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Developing Children's Vocabulary and Expressive Language Skills Through Play

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# Declaration

I certify that this research, submitted for the degree of Master of Education, Maynooth University, is entirely my own work, has not been taken from the work of others and has not been submitted in any other university. The work of others, to an extent, has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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## Abstract

This thesis outlines a self-study action research project which follows my journey of developing the vocabulary and expressive language skills of my junior infants class in an urban co-educational Dublin school. I decided to devote this action research journey to the development of oral language skills through play as a result of my core teaching values and my own school experience. Having been lucky enough to experience a teacher who taught through playful methodologies, this experience is something which has followed and directed me through my initial teacher education and early career. My core teaching values are centred upon respect, trust, compassion and creativity. Thus, I wanted to engage in an action research project which was not only personal to me, but which allowed me to develop my practice and teach in a way which was representative of these values. With the introduction of the new Primary Language Curriculum in 2019, which is open to and inclusive of playful methodologies, I felt it important to highlight the multitude of benefits that result from these playful methodologies in relation to children's learning and, in particular, on their oral language skills.

I designed a playful, evidence-based and cross-curricular intervention for teaching vocabulary and expressive language skills through play in my junior infants classroom. The intervention had three key components: the integration of play into two specific curricular areas – Literacy and Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), pre-teaching vocabulary alongside the use of stories and the use of the early childhood Aistear framework. Action research was chosen as the methodology for the study as it enabled me to critically examine my own practice while also enhancing it. Throughout the action research process, I collected a large amount of both qualitative and quantitative data through the use of the following data collection instruments: a reflective journal, student-teacher conferencing, teacher observations, samples of my students' work, vocabulary checklists, an expressive language rubric, my own original data collection tool - the 'Highlights Chair' and feedback from a critical friend.

My engagement with the reflective process enabled me to generate a living theory. This living theory then allowed me to identify the ways in which I could align my practice more closely to my values. The findings that emerged from this study were centred upon:

- Collaborative learning as a way to extend vocabulary and expressive language
- The impact that enjoyment has on the development of vocabulary and expressive language skills
- The role of adults in expanding children's vocabulary and expressive language skills

Playful teaching methodologies can have a profound impact on children's learning as a whole, but particularly in relation to the development of their oral language skills. As teachers, we owe it to our students to incorporate age-appropriate and child-led teaching methodologies which demonstrate active learning and an awareness of the individual needs of our students. The findings from this research showcase the vast benefits of including playful methodologies in the primary school classroom and highlight a successful three-part intervention for the introduction of play into the classroom. This research has also resulted in a significant change in how I approach the teaching of vocabulary and the development of my students' expressive language skills and will continue to do so for years to come. Not only has it allowed me to align my practice with my core teaching values but it has also enabled me to teach in a way which is representative of my educational beliefs and positive school experience. Play comes naturally to children from a young age and I believe that it is our responsibility as teachers to promote this intrinsic concept which, when nurtured, can last a child's whole life through.

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# List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

SSAR	Self-Study Action Research
OL	Oral Language
ELS	Expressive Language Skills
EL	Expressive Language
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
PSC	Primary School Curriculum
DES	Department of Education and Skills
AR	Action Research
ELR	Expressive Language Rubric
VC	Vocabulary Checklist
SESE	Social, Environmental and Scientific Education
CARLA	Centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition
BERA	British Educational Research Association
СР	Child Participant

# **Chapter One: Introduction**

#### **1.1 Introduction to Research Study**

"Play is in no sense a simple thing. Play, in fact, is a very complex thing, as complex as the human being himself" (Scarfe, 1962: 117). Described by Vygotsky (1978, cited in White, 2012: 4) as containing "all developmental tendencies in a condensed form", play is a source of educational motivation for young children. It provides a "context for exploration and experimentation which enhances learning" (Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, Rafferty & Sheehy, 2006: 202). Curricula inclusive of play offer children a "higher quality learning experience" than that of more traditional and instruction-based curricula (Walsh et al., 2006: 219). Yet, although recognised as a "valuable pedagogical strategy", play is not without its critics (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021: 79). As Wood and Attfield (2005: vii) note, the methodology of play "remains open to debate, discussion and arguments regarding the role and value of play in learning development". Despite Gray and Ryan's (2016: 197, 201) study finding that seventyeight percent of teachers value play and believe it "lays the foundations for future learning", they note there is little evidence to suggest that play supports or is "linked to the underlying principles of the primary school curriculum" (PSC). Play sits on "the periphery of the school day", with curricular subjects being afforded "more time and teacher-attention" (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 200). In terms of the challenges of a preference for didactic teaching methods, Whitebread and Coltman (2015) document the disappearance of play from classrooms in England and its replacement with performancebased target learning activities. Grant (2013) notes that teachers in Ireland are similarly driven by meeting high-performance standards. Comparably, the teacher participants in Gray and Ryan's (2016: 201) study note they are under increasing pressure from parents, who are products of a "formal prescriptive education system", to teach young children to read and write almost immediately. Gray and Ryan's (2016: 198) study also identified a clear lack of awareness and training in relation to methodologies of play and play frameworks, with half of the interviewees claiming they had "no knowledge of Aistear". One teacher in the study even asked if the Aistear framework was "for socially disadvantaged children?" (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 198). As a result of these views and studies, connoting play in an insignificant and negative light, we find the concept of play surrounded by uncertainty and disfavour. My research is inspired by my desire to combat the scepticism surrounding methodologies of play, with a view to showcasing the vast potential of play methodologies and the significant impact that they can have on both the development of children's language and attainment of high performance standards. I hope to utilise the methodology of play to improve my teaching and extend my students' language learning.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

There are two key questions which underpin this self-study action research (SSAR) project:

- How can I improve my teaching of vocabulary and expressive language through play?"
- 2. "What play methodologies help to develop children's vocabulary and expressive language skills?"

### **1.3 Rationale**

This research aims to explore the ways in which the oral language (OL) skills of my junior infants students can be enhanced through methodologies of play. At the beginning of this research process, we were asked to reflect on our teaching and identify an area of specific interest or conflict. As I began to reflect on my teaching, I realised that it was not as child-centred as I had thought and that, instead of active learning, I was utilising a more didactic style of teaching which appeared to focus on the teacher as the holder of knowledge rather than on the children as learning partners. This presented me with quite a shock. It was so far removed from both my epistemological values, which views students and teachers as equal knowledge contributors, and my core educational values, which constitute respect, creativity, trust and compassion. Thus, I identified myself as a "living contradiction" and felt a change needed to occur (Whitehead, 2000: 93). The use of play methodologies is thought to have originated in the time of Friedrich Froebel, who described play as the highest form of child development. Play methodologies help to motivate and engage students while allowing children of differing learning styles to approach their learning from alternative perspectives (Rice, 2009). Rice (2009: 103) notes that the inclusion of playful methodologies helps to generate "excitement, enjoyment and interest as part of the learning process". Play, although it may appear to be a simple concept, is "profound to a child's development" (White, 2012: 3). It transforms learning into something which "happens naturally and joyfully, when a child laughs and wonders, explores and imagines" (White, 2012: 3). Children naturally play, it is an instinctive act. When provided with playful learning opportunities, a child's natural instinct is piqued. It was my intention, through this research study, to enable the students in my class to enhance and extend their vocabulary and expressive language skills (ELS) through

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methodologies of play. I wanted to provide my students with opportunities to build upon their natural instincts of play and curiosity and to utilise these instincts to develop their learning. Indeed, during my own school experience, my love of learning, and subsequent love of teaching, began during my engagement with playful methodologies. I experienced a teacher whom taught through play and consistently ensured that learning was enjoyable, active and engaging. This experience, alongside the admiration I had for my grandfather, a principal at the local post-primary school, inspired me to become a teacher. As I reflected on these experiences, I began to wonder how I had come to neglect my core values, which form a crucial part of my teacher identity, and I vowed to rectify this contradiction. Through my engagement with this SSAR project, I was provided with the opportunity to not only enhance my practice and extend my students' learning, but to also become a living embodiment of my core values (Whitehead, 2015).

### **1.4 Values Statement**

Action research begins with reflection in order to identify your values (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). Initially, identifying my values through reflection presented as a challenge. I found that my reflective tasks and diary entries consisted solely of surface level descriptions of my classroom and rarely moved into a deeper level of reflective practice. However, in hindsight, I now realise that this was a process of identity development (Urzúa & Vásquez, 2008, cited in Beauchamp, 2015) which was enabling me to explore not only my professional identity but also my values associated with this identity. My reflective diary became a safe space for me to articulate and express my values in relation to my practice. In a way, reflection acted as a conversation with myself which lead to a deep understanding of my own values and beliefs (Lindsey, Lindsey, Hord & Frank, 2016: 13). As a result of this, I identified respect, trust, creativity and

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compassion as the values which I claim to uphold in my practice. Once I had identified these values, I began to reflect on my daily practice to ensure that I was living in harmony with these values. As previously mentioned, it came as quite a shock to me to learn that I was, in reality, anything but representative of my core values and in fact, was presenting as a "living contradiction" (Whitehead, 2000: 93). My values of respect, trust, creativity and compassion are the result of a hugely positive experience of education throughout my childhood and an element of my practice which I hold in the highest regard. Thus, the discovery that my teaching was not in line with these values was an incredibly disappointing moment in my career but one which identified an area of research which was both personal and of great importance to me. I wanted my students to learn in a positive, child-centred and engaging environment, just as I had experienced as a child. Therefore, it became clear to me that methodologies of play and their impact on the development of my students' OL skills was the perfect topic for my research study. It was a topic which not only enabled me to carry out important research in the area of OL but one which is also in accordance with my values.

#### **1.5 Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this research was to explore the ways in which I could enhance my teaching of OL, namely vocabulary and ELS, through the use of play methodologies. I wanted to ensure that my students were actively involved in their learning in an appropriate, child-friendly and enjoyable manner. The nature of play methodologies meant that the children would be engaging with learning activities which would not only benefit their OL skills, but which would contribute towards instilling a love of learning in them also. In taking this approach, my aim was to teach in a way which was closer to my core educational values and representative of my true teacher identity, while also

enabling my students to learn in way which engaged and excited them, thus developing their curiosity for learning. "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious" (Albert Einstein, n.d.).

### **1.6 Thesis Structure**

<u>Chapter One:</u> is an introduction to the research study which includes a rationale for my research, highlights my values statement, describes the purpose of this research study and finally, outlines the structure of the thesis.

<u>Chapter Two:</u> incorporates a literature review of play and language research and provides the reader with a sense of the core elements of this study. The literature review presents numerous topics for discussion such as the origin and benefits of play, the relationship between language and play and current curriculum and legislation related to language and play.

<u>Chapter Three:</u> indicates the methodological approach chosen for this study and outlines the design of the research process. The use of a SSAR approach is explained and justified, while also discussing the data collection instruments used during this study and the ethical considerations involved in the study.

<u>Chapter Four:</u> incorporates the analysis of my findings. The findings are discussed and put into context alongside relevant literature. The findings considered are:

- Collaborative learning as a tool to extend vocabulary and ELS during play
- The impact of enjoyment of play on developing vocabulary and ELS
- The role of adults in expanding vocabulary and ELS through play

<u>Chapter Five:</u> contains a conclusion to this research study. The overall outcomes and findings of the research process are discussed and the limitations of the study considered. The re-establishment of my teacher identity and realigning of my core values are communicated. Recommendations are made for future research and practice alongside exploration of methods for the dissemination of this research. To conclude, there is a personal reflection on the research process as a whole.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the research study, highlighted the rationale and defined the values related to this study. The overall purpose of the research was then discussed and finally, the structure of the thesis outlined. The next chapter will explore key literature relating to language and play in a bid to inspire the creation of a pedagogical intervention which may address the initial research questions and result in a "claim to new knowledge" (Sullivan, Glenn, Roche & McDonagh, 2016: 68).

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In this chapter of my research project, I offer a critical review of some key literature regarding play and oral language (OL), with a specific focus on play as a teaching methodology, its link to OL development and its overall contributions towards learning. This literature outlines the importance of OL, its role as a foundation block for learning, the natural acquisition of play, guidance on efficient practices for the implementation of play and discusses the link between play and OL. The aforementioned areas prove crucial in answering the research questions posed. The review is organized thematically, in accordance with the key themes that emerged from my review of the literature and the relationships which occurred between these themes across the literature. It begins by introducing the concept of play, then considers why play is a central topic for debate and afterwards outlines the benefits of play. It is then followed by an exploration of language, with a particular focus on expressive language (EL) and vocabulary acquisition. Next, it considers the link between play and language and its subsequent benefits. After, it examines and comments on current curriculum and legislation documents surrounding play both in Ireland and abroad before finally drawing a conclusion.

