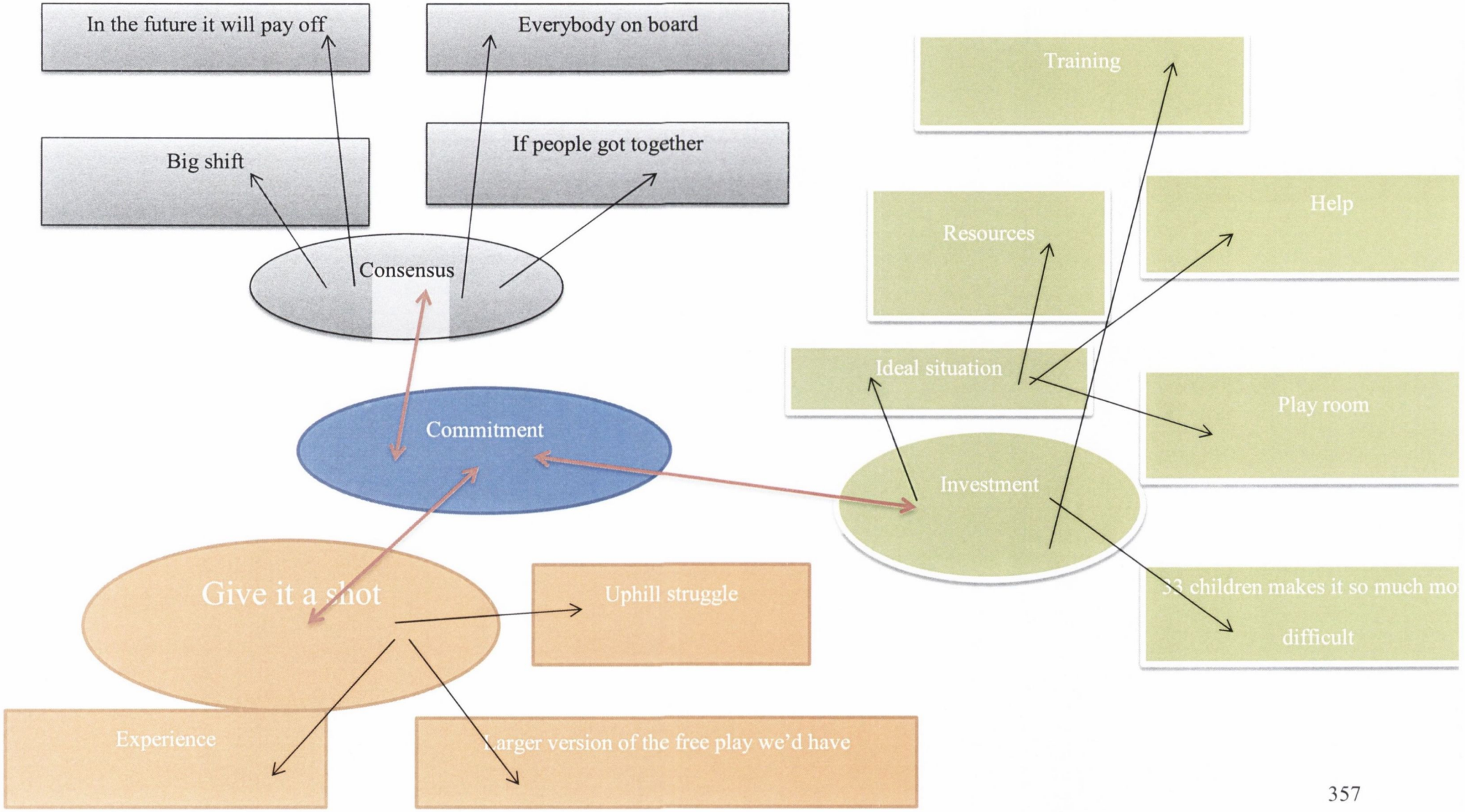
DP2: I do like *Aistear*. I do like it. The thing is I have never used it in a will just go back to doing their own thing. So we have to give ourselves the

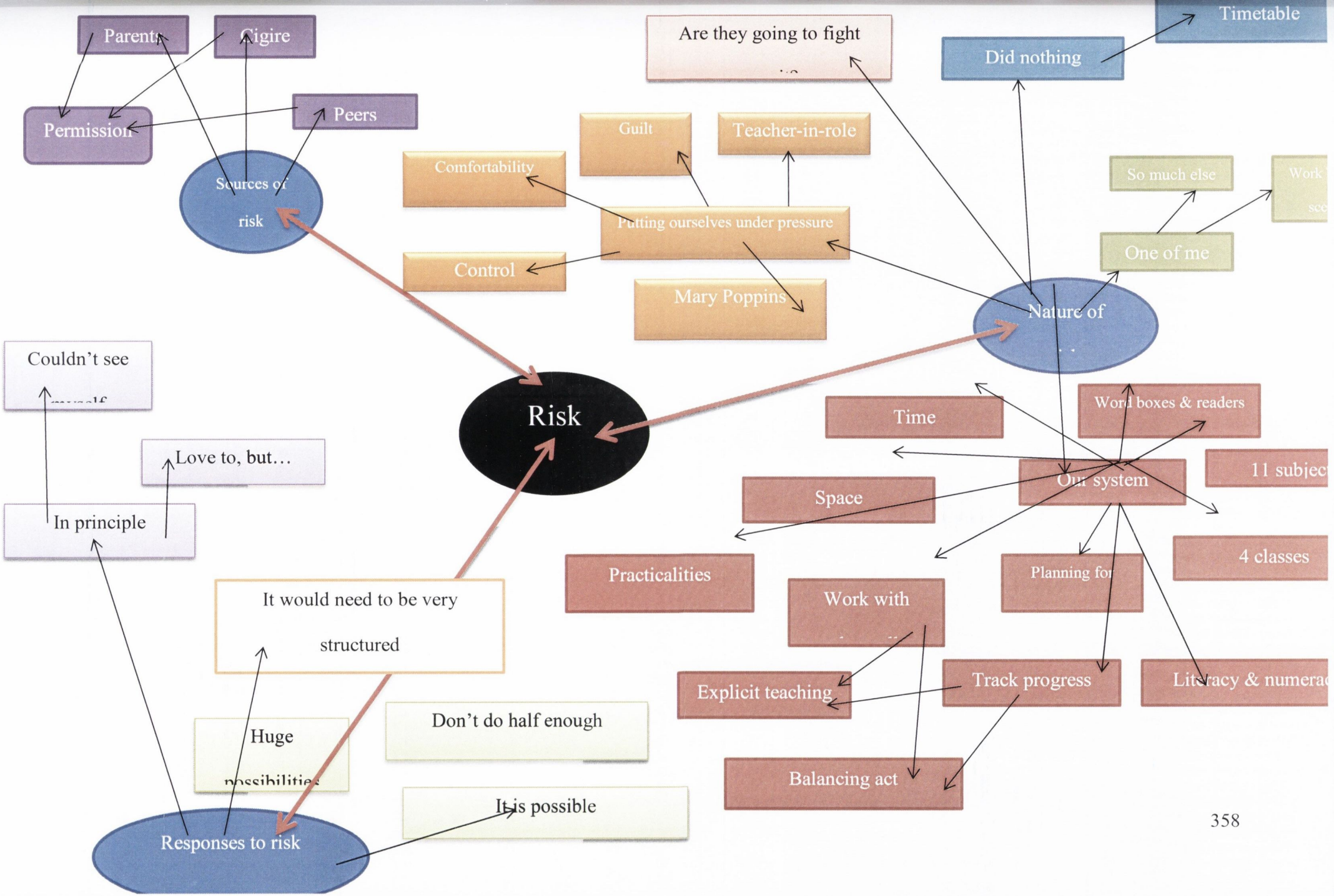
Small group v whole class.
Play is a difficult methodology.
Demanding behaviour. Numbers.
Connect with only yourself in A + B.
Convinced by it.
Training
Confidence
Time to learn