#### 2.2 Play

Piaget (1962) described play as the work of childhood. Play can be understood through a range of concepts, each different and each equipped with their own characteristics. It can be seen as a medium by which children begin, and continue to, explore their environment.

Play begins in the early stages of a child's life; from making noises, to singing songs, to object play with items such as blocks, its presence in the life of children is undeniable. Play can be active or passive, dependent only upon its participators form. It is everchanging and evolving. With that being said, Eberle (2014) reminds us that this understanding of play brings us no closer to establishing a formal definition of play. In fact, quite the opposite. The more we look, the more we see how diverse play really is. However, our inability to fully define play is not for want of trying. Henricks (2006), for example, conjured up a list of play criteria in his work 'Play Reconsidered' in an attempt to devise a definition. He argues that any activity which falls short of these criteria may not be defined as play. One might question Henricks' ability to account for all types of play within these set criteria. Perceptions of play can be a matter of personal opinions or beliefs, as play is not a one size fits all concept. It can be considered in a variety of ways; as a noun, an adjective and so on. In support of his, Eberle (2014: 216) states that "knowing how you perceive a rose and how you react to a rose is not to say what a rose is". The same can be said about how we perceive play. However, Eberle (2014) then proceeds to offer his own lengthy definition of play, leaving one in a state of wonder as to why it is deemed necessary to define play. Should we not, instead, be content to live with play as one of life's phenomena? After all, "in real life, we forgive much that is mysterious or ill defined" (Eberle, 2014: 218). As Spariosu (1989, cited in Eberle, 2014: 218) described, "play is one of those elusive phenomena that can never be contained within a systematic scholarly treatise". It transcends all disciplines.

## 2.2.1 Why Play?

The idea of play as a teaching methodology can be traced back to Friedrich Frobel, a German educator who developed his philosophy of early childhood education. Known as the 'father of kindergarten', Froebel, like many scholars before him such as Rousseau and Pestalozzi, believed that the earliest years of childhood were the most important in the education of a child (Strauch-Nelson, 2012). Such was Froebel's belief in the importance of early childhood education, that he established the idea of 'kindergarten', translating to 'a garden of small children', which catered for the early education of young children. This later prompted the opening of nursery schools or 'kindergartens' worldwide.

Despite extensive historical works on play methodologies from educational philosophers, at present, educators report seeing a decrease in developmentally appropriate language learning experiences for children (Bluiett, 2009). Instead, developmentally and ageappropriate learning techniques such as play are being replaced by increasingly academic concepts of language learning. In recent years, a trend has developed which questions the role of play in the classroom and the educational benefits associated with it (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Despite an overwhelming amount of studies which outline the educational, social and personal advantages of play, alongside the creation of a variety of play-based frameworks, play as a learning methodology, continues to be questioned. Critics of play methodologies find it hard to fathom that children are capable of voluntarily participating in an enjoyable activity and learning at the same time. However, Hernik and Jaworska (2018: 508) state that "good emotions can positively influence our physical, as well as our psychological state", thus, when children are actively engaged in and enjoying learning, their ability to retain new information increases. Enjoyment of learning creates a community, evokes positive memories, and as a result, makes these memories stronger (Hernik and Jaworska, 2018: 508). However, parents continue to consider traditional didactic teaching methods as more valuable despite vast evidence regarding the benefits

of play (Stagnitti, Bailey, Stevenson, Reynolds & Kidd, 2016). Moreover, educators still find themselves struggling to fit in play during school time given the strict time allocations per subject per week of the 1999 Irish Primary School Curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 1999). Fortunately for the methodology of play, 2019 brought the introduction of the new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) which recognises playful experiences as an important part of learning, stating that language is central to how we learn and develop as a person (NCCA, 2019). The new PLC focuses on learners, thus allowing teachers to use a range of age and developmentally appropriate pedagogy including play. However, although this is a step in the right direction, practitioners continue to struggle to find time to allocate to play in the classroom and are still unsure about its benefits, in comparison to those of more didactic teaching methods. Thus, what better time to further investigate the impact of play upon children's learning? With the methodology of play beginning to receive the positive recognition it truly deserves, alongside the new PLC, what better time to add to the "pool of early childhood education research" (Rajapaksha, 2016: 16). A time in which one finds play and its impact upon children's learning a subject of significant importance.

#### 2.2.2 The Benefits of Play

"Children learn as they play. Most importantly, in play, children learn how to learn" (Donaldson, O. F. cited by Brockman, 2012: 1). The benefits of play, although unmistakeable to many early years educators, can be seen in a variety of literature and research. Play has a profound effect on the development of literacy and language with children developing their literacy skills from their knowledge and use of language. Thus, the importance of providing children with a safe and comfortable environment, in which to use and develop this language, comes to the fore. Fox (2002) notes that children learn

best in an environment which allows them to explore, discover, and play. During play, children learn how language works. It is a natural and safe environment for their engagement with language. Spodek, Saracho and Davis (1991) concur and postulate that play, like language, is a symbolic activity. It is through this symbolic learning that children "enhance their ability to function in language and literacy" (Imenda, 2012: 30). Garvey (1977) notes another benefit of play in suggesting that less verbal children may become more capable of expressing their views, experiences and even frustrations through play, given the child-friendly and comfortable environment that it provides. Experiences of play not only enable less verbal children to express their views but also provides increased opportunities for collaborative practice. Vygotsky (n.d., cited in Mooney, 2000: 83) believed that children "develop language skills and grasp new concepts as they speak and listen to each other". When engaged in play, children not only work together, but they become a support for one another, "they correct each other, they learn about ideas not yet tried" and most importantly, they develop their language skills (Mooney, 2000: 83). Gordon and Browne (2004) believe that play can also serve as an important tool for teachers through providing an insight into their students' learning, thoughts and beliefs. They argue that children deserve teachers who value their play, who are interested in their ideas and who support them in their playful pursuits. In congruence, Frost (1992, cited in Imenda, 2012) adds that regular observations of children playing holds great potential for assessment information and provides teachers with opportunities to identify children with individual needs.

The benefits of play are not limited to educational ones and in fact, being an aspect of human development, play contributes hugely to a child's socialisation and development of their overall being (Eberle, 2014). Fromberg (1990: 223) describes how play is the

"ultimate integrator of human experience". It allows children to use their prior experiences to add to and continue their learning about the world around them. Bredekamp and Copple (1997) state that play serves as a vital process for the development of children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Gordon and Browne (2004: 123) note the benefits of play on a child's physical development in that "it requires active use of the body, builds the child's fine and gross motor skills and develops a child's self-awareness".

As Tekin and Tekin (2007) state, a huge variety of researchers have reported numerous positive effects of play on early childhood development. Despite this, there are still critics of the methodology of play. Smith-Hill (n.d., cited in Seefeldt & Barbour, 1986) calls for the freeing of child's play from the restrictions of the Froebelian structured programme. Smith-Hill questions the following of Froebel's methods explicitly. It can be said that play is most definitely not a 'one size fits all' concept and that Froebel's concepts of play need to be adapted to suit one's own practice. However, one would have to entirely disagree with Smith-Hill's 'restrictive' view of the Froebelian programme, particularly given the vast amount of research in which Froebel notes the importance of giving children the freedom to explore and become active learners. Garvey (1977) continues this disagreement in stating that play allows children to use their creativity to develop and explore a world that they can master.

It is evident from the above literature that play forms a crucial part of early childhood development. Speaking of those "who view play as a trivial, simple, frivolous, unimportant, and purposeless behaviour", Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002: 33) call for an attitude shift and challenge them "to recognize play for what it is – a powerful influence on learning".

### 2.3 Language

Language is the foundation block for all literacy. Children begin to explore and understand the world around them through emergent literacy activities. From their early stages, children begin to hear and differentiate verbal sounds. As their emergent language develops, they begin to associate these combinations of sounds with different meanings and thus, their oral vocabulary begins to develop. As children progress, their understanding and awareness of language structures begin to unfold. It is through children's early encounters with language that emergent literacy becomes evident and it is crucial that we, as educators, recognise and nurture these encounters (Wood, 2020). Stagnitti et al. (2016) state that OL is the single most important skill that a child can bring to the classroom.

Adults and children use language daily, in the form of receptive and expressive language skills (ELS), which act as a method of communicating effectively with others. From their early years, children begin to develop these skills in order to understand the people and world around them. Language incorporates so much of our daily experiences and with such a vast range of concepts, it would be almost impossible to research every aspect of it. Thus, for the purpose of this research, the areas of language which I wish to focus on are the development of ELS and vocabulary acquisition.

Expressive language (EL) can be defined as a child's ability to use language to convey meaning or express themself. Children use EL each time they communicate their needs, ideas or opinions with others. There are many ways in which children use language functions to express meaning such as instrumental, personal, informative and imaginative (Hill, 2010). Children learn language in a variety of ways, with some children encountering problems in the development of their EL. Halliday (1978, cited in Thwaite, 2019) states that language is something which can be constructed through interactions. This prompted my interest in researching the ways in which I could develop my students' ELS through their interactions with the methodology of play. Interestingly, I found there to be a lack of continuum on EL and its development as part of children's general language learning. The only occasions in which EL appears to have been investigated, was in relation to a learning difficulty. This strengthens and reinforces my reasoning for the investigation of EL in the classroom, how it is developed and its relationship with play. Perhaps this research may be of use to other educators whom, like myself, found their curiosity in the area of EL curbed by the lack of continuum.

Vocabulary falls into the category of EL semantics. Vocabulary and EL are interconnected as children need vocabulary in order to express themselves to others. Nation (2001, cited in Alqahtani, 2015: 22) describes "the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language use as complementary: knowledge of vocabulary enables language use and, conversely, language use leads to an increase in vocabulary knowledge". Alqahtani (2015) adds that the acquisition of vocabulary is necessary for successful language use as, without an adequate vocabulary, learners are unable to use the structures and functions of effective communication. Interestingly, Krashen (n.d., cited by Lewis, 1993) notes that when students travel, they don't carry grammar books, they carry dictionaries. This reinforces the idea that vocabulary is pivotal in the learning of language. However, research indicates that the teaching of vocabulary can sometimes prove problematic as many teachers are unsure of the best practice by which to teach vocabulary, which results in a lack of confidence (Berne & Blachowicz, 2008). This, in

turn, prompted my research into the impact that methodologies of play can have on the acquisition of vocabulary.

### 2.3.1 Language and Play

In describing the link between language development and play in children, the NCCA (2019: 9) state that "playful experiences are an important part of language learning". They elaborate this belief by explaining that learning key vocabulary and phrases through play and songs is an effective method of developing language skills (NCCA, 2019). Language learners should then be given opportunities to use and practice their new language skills through "learner-centred play tasks" (NCCA, 2019: 38). In a study conducted by Ribot, Hoff and Burridge (2018), it was found that children who did not speak much in the formal classroom setting did during play. Ribot et al. (2018) note that children learn in a different, more creative way, through play. It would appear that their hypothesis, which was based upon the understanding that "children's own language use, not just their exposure, makes a contribution to their language development", was proven to be true (Ribot et al., 2018: 1). In congruence with this hypothesis, Swain (2005) adds that acquiring a language involves the production of speech and that the input of language alone does not result in the same language proficiencies as does the combination of input and output. In other words, didactic teaching methods alone do not produce proficient language users. In order to become proficient language users, children need to be active learners (Ribot et al., 2018).

Stagnitti et al. (2016) conducted a study which investigated the influence of play-based instruction on the development of OL skills during the first six months of formal schooling. Their research identified that "play-based instruction can be associated with

significant developments in OL skills in the first six months of school" (Stagnitti et al., 2016: 402). Thus, it can be said that there is an evident relationship between language and play and a very beneficial one at that. However, as noted by Stagnitti et al. (2016: 402), the research results "provide a positive endorsement for play-based learning in early years education", but a deep understanding of the relationship between play-based methodologies and OL skills is essential if a play-based approach is to be incorporated into classrooms. This both supported the reasoning behind my research study topic and highlighted the importance of play-based methodologies on the development of children's OL skills. Through use of the following curriculum and legislation surrounding the methodology of play, one can gain a better understanding of the relationship between language and play, the challenges facing the integration of play methodologies into mainstream classrooms and the ways in which play may be utilised, in an integrated manner, to develop language skills in the classroom context.