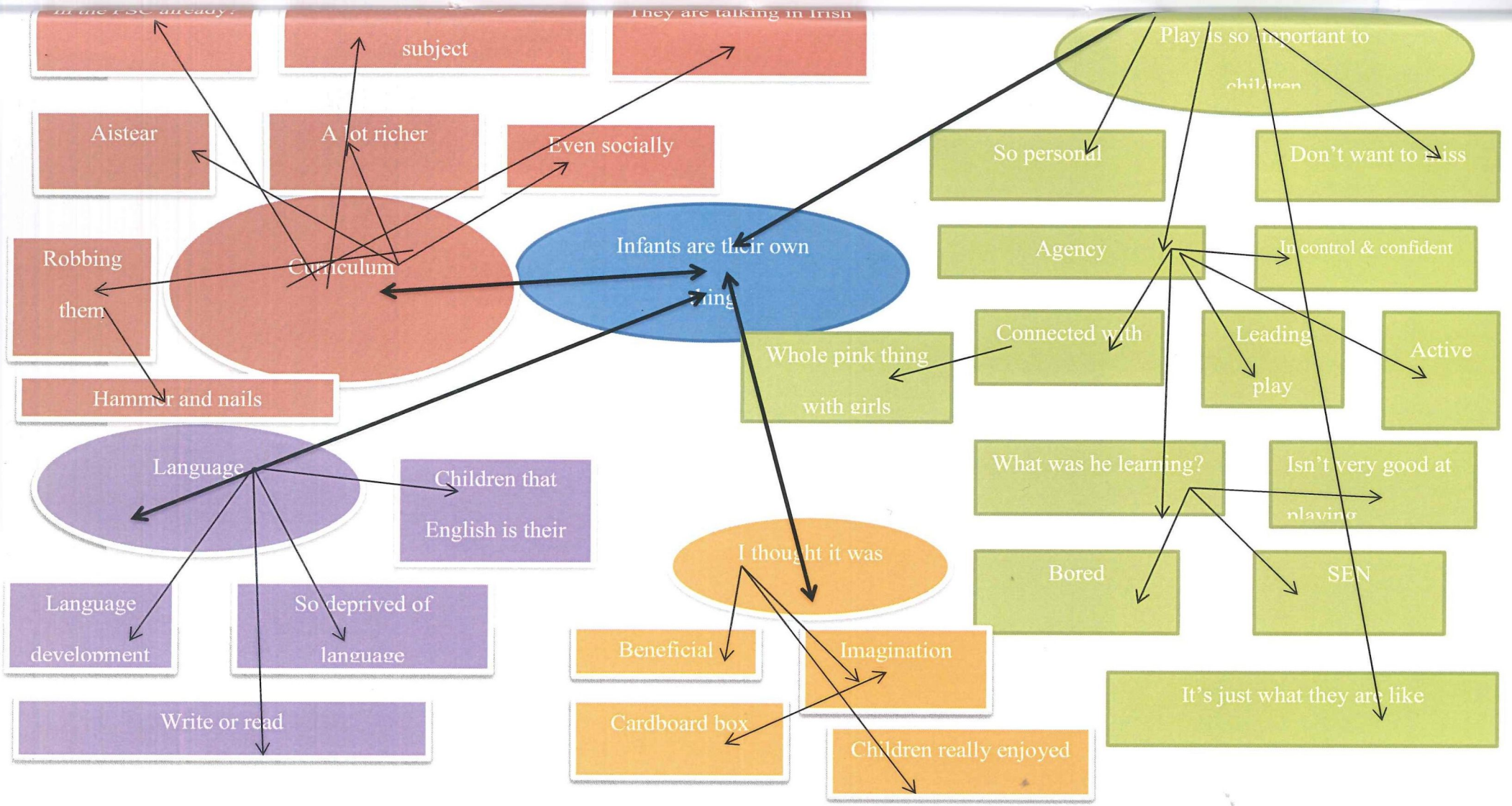
Collaborative
Teacher facilitating
Observation
Practicalities
Help
Difficult children
Practically the
Observation Assessment
Harder than it looks
Only me
Numbers
Definitely enough
of it.
Feel confident.
Confidence
Possible
Experience
Uphill struggle
Give it a shot