#### 2.4 Current Curriculum and Legislation

#### 2.4.1 Aistear (2009)

The Aistear framework launched in 2009 and was designed to "complement and extend the primary school curriculum at infant level" (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 188). Modelled on the curriculum of 'Te Whariki' in New Zealand (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021), Aistear is one of a huge variety of play-based frameworks which have been designed and introduced in the last decade. Each of these frameworks "eschew traditional didactic models of teaching and learning in favour of a play-based approach to early childhood pedagogy and practice" (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 188). Aistear, Ireland's contribution towards the formal inclusion of play-based methodologies in education, is a "holistic and practiceorientated approach" (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 190). However, at times, it can be in contention with the current PSC in Ireland which utilises a more subject-based approach and thus, can result in over-stressed educators attempting to juggle a dual-curriculum.

During Gray and Ryan's (2016) study, which investigated the experiences of early years teachers in Ireland with regards to 'Aistear vis-á-vis the PSC', they noted that practitioners are experiencing a tension between the demands of both, the traditional curriculum and the play-based framework (Brooker & Edwards, 2010, Wood, 2013). Results of research conducted on this tension internationally have shown that "teachers feel pressured by other teachers, principals and target demands to focus on more academic goals such as literacy and numeracy, thus limiting the time available for play" (Lynch, 2015, cited in Gray & Ryan, 2016: 191). As Whitebread (2020) describes, the benefits of play have been recognised around the world, however, given time constraints and an already overly-packed curriculum, the transferral of these benefits into practice can often prove difficult. The results of Gray and Ryan's (2016) study describes Irish teacher's willingness to introduce play-based methodologies into their practice and their recognition of its vast benefits while also noting their frustration with the lack of guidance for the implementation of these play methodologies. Thus, my research study sets out to explore the ways in which methodologies of play can be implemented in conjunction with the PSC, in an integrated and cross-curricular manner, for the development of OL skills.

### 2.4.2 The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011-2020)

The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011) advocates Aistear and its role in children's learning. It values Aistear's child-centredness, priority of play and concept of the child as an active learner. However, the DES (2011: 48) also recognise the previously mentioned challenges surrounding the implementation of Aistear in Irish schools and suggest a method in which to overcome these challenges, stating:

We need to revise the literacy and numeracy aspects of the Primary School Curriculum for infant classes (4- 6 year olds) to bring them into line with the approaches to teaching and learning advocated in the Aistear curriculum framework for early years education.

Alongside this, the DES (2011) address the need for lower adult-child ratios in junior and senior infants classrooms across Ireland to allow for the effective implementation of play approaches, as recommended by the Aistear framework. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011: 48) notes that Aistear emphasises an appropriate "balance between adult-led and child-led activities", recognises play as a key methodology underpinning early childhood education and advocates a number of effective play-based methodologies suitable for the classroom.

#### 2.4.3 The Primary Language Curriculum (2019)

The PLC, introduced in 2019 by the NCCA, was created as a result of significant changes in Irish society and hence, a need for revision of the 1999 PSC in relation to the English and Irish languages. The PLC acknowledges educational developments in relation to the recognition of play as a vital component of early childhood education and the introduction of frameworks which support these developments. The PLC builds upon the principles of and is wholly connected to Aistear, including new objectives that have taken direct inspiration from Aistear's aims. The PLC, in agreement with Aistear, is of the opinion that language forms a central part of how we learn and develop as a person and that the learning environment in which this language learning takes place greatly influences how children learn (NCCA, 2019).

The PLC recognises the need for specific attention to OL in the early years of primary school as "it is fundamental to the development of reading, writing and learning across the curriculum" (NCCA, 2019: 15). Like Aistear, the PLC focuses on learners, thus allowing teachers to use a range of pedagogical approaches which they deem appropriate for their students, including play methodologies. It encourages "fulfilling the functions of language through real and imaginary situations", allowing children the opportunity to experiment with and use their developing language skills (NCCA, 2019: 40).

### 2.4.4 Children's Right to Play (2010)

Children's Right to Play is an "examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide" (Lester & Russell, 2010: 1). It provides an exploration of the meanings of a child's right to play internationally. Lester and Russell (2010: 7) observe how "play can manifest itself in many ways" such as "sociodramatic play, language play, and social play". They outline a hugely valid point in their description of how adults view play, noting that, although adults have played as children, they now see play through adult eyes and as a result, try to "rationalise the irrational" – defeating the whole purpose of play (Lester & Russell, 2010: 7). Indeed an adult's view of and role in play is an aspect of play which has appeared in numerous literature. It is a concept which is much debated in both Ireland and abroad. Frost and Sunderlin (1985, cited in Weldemariam, 2014: 266) state that "adults" involvement in play may be imperative when play gets repetitive and when there is a need for encouragement and support". In contrast, Weldemariam (2014: 266) advises against unnecessary adult involvement in play, stating that it can "hamper

the creative process that takes place". However, Johnson, Christie and Wardle (2005) note the important facilitative role that adults can adopt during play activities and the positive contributions that they can make to children's language development during play methodologies. A vital element of play is that it is exempt from consequences and excessive adult instruction, "allowing freedom to explore and a suspension of the limits of the real world" (Lester & Russell, 2010: 13). After all, play is "an expression of children's subjective experience and thus defies adult representation" (Lester & Russell, 2010: 7).

### 2.5 Conclusion

In summary, the evidence derived from the above literature suggests that play methodologies are not only hugely beneficial to children's overall learning and wellbeing but that they must be seen as a crucial part of their early language development and education. Not only does play invite children in as active learners, encouraging them to take responsibility for their learning, but it also contributes significantly to their intellectual, emotional, social, personal and physical development (Gordon & Browne, 2004). However, it is clear from the literature that the methodology of play, albeit a favoured pedagogy of numerous historical philosophers and current educators, still maintains a vast amount of critics. Despite my disagreement with these critics, it can be said that in Irish and international contexts, there is a clear lack of training provided to teachers in relation to the introduction and use of play as a powerful pedagogical tool in the classroom (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Educators have cited their openness to the use of pedagogical play but found themselves unsure about how best to do so (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Thus, it is fair to say that the introduction of frameworks and curriculums which support play, such as Aistear and the PLC, have been warmly welcomed, but that in order

to fully benefit from the use of such curricula and frameworks, teachers require more guidance and support. My research study aims to not only highlight the powerful impact that play methodologies can have on children's learning, in particular their OL skills, but to also provide support and guidance for fellow educators on the process of introducing and utilising methodologies of play into the classroom context.

The above literature identifies key links regarding the important relationship between language and play. The NCCA (2019) state that playful experiences form a vital part of language learning and that children should be provided with plentiful play opportunities in which to practice, demonstrate and develop their language. In their study, Ribot et al. (2018: 4) showcase the ways in which sociodramatic play can be used to promote and develop OL skills, while also noting that children are "far less distracted when learning about or doing an activity in a playful state". Thus, from this review, it may be concluded that the relationship between language and play is mutually beneficial and that the introduction of play pedagogies into the classroom can significantly impact children's educational attainment, inclusive of OL skills (Ribot et al., 2018). This key literature will help to inform the research I am undertaking. I hope to utilise many of the findings from this literature to develop an action plan for my research, with an aim of identifying the most effective ways of using play methodologies to enhance both my teaching and my students' learning. The next chapter of this research project showcases the ways in which I intend to employ and integrate my findings from the key literature to plan for the collection of data in my classroom, with a view to extending my students' OL skills and responding to my research questions.

# **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter aims to explore and justify the chosen methodological approach used during the research process while simultaneously outlining the design of this research study. A range of data collection instruments have been chosen for this study, which can be seen in Figure 3.1 below:

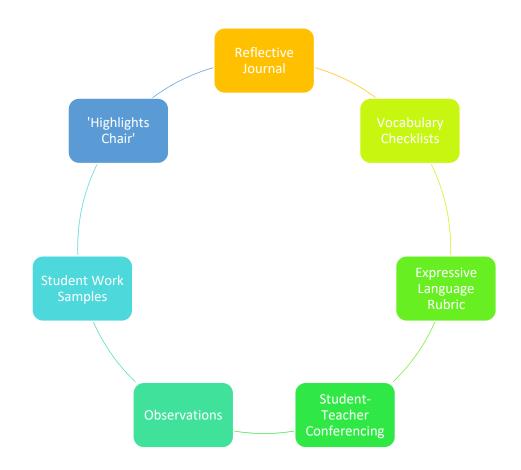


Figure 3.1: Data Collection Instruments

The above data collection instruments will be further discussed below, alongside a rationale outlining their suitability for this study. The importance of validity and the establishment of triangulation during the action research (AR) process will be illustrated. The ethical issues which arise as part of the research process will be discussed and the limitations of the research considered. The research seeks to examine how the introduction of play methodologies can enhance vocabulary and expressive language skills (ELS) in children. As this is a self-study action research (SSAR) project, I will be enabled to assess the values and commitments evident in my practice (McNiff, 2013). Undertaking this research will also provide me with an invaluable opportunity to create social hope (Rorty, 1999). McNiff (2013) explains that in creating social hope, one can then action this hope in terms of social evolution. Participating in this AR process will enable me to not only enhance my teaching but to also disseminate new knowledge to fellow educators.

#### **3.2 Research Context**

The focus of this research was to enhance my practice. To conduct this study, my junior infants class of twenty-one children were agreeable participants. The research site was a mainstream urban junior national school, which caters for students from junior infants up to second class. The study took place over a twelve-week period, beginning upon the reopening of schools in March 2021, as a result of closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and finishing in May 2021. The pedagogical interventions were planned for one hour slots, four times a week.

#### 3.3 Methodological Approach

McNiff (2013) describes a methodology as a way of generating new theory. There are numerous ways in which a methodology may be approached, dependent upon the focus of the research. Thattamparambil (2020) describes how research methodology should be chosen based on its suitability to the objective. As I began to examine each of the positivist, interpretivist and AR models, it became clear to me that the facets of AR were most suited to the aims of this research project (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006).

#### **3.4 Action Research**

As I continued to explore AR, I felt confident in its ability to meet the aims and answer the research questions of this study. McDonagh, Roche, Sullivan and Glenn (2020) describe how although the focus of an AR project is on the person doing the research, the research always entails their relationship and connection with the people around them. As a result of its collaborative research style, ontological and epistemological perspectives and practical approach, AR "has the potential to change both the practice and the practitioner irrevocably" (Sullivan et al., 2016: 25).

#### 3.4.1 What is Action Research?

AR is an "enquiry by the self into the self, with others acting as co-researchers and learning partners" (McNiff, 2013: 23). Recognition that one is always in relation to other people, while being situated in a real-life context such as the classroom, is crucial to AR (McNiff, 2013). AR is a wholly collaborative research methodology, making it a suitable model of research for educators. Carr and Kemmis (1986) tell how AR takes place in two parts: taking action (action) and doing so in an attempt to acquire new knowledge

(research). It advocates continual professional development wherein researchers challenge themselves and their context (McDonagh et al., 2020).

AR is a cyclical process which encourages dialogue with colleagues and critical friends throughout, thus demonstrating validity and credibility. Bassey (1990) outlines that this cyclical process includes reflection, analysis and change in order to advance to the next cycle. The nature of this cyclical structure means that each cycle determines the steps of the following cycle as the data from the previous cycle is used in an informative manner. The cyclical nature of the AR process can be seen in Figure 3.2 below.

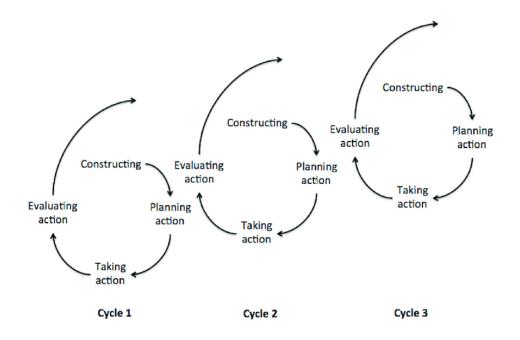


Figure 3.2: Action Research Cycles (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010: 10)

Although this cyclical process has proven effective in carrying out AR, it is not without its obstacles. McNiff and Whitehead (2010) admit that AR is not always straight forward and may even be described as 'messy'. Cook (2009: 277) describes this 'messy area' as "the interface between the known and the nearly known". However, Mellor (2001) suggests that these 'messy' experiences can, in fact, prove useful in strengthening and extending a teacher's research.

#### **3.4.2** The Importance of Critical Reflection in Action Research

McDonagh et al. (2020) discuss how critical reflection, albeit a crucial component of SSAR, can be a process which proves challenging for the researcher and may require Dewey's (1933, cited in McDonagh et al., 2020: 12) virtues of "open-mindedness, wholeheartedness and intellectual responsibility". In order to extend critical reflection beyond the superficial level and to enable researchers to make more accurate decisions in relation to their practice, McDonagh et al. (2020) suggest the use of critical reflection frameworks such as Brookfield's (2017) four lenses or Moon's (2004) reflection model. Indeed, Brookfield (2017) describes critical reflection as a fundamental element of AR in that it provides a guide by which teachers can ensure they are acting in a morally and ethically correct manner. In congruence, Sullivan et al. (2016) consider reflection as an essential part of work as an educator, stating that it is through reflection that we are enabled to identify if our values are evident in our practice.

The aims of this research project include the evaluation of one's practice and the evidence of values present in this practice, with a view to identifying ways in which one might live closer to these values. However, one may find that tensions arise between values and actual practice, thus creating what Whitehead (2000: 93) describes as a "living contradiction". It is through critical reflection that researchers may gain the skills necessary to identify contradictions in their practice, prompting them to take action as a result. With an awareness of the importance of critical reflection in AR, I decided to adopt Gibbs (1988) model of reflection for this study. This can be seen in Figure 3.3 below. Gibbs (1988) model of reflection enabled me to reflect on and evaluate my practice while also deepening my understanding which, in turn, informed my future practice.



Figure 3.3: Gibb's Model of the Reflective Cycle (1988)

#### 3.4.3 Self-Study Action Research

SSAR is research done by you, looking at you, the practitioner (McNiff, 2013). McNiff (2013: 23) describes it as a "form of on-the-job research, undertaken by people in any context". The aim of SSAR is to allow the practitioner to identify a challenging area of their practice, or one of great interest to them, and to investigate methods by which the practitioner may improve this practice as a result (Feldman, Paugh & Mills, 2004). The purpose of this research project was to enhance my professional practice by living more in harmony with my core values and so, it became clear that SSAR was the most appropriate model of research for this project. It allowed me to evaluate my own teaching while collaborating with my colleagues and students to identify the best practice going forward.

# 3.5 The Role of Values in Action Research (Epistemological and Ontological Stance)

McDonagh et al. (2020: 12) describe epistemology as how one views "knowledge, knowledge acquisition and knowledge generation". In order to determine our epistemological stance, McNiff (2013: 27) invites us to ask ourselves "What do I know and how do I come to know it?" Prompted by McNiff's (2013) questions, I explored my epistemological stance. As a result, I identified that my view of knowledge is as a living process. I believe that knowledge is not a concrete idea; it is constantly evolving. I also believe that we are all capable of constructing knowledge as co-educators. This is linked to my professional values of respect and creativity. I respect my students as co-researchers and encourage them to call upon their creativity and critical thinking to generate new knowledge. Participating in this SSAR has allowed me to develop my own

understanding of knowledge and so, enabled me to generate my own 'living theory' (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006).

McDonagh et al. (2020: 12) state that "your ontological standpoint informs how you view the nature of being – your understanding of how you are in relation to others". McNiff (2013: 27), with a view to identifying one's ontological stance, poses this question: "Who do I think I am?" In contemplating this question, I realised that my ontological stance was based on values of trust and compassion. McNiff (2013) discusses the value of trust in terms of self-study research wherein she discusses the need to trust the opinions of one's critical friend or research participants. I believe my values lie in harmony with my ontological stance through my realisation of the importance of the student and teacher relationship. When carrying out this SSAR, I was aware that a relationship based on trust and compassion, with both my students and colleagues, was paramount.

#### 3.6 Methodological Choice

In deciding which research methodology would be the most appropriate for this project, I began to research both qualitative and quantitative paradigms. It soon became evident that there were very mixed opinions of the aforementioned paradigms. In fact, it appeared as though what Gage (1989: 4) describes as "paradigm wars" was, most definitely, at play. Johnson and Onweugbuzie (2004: 14) tell how "for more than a century, the advocates of quantitative and qualitative research paradigms have engaged in ardent dispute".

Mason (1996) described qualitative research as an umbrella term for research strategies which aim to investigate how human beings understand and experience the world. In congruence, qualitative research methods, according to McDonagh et al. (2020: 104),

include unquantifiable information that is "observable or innate". On the other hand, McNiff and Whitehead (2005) describe quantitative research as research in which knowledge can be precisely measured through the generation of numerical data. Similarly, McDonagh et al. (2020) outline that in quantitative research, knowledge is viewed as a measurable object.

In the end, a mixed methods approach was deemed the most appropriate for this research. A mixed methods approach can consolidate qualitative and quantitative data for the production of more inclusive forms of data (Newby, 2010). The inclusion of two or more data collection methods in a research study can be defined as 'triangulation', which aids reliability (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) identify methodological pluralism as one of the most beneficial features of mixed-method research. My hope was that, in adopting a mixed methods research approach, qualitative research would allow for the exploratory nature of this research study and consideration for instances in which the children's OL skills could not be measured quantifiably (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). I, too, hoped that the inclusion of quantitative research, such as rubrics and checklists, would enable me to analyse the numerical information from said approaches which would then determine their efficacy at enhancing OL skills. My aim was to provide an insight into the "full picture" of this research through use of a mixed methods approach (Sullivan et al., 2016: 79).

#### **3.7 Research Model and Framework**

With an awareness of growing curricular demands, as a result of nationwide school closures, I decided to adopt an integrated, cross-curricular and playful intervention for the purpose of this research study. The intervention consists of three research cycles. The

expressive language rubric (ELR) and three vocabulary checklists (VCs) were utilised before and after both the intervention and each cycle of research, in order to ascertain pre and post-intervention/cycle data.

#### **3.8 Pedagogical Interventions**

The pedagogical intervention for this research project took place over three research cycles and focused on three specific elements. Firstly, I integrated playful learning activities into two curriculum areas, Literacy and Social, Personal and Health Education (SESE), to teach the children about the features of spring. The aim was to enhance the children's OL skills in an integrated and playful setting. I then decided to pre-teach the children content-specific vocabulary, which was related to our next topic of spring minibeasts and amphibians. I used a variety of books and vocabulary games to help achieve this. Finally, I adopted a thematic approach to developing my students' OL skills through play. For this approach, the early years framework Aistear was utilised. The theme for Aistear was 'Summer on the Farm'. During this, the children were presented with the opportunity to extend their OL skills in four different stations. The stations used in this thematic approach were socio-dramatic play, construction, small world and arts and crafts. The children engaged with a different station each day which was determined by a play rota.

#### 3.9 Data Collection

The data collection instruments adopted for this study, as seen in Figure 3.1 above, enabled me to gather a wide variety of qualitative and quantitative data. I was aware that a 'one size fits all' approach would not be sufficient for classroom based research and so,

utilised a combination of approaches which allowed children of all learning styles to have their say. Below, I will provide a brief summary of each data collection instrument.

#### **3.9.1 Observations**

"To collect observational data is to generate first-hand reports: to see, hear, feel and 'be there' personally" (Wästerfors, 2018: 314). Thus, I felt that observations would prove a successful method of collecting 'live' data for this research study. Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy (2004: 94) state that "simply noticing events can provide insight into situations". With a view to this, I decided that the use of unstructured observations were the most appropriate to my study. During unstructured observations, the researcher observes the natural actions of the participants and decides on information which may be significant for the research study there and then (Cohen et al., 2018).

#### **3.9.2 Reflective Journal**

Sullivan et al. (2016) describe reflection as a crucial part of AR. Research journals encourage researchers to be reflective on an ongoing basis. In doing so, this allows them to become a part of the research and not merely an observer (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Given that this research project involves SSAR, my hope was that in keeping a reflective research journal, I may be enabled to learn about my own practice and investigate whether or not it is aligned with my core values. Gibbs (1988) model, seen in Figure 3.3 above, was my chosen model of reflection for the duration of the intervention. I also considered discussions with my critical friend and research participants which provided a number of different viewpoints to my reflections during the research.

#### 3.9.3 Student Work Samples

Helm, Beneke and Steinheimer (1997: 201) justify that "what the child is beginning to do, or what the child is trying to integrate are often the most helpful pieces of information". Taking inspiration from this, I decided to incorporate the children's work, completed as part of the intervention, into my collection of data. This work was used as a stimulus for discussion during student-teacher conferences. Negi (2015) explains how drawing can prove a hugely effective communication tool for children with limited language skills. Thus, I felt that discussing the children's work during conferences, retaining them as sources of data and even simply reflecting upon the children's work myself would prove an insightful data collection method and one which every child could participate in, despite varying levels of ability.

#### **3.9.4 Expressive Language Rubric**

In educational terms, a rubric outlines a variety of categories such as criteria for assessment, interpretation of learning and standards of learning (Brown, 2012). Rubrics can include performance dimensions in both writing and speaking. In this research study, I found the inclusion of an ELR to be particularly useful for assessing the children's current expressive language skills (ELS) both before and after the pedagogical interventions. According to the Centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition [CARLA] (2013), "rubrics help us to set anchor points along a quality continuum, therefore, instructors can set appropriate expectations for learners" (cited in Ayhan & Türkyılmaz, 2015: 7). A copy of the ELR can be found in the Appendices (Appendix E).

#### 3.9.5 Vocabulary Checklists

Pine, Lieven and Rowland (1996: 574) describe how "the invention of VCs has represented a huge step forward" in the assessment of literacy. VCs have provided researchers with an assessment tool which enables them to "locate the children in their own, often relatively small, samples with respect to the rest of the population" (Pine et al., 1996: 574). It has also enabled researchers to accumulate data on children's early lexical development with ease (Pine et al., 1996). In this research project, the VCs serve as an informative and simple tool for collecting quantitative data. As a result, this quantitative data then allows for assessment of the success of the intervention at enhancing the children's vocabulary. A copy of the VCs can be found in the Appendices (Appendix F).

#### 3.9.6 Conferencing

Spencer (2015) discusses the numerous benefits of short student-teacher conferences. He adds that conferencing can be "a chance to guide students in self-reflection, help provide needed advice, or provide a chance to review mastery of standards" (Spencer, 2015: 1). Irish classrooms have large numbers of students, making it difficult to achieve one-on-one feedback, on a regular basis, with each child. However, establishing time for a short conference with one student each day can not only hugely benefit the student-teacher relationship but, also makes students feel that their voice is being heard. I felt that student-teacher conferences would allow for each of my students to voice their opinions and have quality one-to-one time with the teacher while also providing a collaborative method of qualitative data collection.

#### 3.9.7 'Highlights Chair'

For the purpose of data collection, I established my own, original instrument – the 'Highlights Chair'. After completing activities involved in the interventions, I would ask the children if anyone would like to share their opinions on the 'Highlights Chair'. When sitting on the highlights chair, each child was prompted, by open-ended questions from the teacher, to share with the class their 'highlight' or favourite part of today's activity. This data collection tool allowed me to discreetly assess the children's ELS by means of the ELR, which focused on areas of their expressive language such as organisation of ideas, content and non-verbal communication gestures.

#### 3.9.8 Surveys

This research project was carried out at a time of huge uncertainty due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, I decided to include the possibility of parental surveys on my letter of information seeking consent. These surveys could provide valuable data during 'remote learning' in the event of continued national school closures. Fortunately, schools reopened in early March 2021 allowing for the plentiful collection of data in the classroom environment and so, the use of parental surveys was not necessary.

#### 3.10 Validity and Reliability in Action Research

Baumfield, Hall and Wal (2013) describe how validity and reliability are closely linked aspects of AR. Heikkinen, Huttunen and Syrjälä (2007) add that in the history of AR, validity and reliability can be seen as essential tools for assessing the quality of research. Bryman (2003: 30) describes how "validity is concerned with the integrity of the conclusions". In other words, do the findings relate to the process of the research itself. Researchers can increase the levels of validity through inclusion of feedback methodologies during data collection. Baumfield et al., (2013: 24) describe reliability as "the extent to which the study can be repeated and the same results achieved". Mertler (2019) explains that in order to warrant validity and reliability in AR, one must generate an expert panel for feedback. Thus, in order to ensure validity and reliability in this research project, I enlisted the help of my critical friend and research participants to provide feedback. By enlisting this help, my aim was to acquire alternative observations and interpretations of the research and its accompanying results. The inclusion of a range of data collection instruments and a variety of feedback methods ensured triangulation in this research. Providing "corroborative evidence through triangulation from various sources" strengthens the rigour and validity of one's findings (McDonagh et al., 2020: 6).