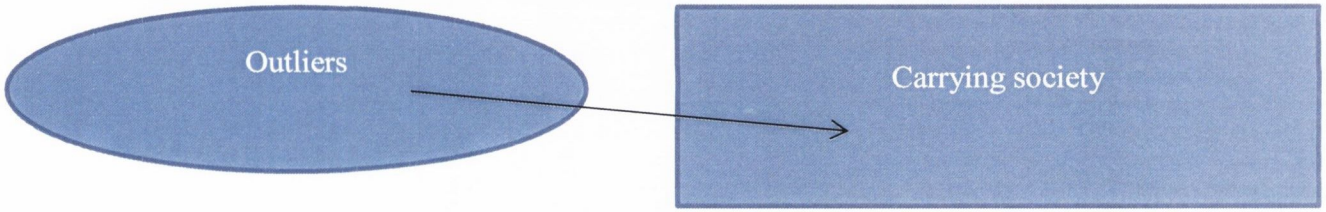
2
3

Appendix E: Initial Thematic Map


In the future it will pay off
Everybody on board
Big shift
If people got together
Consensus
Commitment
Give it a shot
Uphill struggle
Experience
Larger version of the free play we'd have
Training
Resources
Help
Ideal situation
Play room
Investment
difficult


Parents
Cigire
Permission
Peers
Sources of risk
Are they going to fight
Timetable
Did nothing
Guilt
Teacher-in-role
Comfortability
Putting ourselves under pressure
Control
Mary Poppins
So much else
Work
One of me
Nature of
Couldn't see
Risk
Time
Word boxes & readers
Love to, but…
In principle
Space
Our system
11 subjec
Practicalities
Work with
Planning for
4 classes
It would need to be very structured
Explicit teaching
Track progress
Literacy & numerac
Huge possibilities
Don't do half enough
Balancing act
It is possible
Responses to risk


subject
They are talking in Irish
Aistear
A lot richer
Even socially
Curriculum
Robbing them
Hammer and nails
Infants are their own thing
Play is so important to children
So personal
Don't want to miss
Agency
In control & confident
Connected with
Leading play
Active
Whole pink thing with girls
Language
Children that English is their
Language development
So deprived of language
Write or read
What was he learning?
Isn't very good at playing
I thought it was
Bored
SEN
Beneficial
Imagination
Cardboard box
Children really enjoyed
It's just what they are like


Outliers
Carrying society

Abstract

This thesis presents the results of a qualitative, interpretative study of teachers' beliefs about play pedagogy in infant classes in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. The introduction of *Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) has drawn renewed attention to the importance of play as a context for young children's learning. This approach has been endorsed in *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011), the national literacy and numeracy strategy. However, while there is little research on practice in infant classes, such evidence as exists indicates that formal teaching in infant classes is widespread. It is envisaged that considerable change in practice in infant classes will be required to ensure that the pedagogical approaches in infant classes become consistent with best practice as conceptualised in *Aistear.* To underpin this study, literature on teachers' beliefs and play in schools was reviewed. Data was collected through a series of 6 focus groups, in which teachers discussed their beliefs about play in infant classes. The focus group data was analysed thematically, resulting in the identification of three overarching themes. The findings suggest that teachers value children's play but consider that introducing play into the infant classroom is professionally risky. Teachers believe that commitment from all stakeholders, not just teachers, is required for successful implementation.