#### 3.11 Ethical Issues

The British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018: 5) acknowledge that "educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for: the person, knowledge, democratic values and academic freedom". Thus, in line with the ethical guidelines of the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in Maynooth University, an application for ethical approval to carry out this research project was submitted to, and later approved by, the ethics committee. Ethical approval was then granted by the school's Board of Management. However, despite having received ethical approval from relative committees and boards, my students and colleagues were at the fulcrum of this research and so, there were several other ethical issues to first consider before beginning my research. These will now be discussed below.

#### 3.11.1 Consent/Assent

Mitscherlich and Mielke (1949) introduced the idea of participant consent in research studies during the Second World War. This led to an increased awareness of appropriate ethical procedures in research and resulted in the establishment of research ethics committees in institutions worldwide. Howe and Moses (1999) describe consent as a crucial element of conducting research. In order to acquire the participants written consent for this research, consent forms, alongside a letter outlining the details of this study, were distributed to the parents of my students and my critical friend. The student participants were provided with age-appropriate information regarding this study, including "appropriate use of language, clear layout and larger than usual font", and subsequent assent forms (Burton, Brundrett & Jones, 2011: 57). Having gained consent and assent from my research participants, I then ensured that participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without reason.

#### 3.11.2 Data storage

Hesse, Glenna, Hinrichs, Chiles and Sachs (2019: 561) describe that "although new data gathering and storage technologies enable innovative approaches to qualitative research, they also create unique challenges for the responsible use of that data". Hence, in line with Maynooth's Ethics Policy, both physical and digital data collected will be securely stored for a minimum of ten years from the date of publication of this research project. Physical data collected from the research process will be stored in a locked cabinet in my classroom, of which I have sole access to, and digital data collected will be stored in a password-protected folder on my laptop. The completed thesis will be made available for any participant who may request it.

#### **3.11.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity**

All data collected during the research process will be confidential, anonymised and in line with the Maynooth University Ethics Policy. The names of research participants will not be labelled on any data or used throughout this research project. Pseudonyms will be used to protect participant anonymity. A list of child participant (CP) pseudonyms can be found in the Appendices (Appendix G). Comstock (2013: 146) notes that "responsibility for the data does not end with collection; our duties extend to our public representation of what we have found". In recognition of this, it is important to note that this research project may be published on Maynooth University's online library archive or shared with fellow members of the education profession. In this case, confidentiality and the anonymity of participants will be maintained to the highest degree.

#### 3.11.4 Power Relationship

As the teacher and researcher, I was cognizant of the differential power relations that can occur between children and their teacher and also the acquiescence that can occur as a result of this. To combat this, I used age-appropriate and simplified language when explaining the research project to my students. I also ensured that my students were aware that the core aim of this research project was to investigate ways in which I could improve my practice, that it was not focused on them but that they were the facilitators. Lastly, I explained the changeability of power relations (Foucault, 2003) to my students by repeatedly informing them of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without consequence.

#### 3.12 Data Analysis

The analysis of data involves "organising what has been seen, heard and read so that sense can be made of what is learned" (Watt, 2007: 95). Cohen et al. (2018) discuss the importance of choosing a method of data analysis which is suitable to the data collected. A thematic approach was adopted to analyse the qualitative data collected during this study. In accordance with Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step data analysis procedure, the qualitative data was perused and subsequently broken down into 'codes'. These codes were then condensed further into several 'themes' through establishing repeated patterns in the data. Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step procedure was chosen as it is an unconstrained method of data analysis and is suitable for small scale research. Exploratory data analysis was used to analyse quantitative data collected from the VCs and ELR. This method of data analysis involves the use of visual methods (Cohen et al., 2018). The use of these visual methods incorporates the representation of findings through bar charts and graphs. Both, the thematic and exploratory approach to the analysis of data will be further explored in Chapter Four.

#### 3.13 Limitations

When undertaking this research study, I found myself often restricted by time. Carrying out the research while ensuring appropriate time allocation for other curricular subjects was challenging. Alongside this, although the small scale of this study did not in any way impact its effectiveness, it did make it difficult to ensure maximum reliability; should the study be carried out on a larger scale, it is difficult to guarantee the same findings/results. However, every effort was made to maintain high standards of validity and reliability throughout this research project by means of triangulation of data.

#### 3.14 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined SSAR and the key characteristics of this type of research. The possible methodological approaches have also been considered while outlining which approach was eventually deemed the most appropriate for the aims of this research study. There has also been an explanation of chosen data collection methods alongside a description of the validity and reliability of this research project. The data analysis procedure has been provided along with discussion around the ethical issues and limitations which arose as a result of this research. The next chapter will present my analysis of the data collected during this research project and depict my findings.

### **Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion of Data**

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter wishes to present, critique and systematically analyse the data collected throughout three cycles of AR. The chapter is structured in a way which enables analysis and reflection on the data collected throughout the process. This analysis and reflection illustrates the learning experiences which occurred, highlights the realigning of my core values and guides towards building a conclusion of the overall research journey. The fundamental concept underpinning the data analysis was the extent to which the introduction of play methodologies affected the practitioner's ability to develop children's vocabulary and expressive language skills (ELS). Three themes, which emerged as a result of examining data collected, are analysed in this chapter. These themes are related to the initial research questions - "How can I improve my teaching of vocabulary and expressive language through play?" and "What play methodologies help to develop children's vocabulary and expressive language?"

#### 4.2 Structure of Cycles

Upon the return to school in March, after the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic and having taught through online mediums for the months of January and February, teachers were instructed to prioritise areas of the curriculum, primarily Literacy, Maths and Gaeilge. This prompted reassessment and adaption of the intervention in accordance with new government guidelines. An integrated approach towards this research study was adopted, thereby incorporating research methods into everyday curriculum areas. As this research study was essentially focusing on the development of children's OL, I decided to utilise appropriate components of the junior infants curriculum which would allow for the incorporation of vocabulary and EL development. This included areas such as Literacy, use of the Aistear Framework, stories and SESE. Although now different than originally intended, this approach to the research study was deemed to be practicable despite growing pressure to cover curriculum content. Sullivan et al. (2016: 133) note the importance of remembering that "an action research process does not follow a linear trajectory" but that there are many twists and turns during which a researcher must embrace the messiness of the process. The research intervention now held a dual purpose; teaching important curricular material, alongside the facilitation of research concerning vocabulary acquisition and the development of ELS.

#### 4.3 Messiness of the Research Process

Sullivan et al. (2016: 63) speak of the "fog", or what Schön (1983: 42) described as the "swampy lowlands", that can emerge as a result of the "messiness" of AR and indeed, there were moments in which this fog appeared throughout my research. The messiness that often accompanies AR can be the result of attempting to juggle the processes of research itself such as: reflection, critical thinking and reading, alongside one's everyday work (Sullivan et al., 2016). However, as posed by Cook (2009), this messiness can help us to move towards new constructions of knowledge and revisit our ways of thinking. As suggested by Sullivan et al. (2016), it was most helpful, during the descending of the aforementioned fog, to revisit my core values and envisage the ways in which I may live alongside them. Working through the messiness of this research process has proved invaluable in helping me to reaffirm my educational values and allow for the realignment of my practice to these values.

#### 4.4 Methods for the Analysis of Data

The data collection methods incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative data was collected in respect of Brookfield's (2017) lenses which incorporate my perspective, my student's viewpoints, my colleagues' interpretations and a theoretical stance. Inclusion of this range of perspectives will result in triangulation of the data, therefore rendering it more credible and reliable. Thematic analysis proved to be the most suitable qualitative data analysis technique due to its variability and flexibility. Braun and Clarke (2014: 1) document thematic analysis as a "method well-suited to the varying needs and requirements of a wide variety of research projects". In order to ensure efficient thematic analysis of the data collected, the following six-step system, adapted from Braun and Clark (2013), was utilised. This can be seen in Figure 4.1 below:

1.Familiarisation with Data	2. Generation of Initial Codes	3. Emerging Themes and Sub- Themes
4. Review of Main Themes	5. Defining Themes	6. Production of Findings

Figure 4.1: Analysis of Data Steps

Thematic analysis involves colour-coding and determining repeated patterns, words or phrases in order to identify initial codes. In this research study, the data was first collated and then thoroughly analysed. A colour-coding system was devised to detect repeated patterns in the data and generate initial codes. The generation of these initial codes lead to the emergence of themes and sub-themes; some of which were irrelevant to my research questions but were crucial for the overall continuity and validation of the study (Braun & Clark, 2006). These themes and sub-themes were then categorised by similarities and as a result, the main themes were derived. Figure 4.2 below outlines the three main themes which emerged as a result of repeated thematic analysis.

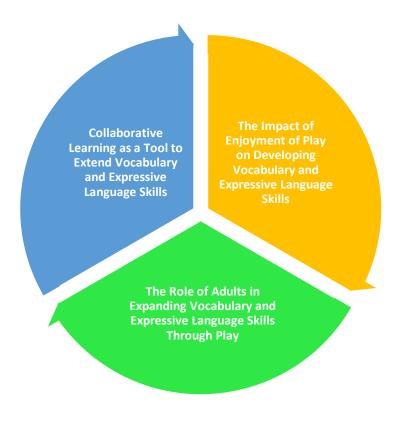


Figure 4.2. Main Themes Resulting from Thematic Analysis

An example of the thematic analysis process, which utilises a colour-coding system, can be found in the Appendices (Appendix H).

Although this research study primarily consists of qualitative data, quantitative data was also collected. As previously mentioned, the inclusion of a mixed-methods approach to the collection of data not only allowed for the collection of a wide range of data but also ensured triangulation. The quantitative data collected was analysed numerically and represented visually through the use of graphs (Cohen et al., 2018). This consisted of numerical scores being assigned to the CPs alongside their engagement with the VCs and ELR, followed by later comparison of these scores. Below, I will now explore the three main themes and their associated findings, which arose from my analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data collected. Examining the findings from both qualitative and quantitative sources of data will not only ensure rigour and validity in my research but will also strengthen my ability to determine the efficacy of the intervention.

#### 4.5 Main Themes and Associated Findings

Before both the intervention itself and each cycle of the intervention, baseline data was collected through use of an expressive language rubric (ELR) and vocabulary checklists (VC). In order to establish the children's pre-intervention EL abilities, student-teacher conferencing and whole class discussion was utilised, with the children's abilities then scored on the ELR. Examples of the pictures used to initiate and prompt discussion can be found in the Appendices (Appendix I). The attainment of pre-cycle data, in relation to the children's vocabulary, was collected through creation of a list of content specific vocabulary for each cycle of the intervention. The children's knowledge of each set of vocabulary was assessed and scored before the corresponding research cycle.

Collecting a wide range of baseline data allowed for assessment of the children's development in relation to their vocabulary and ELS, through comparison of their pre and post-intervention/cycle results. Although this research study primarily collected qualitative data, as previously mentioned, I felt it important to also include quantitative data collected from the ELR and VCs. This provided the opportunity to present the children's developments, resulting from the intervention, by means of quantitative, or numerical, data while also providing examples of qualitative evidence of their learning. This, in turn, enabled presentation of the whole picture. The three themes, as seen in Figure 4.2 above, which derived from a mixed methods data collection process, will be the focus of subsequent discussion below.

### 4.5.1 Collaborative Learning as a Tool to Extend Vocabulary and Expressive Language Skills During Play

Collaborative learning is a learning methodology whereby learners work together to complete tasks, engage in problem-solving or simply to increase their engagement. Collaborative learning is a powerful tool which has the ability to extend children's learning. Vygotsky (n.d., cited in Mooney, 2000, p.83) explains how children learn best when they play with other children, he believed that children "develop language skills and grasp new concepts as they speak and listen to each other". When examining the data, it became clear that there were numerous instances which support Vygotsky's claim throughout my research. The excerpt from my reflective journal below notes the positive impact that Cora's peer, Michael, was having on her ELS:

I was amazed today when Cora, accompanied by Michael, opted to come up to the highlights chair to share her highlight of today's activity. I feel sure that, for Cora, being accompanied by Michael and observing him speaking first, gave her the confidence and belief in her own abilities that she needed to share her opinions. Not only did she opt to share her thoughts with the class but her eyecontact and structure of ideas was fantastic. Previously, Cora would never have opted to share with the class and when speaking to myself or her peers, her eyes would face the ground. It was incredible to see this change as a result of peer support (O'Donnell, Reflective Journal: 15/03/21).

This excerpt highlights my perception of an incredible development in Cora's expressive language skills (ELS). Not only had Cora's self-confidence been boosted by support from Michael, but she had also evidently grasped Michael's use of appropriate eye contact and his structure of ideas. Mooney (2000: 83) notes that when children play, they constantly use language, "they correct each other" and "learn about situations and ideas not yet tried". In congruence, Mielonen and Paterson (2009: 33) add that "setting up opportunities for children to work collaboratively in partnerships where both participants feel comfortable and safe with each other appears to support the development of language". In the instance above, Cora was mentored and supported by her peer, which provided her with an opportunity to increase her social interaction and develop her ELS as a result. The impact of this peer support on the development of Cora's ELS can too be seen in the comparison of Cora's pre and post-intervention expressive language rubric (ELR) scores below (Figure 4.3). Cora experienced an increase of 32% from her pre-intervention ELR score as a result of her engagement in collaborative learning throughout the classroom intervention.

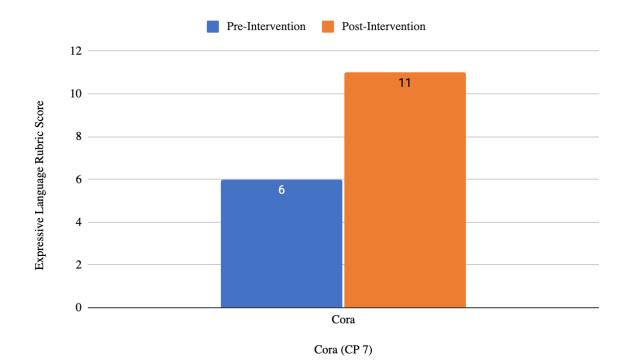


Figure 4.3: Cora's Pre and Post-Intervention ELR Scores

Cora herself, also noted a development in her confidence and ability to convey her opinions, as a result of support from her classmate. This can be seen in the excerpt below.

Cora - Conference	"I didn't do that before but Michael does
15/03/21	it and he came with me so I wasn't scared
	he's good at talking so I can be too."

This is a wonderful example of the impact that collaborative learning and the use of classmates as supportive scaffolds can have on children's confidence and belief in their own abilities. In the above example, not only did Cora lean on Michael as a supportive

scaffold but she was also aware of his language skills and applied these same skills when presenting her own ideas.

Below, another excerpt from my reflective journal outlines the impact of collaborative learning on several of the children's ability to structure their content for discussion effectively.

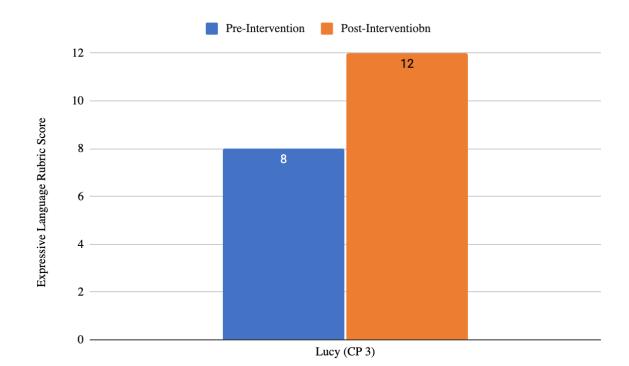
I couldn't but notice the change in so many of the children's sentence structure and organisation of ideas today. Children that previously struggled to organise their ideas for discussion now showcased a new-found ability to correctly organise and discuss their content. I feel sure that this is a result of peer modelling and support. Having placed some children who were finding this element of their language tricky with children very competent in this area, the benefits were hugely evident! This is definitely something which I will continue throughout my research (O'Donnell, Reflective Journal: 22/03/21).

In the above excerpt, I noticed how, as a result of collaborative practice and a comfortable play environment, the children were improving and developing aspects of their ELS, such as sentence structure and organisation of ideas, without even realising.

During a student-teacher conference, a usually shy and reserved child, Lucy, noted a change in her own confidence levels alongside mention of her peer:

Lucy - Conference	"Sometimes I get scared to say things but
10/05/21	Lisa does it and we have fun together so
	it's okay. She says I have good ideas.
	Everyone likes my ideas."

This is a powerful excerpt; not only has Lucy gained confidence in her own speaking abilities as a result of support and modelling from her peer, Lisa, but she has also noted that the other children love to hear her speaking and sharing her ideas. Browne and Lara (2011), discussing Johnson and Johnson's (2009) survey of education research, suggest that cooperation results in deeper and more committed relationships and the development of self-esteem. In this case, the children were aware that Lucy was usually quiet and often withdrawn from conversations and so, having noticed her engaging more in conversations during play, decided to give their approval. Without even realising, Lucy's peers had acted as a supportive scaffold for Lucy by boosting her confidence and encouraging her to continue participating in play discussions. The importance of the role of children in acting as supportive scaffolds for their peers is evident in the development of Lucy's ELS throughout the classroom intervention. This can be seen in the comparison of Lucy's pre and post-intervention ELR score below (Figure 4.4), which showcases an increase in score of 25% as a result of peer scaffolding.



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Figure 4.4: Lucy's Pre and Post-Intervention ELR Scores

During analysis of the data, the children's role as a supportive scaffold for one another also became evident in the development of their vocabulary. The children's use of content specific vocabulary alongside inclusion of one or more of their peers was noted on multiple occasions. Tovey (2013: 33) speaks of the importance of a Froebelian environment for play, one which is "based on respect, trust, warm responsive relationships and rich first-hand play experiences". My belief is that the children's increased use of content specific vocabulary resulted from the children feeling safe and at ease in their environment and around their peers. Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2003) describe the play environment as a natural setting for children, a setting in which they are relatively free from any inhibitions, restrictions or disapproval and thus, may let their creativity shine. The creation of this play environment, as a result of the intervention, provided a safe setting for the children's learning, while also putting them at ease, thus enabling them to play and utilise their language creatively, free from any classroom inhibitions.

The following excerpts were taken from student-teacher conferences during the classroom intervention. The use of content specific vocabulary and the inclusion of one or more peers is evident in each child's discussion.

Lisa - Conference	"yeah and then that's me and Ella. The
14/05/21	sun was going and we had to go to the hen house and collect the hen's eggs for

dinner. Ella wanted two fried eggs but the hen only laid two today so we had one each for dinner."

Lisa's understanding of the workings of a farm is fantastic in this excerpt. Not only does she understand a hen's role on the farm but she uses correct and specific vocabulary to describe this role. Notice how there is also inclusion of a peer within Lisa's description of her painting. Lisa's painting, alongside other samples of the children's work, which were used as discussion prompts during the intervention, can be found in the Appendices (Appendix J). Lisa's description showcases Ella's role in acting as a supportive scaffold for her learning and the strengthening of her vocabulary during play. The impact of this supportive scaffolding on Lisa can be seen through the results of Lisa's pre-cycle three VC score showcased an increase of 40% as a result of supportive scaffolding.

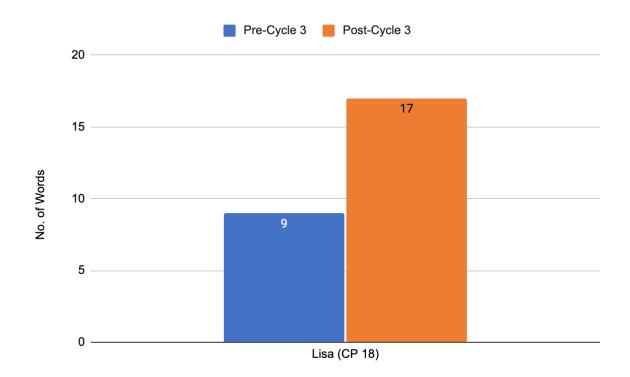


Figure 4.5: Lisa's Pre and Post-Cycle Three VC Scores

Patrick – Conference	"Well, me and Tom think that the
15/04/21	caterpillar is very cool because he eats and
	eats and then sheds his skin when it gets
	too tight. That's so cool. And because he
	can change and be awhat was it Tom?
	Oh yeah, a chrysalis in his cocoon."

In the above excerpt, Patrick uses fantastic vocabulary while describing why himself and Tom think the caterpillar is cool. Patrick has included facts about the caterpillar alongside content specific vocabulary to describe its life cycle. In this excerpt, it is evident that both boys have been discussing, and thus reinforcing, their newly acquired knowledge of, and vocabulary specific to, the life cycle of a caterpillar. The effectiveness of this peer discussion and collaboration on further reinforcing Patrick's learning of the content specific vocabulary taught, can be viewed through the significant development in his VC score, as seen below (Figure 4.6). Patrick's score showcases a fantastic development in his vocabulary (a 50% increase of his pre-cycle two score) as a result of collaborative work completed during cycle two of the intervention.

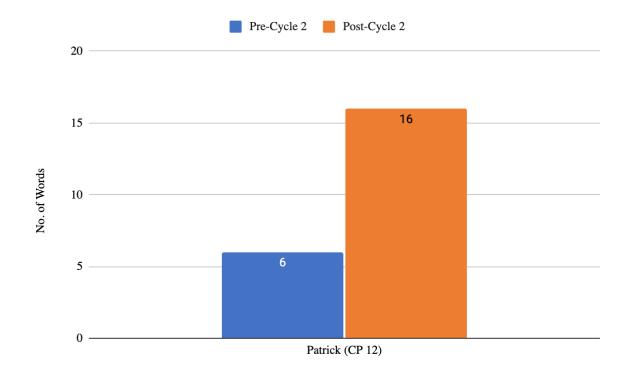


Figure 4.6: Patrick's Pre and Post-Cycle Two VC Scores

Tsao (2008: 518) describes how "social interactions involving language, that children experience during play, helps construct their literacy knowledge". The above excerpt and

consequent VC scores highlight a clear example of the effectiveness of collaborative learning on children's vocabulary acquisition during play.

Laura - Conference	"Sophie said her mammy said that we can
24/03/21	put the bulb in water, put it outside and
	watch the roots grow. I can't wait. The
	roots live in the ground so it's so cool that
	we can see them in Sophie's house like the
	one in school."

In the above excerpt, Laura uses a completed flower worksheet (see Appendix J) to initiate conversation about herself and Sophie's intention to put a bulb in a water-filled vase, in order to see the roots growing. As part of this cycle of the intervention, Laura and Sophie have learned about the parts and functions of a plant. They are aware that the roots of a flower normally reside in the soil, however, taking inspiration from a classroom activity, in which a hyacinth bulb was grown, Laura and Sophie plan to continue their learning at home. Not only does Laura use content specific vocabulary and showcase a fantastic understanding of both the parts of a flower and the hyacinth bulb activity, but she also utilises her peer, Sophie, as a supportive scaffold for the continuation of her learning. The impact of this collaborative learning and peer scaffolding can be seen in the results of Laura's VC scores below (Figure 4.7). As a result of her engagement in collaborative learning, Laura experienced an increase of 40% in her VC score, moving from a pre-cycle one VC score of 15% to a post-cycle one VC score of 55%.

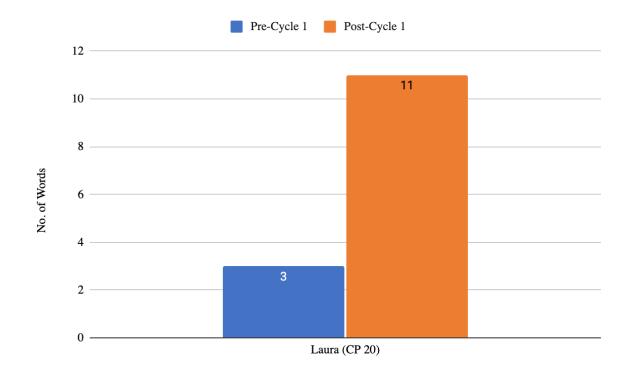


Figure 4.7: Laura's Pre and Post-Cycle One VC Scores

The above samples of data highlight the significant impact that collaborative learning can have on the development of oral language (OL) skills during play. Through analysis of this data, collaborative learning is presented as a powerful tool which not only develops children's social skills, builds friendships and boosts their confidence, but through peerscaffolding and cooperation, extends their ELS and vocabulary on a notable level.

# 4.5.2 The Impact of Enjoyment of Play on Developing Vocabulary and Expressive Language Skills

The impact that enjoyment of play methodologies can have on the development of children's OL skills is exceptional; particularly in relation to vocabulary acquisition and the evolution of expressive language skills (ELS). When children are actively engaged in and enjoying play activities, there is a direct impact on their language skills. This is as a

result of the children's association of these activities with a positive experience, thus resulting in an increased capacity for memorisation. Hernik and Jaworska (2018: 508) state that enjoyment of learning creates a community, "evokes positive memories and makes them stronger". Children rarely view play as learning and so, produce little resistance to becoming fully involved. This, in turn, leads to better engagement and increased ability for the memorisation of new language skills and vocabulary. Hernik and Jaworska (2018: 508) support the idea of enjoyment resulting in language development wherein they note that "it is possible to select the appropriate emotional stimuli that will arouse positive emotions" and will, as a result, allow for better memorisation of language components. The following data samples will explore the relationship between enjoyment and learning in the context of play and discuss the significant impact that enjoyment can have on the development of children's vocabulary and ELS.

The excerpt below, taken from my reflective journal, describes the effect of enjoyment of play on children's ELS.

Another thing which struck me today, as I observed the children, was their overall enjoyment. Each and every child I observed appeared to be having genuine and wholehearted fun with their peers. As I walked around the classroom, I was pleasantly surprised to hear the children chatting excitedly in their groups, demonstrating amazing expressive language skills! The children, unaware, had become so engaged with the activity that any doubts about their ability to share their opinions with their peers well and truly fell by the wayside (O'Donnell, Reflective Journal: 26/03/21). The above reflection in my journal highlights the incredible impact that enjoyment of play activities can have on children's ELS. In this excerpt, I noted that the children were so engaged in the activity that, without realising, they had become deeply engrossed in discussion, demonstrating fantastic ELS. Children who were previously reticent to contribute their thoughts were now openly contributing, while more dominant children, who had a tendency to take over, were now delighting in listening to the ideas of their peers. Garvey (1977) notes that one of the most important benefits of play methodologies is that less verbal children may be given the opportunity to express their views, given the comfortable and child-friendly atmosphere that play provides.

My critical friend also observed the impact that the children's enjoyment of play activities was having on the development of their ELS when she noted:

Critical Friend Observation	"It is wonderful to see the children
14/04/21	enjoying the activities so much. I think it
14/04/21	is evident that their language is improving
	with each and every activity. Sarah is now
	fully engaged and enjoying discussions
	with her peers while Jacob is taking his
	time to speak slowly, ensuring that
	everyone can understand the points that he
	is trying to makeand Clara's eye-
	contact has come on in leaps and bounds!
	They're having a lot of fun and learning
	so much!"

It is evident from the excerpt above that my critical friend also noticed the impact of the children's enjoyment of play activities on their ELS. My critical friend noted that, in particular, Sarah, Jacob and Clara were demonstrating significant developments in their ELS and were utilising these skills during the play activities. The results of Sarah, Jacob and Clara's pre and post-intervention ELR scores (Figures 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10) demonstrate the remarkable development in their ELS as a result of their enjoyment of the play activities, with each child showcasing a notable increase in their score. Hernik and Jaworksa (2018: 513) state that "joy can bring positive experiences and outcomes" and in this scenario, this has most definitely been proven true.

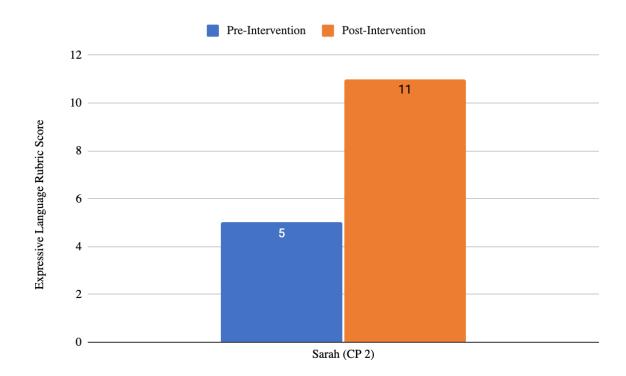


Figure 4.8: Sarah's Pre and Post-Intervention ELR Scores

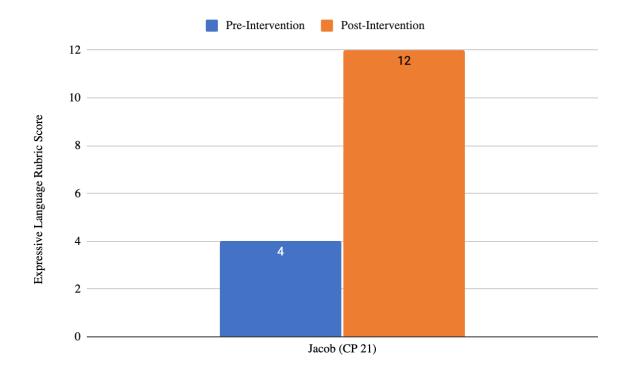


Figure 4.9: Jacob's Pre and Post-Intervention ELR Scores

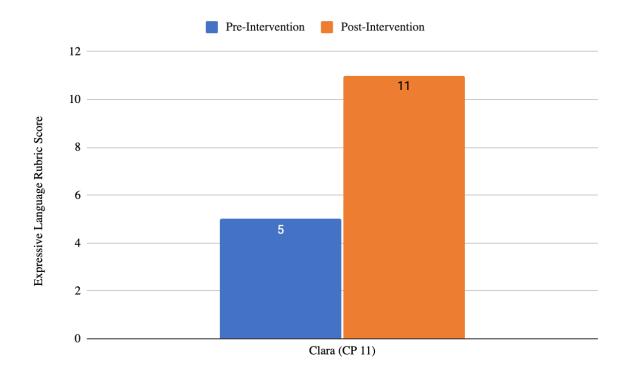


Figure 4.10: Clara's Pre and Post-Intervention ELR Scores

During the collection and analysis of data, the impact of the children's enjoyment of play activities on their vocabulary also became evident. As previously mentioned, when children enjoy play activities, they associate these activities with positive memories, thus increasing their ability to recall information. In the following data sample, Daniel's ability to recall and utilise new content specific vocabulary is evident, alongside his enjoyment of the task.

Daniel - Conference	"Yeah, it was so much fun! We made our
16/03/21	own poem! We all came up with different
	ideas for the poem like spring animals and
	piglets and spring rainy weather. I wanted
	to add in the parts of the flowers in spring
	like their roots and also the insects looking
	for pollen but there wasn't roommaybe
	in the next poemand I'll put in stem and
	pollen for 'sp'yeah!"

In this excerpt, Daniel has described, using excellent ELS, his enjoyment of the spring acrostic poetry activity. A sample of Daniel's spring acrostic poem can be found in the Appendices (Appendix J). Throughout Daniel's description, his feelings of enjoyment and satisfaction of having created his own spring poem is evident, alongside his fantastic use of content specific vocabulary. During the spring acrostic poetry activity, not only was Daniel thoroughly engaged in and enjoying the activity, but he, alongside his peers, also recalled his prior learning to suggest vocabulary for the poem. This suggests that Daniel's enjoyment of this activity, and previous activities, was associated with positive experiences, thus enhancing his ability to recall content specific vocabulary. The increase in Daniel's ability to recall spring specific vocabulary, throughout cycle one of the intervention, can be seen below through comparison of Daniel's pre and post-cycle one VC scores (Figure 4.11). As a result of Daniel's enjoyment of the play methodologies, he experienced an increase of 30% in his ability to recall this vocabulary. As Manasia (2015) notes, positive emotions lead to positive learning experiences, thus demonstrating a clear link between children's enjoyment of play activities and an increase in their ability to memorise new language.

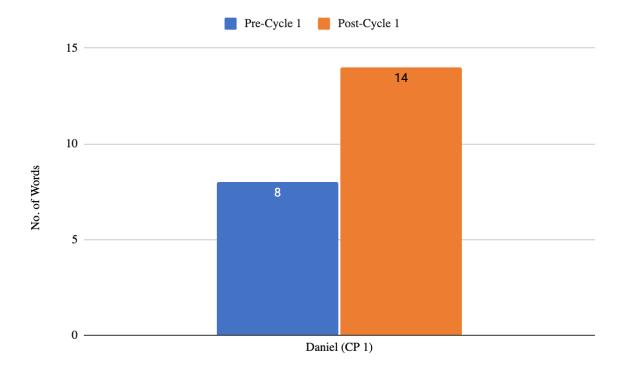


Figure 4.11: Daniel's Pre and Post-Cycle One VC Scores

In the following extract, recorded during use of the 'Highlights Chair', Jacob notes that he has found it easier to recall a variety of spring vocabulary through his enjoyment of some spring poems.

Jacob - 'Highlights Chair'	"I found a cool way to remember some of
	my spring wordsit's like our poem -
25/03/21	everything is growing and then the man
	lost his hat when the wind was blowing
	because sometimes I think spring has all
	sunny weather but that helps me
	remember and then the spring air and the
	sheep lose their hair! It's funny!"

The above extract highlights the impact that Jacob's enjoyment of the play methodologies has had on his ability to recall new vocabulary. As a result of humour throughout the spring poetry, Jacob's enjoyment of his learning increased. This combination then solidified the new vocabulary in Jacob's memory, through positive memory association, and enabled Jacob to recall the vocabulary at a later date. The increase in Jacob's ability to recall this new vocabulary, as a result of his enjoyment of the playful and humorous poetry, can be seen in the comparison of his pre and post-cycle one VC scores below (Figure 4.12). Jacob's initial score showcases a development of 35% in his spring vocabulary retention, thus reinforcing the idea that children's enjoyment of playful methodologies increases their scope for the memorisation of new language.



Figure 4.12: Jacob's Pre and Post-Cycle One VC Scores

The following excerpt also showcases a child participant's (CP) increased ability to recall new vocabulary resulting from their enjoyment of playful methodologies. In this excerpt, Jamie found the rhyme scheme of a spring song particularly enjoyable and as a result, more memorable. This then increased Jamie's ability to recall numerous lyrics of the song and as a result, a wide variety of spring vocabulary also.

Jamie - Conference	"Yeah, I loved it. *Sings* A seed for me
25/03/21	to sow, soil to make it grow, a little pat
	and that's that, then a little shower and
	here's our flower."

In this excerpt, not only did Jamie thoroughly enjoy learning the spring vocabulary through a playful song, but this, in turn, extended Jamie's ability to recall the new vocabulary at a later date. Jamie's recollection of the new spring vocabulary, such as "seed", "sow", "soil", "grow", "shower" and "flower" demonstrates a clear link between children's enjoyment of playful learning methodologies and an increased ability to recall new language. Evidence of this link can too be seen through Jamie's pre and post-cycle one VC scores below (Figure 4.13). Jamie's enjoyment of the playful learning methodology resulted in an increase of 20% in his ability to recall the new spring vocabulary, moving from a pre-cycle one score of 20% to a post-cycle one score of 40%.

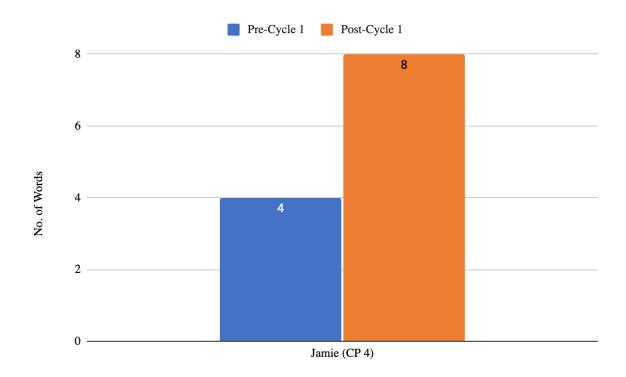


Figure 4.13: Jamie's Pre and Post-Cycle One VC Scores

The above excerpts of data portray an evident link between children's enjoyment of play methodologies and an increase in their ability to extend, recall and utilise advanced OL skills. In this research study, the above excerpts highlight the development of children's ELS and vocabulary, through their enjoyment of and engagement in playful learning methodologies.

# 4.5.3 The Role of Adults in Expanding Vocabulary and Expressive Language Skills Through Play

As noted in my earlier literature review, the role of adults in play is a much debated concept throughout educational research in Ireland and abroad. There are vast amounts of research which focus on play as a solo activity for children but much less research on the inclusion and impact of adult involvement in play methodologies. Weldemariam (2014) states that adults can prove crucial to children's play as they take on the role of 'play agents' or facilitators. Adult involvement in children's play can both, improve the quality of play activities significantly and extend the benefits from participation in play (Weldemariam, 2014). In the following piece, the participation of adults and children in joint play methodologies will be analysed, with a particular focus on the expansion of vocabulary and ELS.

The data samples presented below showcases evidence of the development of expressive language skills (ELS), alongside increased engagement, as a result of teacher participation in play.

Thomas - 'Highlights Chair'	"Well, I thought it was fun when me and
20/04/21	teacher were talking about the bees.

Teacher said she would like to be a queen bee because she would get to eat all the royal jelly, but I want to be a worker bee because they get to go out and explore all the nice gardens and get nectar in the flowers. It's more fun."

In the above data sample, Thomas demonstrates a very clear understanding of the different titles of bees and their role within the larger bee family. Not only are his ideas well organised and the content of his input well developed but he also includes an adult, in this case the teacher, as part of his 'highlight'. This excerpt showcases the ways in which teacher participation extended Thomas' interest in the topic and hence, his learning, by engaging him in further discussion about roles within the bee family. Not only does Thomas use appropriate titles for each of the bees in his opinion piece, but his explanation of the reasoning behind his choice is excellently thought out. The above excerpt demonstrates clear and confident use of ELS, inclusion of acquired learning content and overall increased engagement in the topic, as a result of adult involvement. The impact of this adult involvement on the development of Thomas' ELS can also be seen in the portrayal of Thomas' pre and post-intervention ELR scores below (Figure 4.14). Thomas showcased a significant development of his ELS with an increase of 31% on his pre-intervention score, as a result of the aforementioned engagement from his teacher.

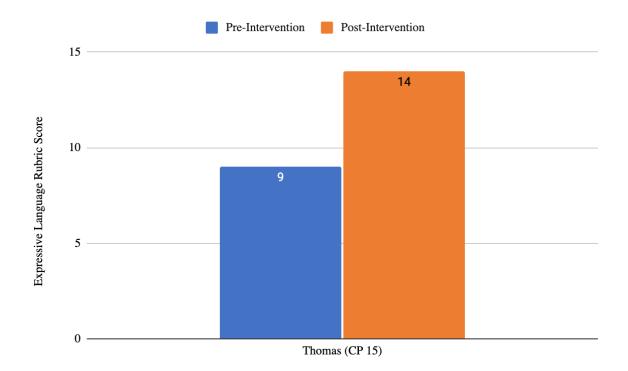


Figure 4.14: Thomas' Pre and Post-Intervention ELR Scores

In the next data sample, Séana's ELS are evident through the excellent organisation of her ideas, with her reasoning behind her favourite part of the play scenario centred around the inclusion of her teacher.

Séana - 'Highlights Chair'	"My favourite part was when you
11/05/21	[teacher] came to the farm shop for your
	shopping because we had to make sure
	that the farmers gave us their food and that
	all the food was fresh. We had to make
	sure that it was right."

Séana's use of ELS is very well established in the above excerpt. Her ability to convey her favourite part of the play in a logical and well developed manner is evident, alongside an advanced understanding of the workings of a farm shop. Séana effectively explains her thoughts to her peers while demonstrating a confident and well organised demeanour. Séana's statement of her favourite part of the play scenario involving her teacher, alongside her progression of ideas, demonstrates a high level of thinking and understanding, excellently developed ELS and overall enjoyment of the play activity. The significant development in Séana's ELS, as a result of teacher engagement during play methodologies, can be seen below (Figure 4.15). Prior to Séana's engagement with this classroom intervention, she scored nine points out of a possible sixteen on the ELR, or 56%. As a result of Séana's engagement with the classroom intervention and through her experience of her teacher as a play facilitator, Séana attained a post-intervention ELR score of thirteen or 81%. This showcases an increase of 25% in relation to Séana's ELR score, as a result of teacher participation in play activities. Trevarthen (2011) reminds us that young children are often not conversational unless they are provided with invitations to converse and appropriate responses are given by their communication partner. It is evident from the above excerpt that in this scenario, the teacher acted as a play agent and communication partner with the result of extending enjoyment of the play scenario and simultaneously developing Séana's ELS.

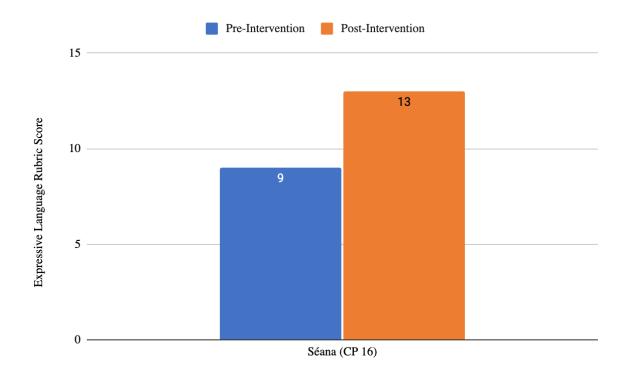


Figure 4.15: Séana's Pre and Post-Intervention ELR Scores

The important role of adults in developing children's ELS is also evident in a completed reflection in my journal. In the following excerpt, I am pleasantly surprised by the impact that my own involvement in a play activity has had on a usually withdrawn and shy child.

I found it hugely interesting to note the change in the children's engagement levels when I created some silly spring rhymes! To see Josh joining in on the fun, creating his own rhyme and confidently sharing it with the class was wonderful! It definitely makes me want to increase my own involvement in the play interventions going forward (O'Donnell, Reflective Journal: 19/03/21). In the above reflection, I note a significant increase in the children's engagement levels as a result of my involvement in the play activity. I, too, note that Josh, a quiet child who can be hesitant to contribute during whole class activities, has demonstrated fantastic involvement in the activity. Josh became more engaged in the activity as a result of teacher involvement and thus showcased a development in not only his confidence and participation but in his ELS also. This development can also be seen through comparison of Josh's pre and post-intervention ELR scores below (Figure 4.16). As a result of teacher involvement in the play activities, Josh's engagement levels were extended and so too were his ELS, with Josh showcasing an increase of 44% from his pre-intervention ELR scores.

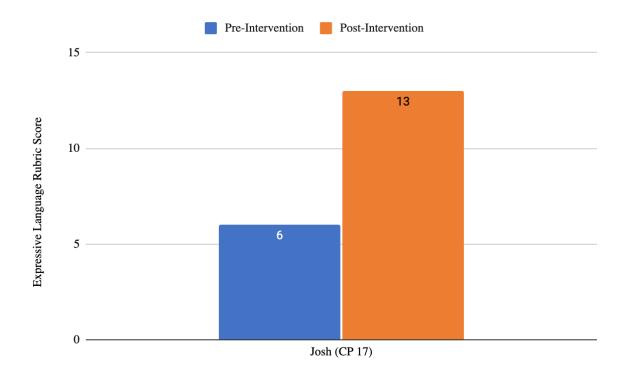


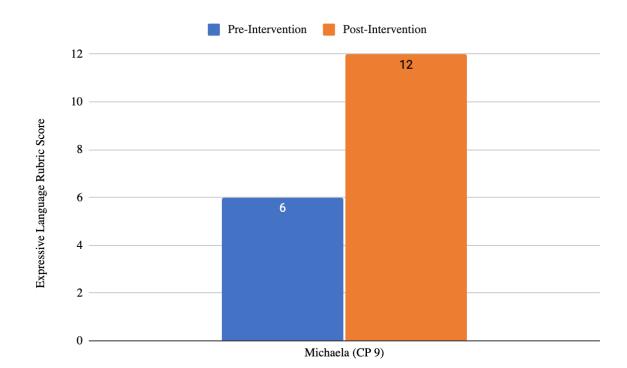
Figure 4.16: Josh's Pre and Post-Intervention ELR Scores

Pursi and Lipponen (2018: 35) note that, through adults actively participating in children's play, they will "learn to recognise the needs as well as the competences of very young children". In fact, through active participation in play, adults will develop appropriate ways to respond to the social needs of both more and less competent children (Kalliala, 2014). In this case, through participation in the play activity, the teacher was enabled to respond to the social needs of a usually reserved child. Josh's contribution of a 'silly spring rhyme' to the whole class activity, alongside the development of his ELR score, demonstrates the effect that teacher involvement can have on encouraging and building a child's confidence while also prompting them towards the development of their ELS.

My critical friend, too, noted the impact of adult involvement in play methodologies on the development of children's ELS in her excerpt below.

Critical Friend Observation	"It is wonderful to see the impact that your
Cifical Field Observation	It is wonderful to see the impact that your
05/05/21	involvement is having on the children's
	learning. I couldn't but notice their
	increased engagement in the activities
	when you participated. To see Michaela
	structuring her thoughts and opinions and
	using appropriate eye contact and hand
	gestures while presenting to the class was
	powerful. She really wanted to join in on
	the fun with teacher and pushed herself to
	do so, with wonderful results."

In the above excerpt, my critical friend provides a valuable insight into the role of adults in play, from a perspective situated outside of the play activity. From observing instances of play, in which the teacher was and was not involved, my critical friend was able to evaluate and compare the results of teacher involvement in the play activities. Interestingly, she noted an increase in the children's engagement in play methodologies during teacher involvement. An increase in engagement in the play activities results in an increase in enjoyment and subsequent, learning, as discussed in the previous theme. My critical friend noted a 'powerful' development in Michaela's engagement and confidence, alongside a development in her ELS, as a result of teacher involvement. Due to a desire to 'join in on the fun' with teacher, Michaela combatted any past reluctancies and wholly participated in the play activity. The impact that this teacher involvement had on the development of Michaela's ELS can be viewed in the graph below (Figure 4.17). The graph highlights an increase of 38% in Michaela's ELR score, as a result of teacher involvement and support during the play activities.



# Figure 4.17: Michaela's Pre and Post-Intervention ELR Scores

During continued analysis of the data collated, the impact of adult involvement on the extension of children's vocabulary, during play methodologies, was also highlighted. The role of the adult in play, with a view to developing literacy skills, can often be described as a language contributor. Not only do adults model the use of new language and vocabulary during play activities but they can also develop the grammatical structure of children's language use through correction by repetition. In this, should the adult notice an error in a child's use of vocabulary or in the grammatical tense used, the adult then repeats the child's statement while modelling correct use of the word or tense. This demonstrates a gentle but effective way to continuously improve children's use of language. In the following excerpts of data, the positive impact that an adult figure can have on the development of children's vocabulary and subsequently, the correct use of this vocabulary, is distinctly evident.

In this excerpt, the constructive effect of teacher correction by repetition is evident, alongside Séan's extended use of content specific vocabulary, as a result. For the purpose of authenticity, the following excerpt, along with each of the research participants' views and opinions, have been presented verbatim.

Séan - Conference	Séan: "Yeah and then mammy and me
12/03/21	goed to the garden centre to see the plants."
	- Teacher's use of correction by
	repetition: "You and mammy went

to the garden centre, did you? What did you see there?" Séan: "Yeah, we went there to the garden centre and I got to see all the flower's roots and stems!"

In this scenario, teacher correction by repetition acted as a prompt for Séan to continue to elaborate on his experience at the garden centre, prompted by the completion of his life cycle worksheet. An example of Séan's worksheet can be found in the Appendices (Appendix J). As a result of teacher correction by repetition, Séan adopted the correct use of the past tense, while also noting his teacher's engagement in his contribution and so, continued the discussion with the addition of recently acquired vocabulary. This demonstrates a clear link between children's learning of new vocabulary and the impact that an adult, in this case the teacher, can have on prompting use of this new vocabulary. The influential role of adults in developing and extending children's vocabulary can also be seen through comparison of Séan's pre and post-cycle one vocabulary checklist (VC) scores below (Figure 4.18). As a result of teacher engagement, Séan's interest in the topic increased and so, too, did his ability to recall and utilise new content specific vocabulary, with an increase of 20% on Séan's pre-cycle one VC score. This highlights the important role that adults can play in both extending and prompting the use of children's vocabulary.

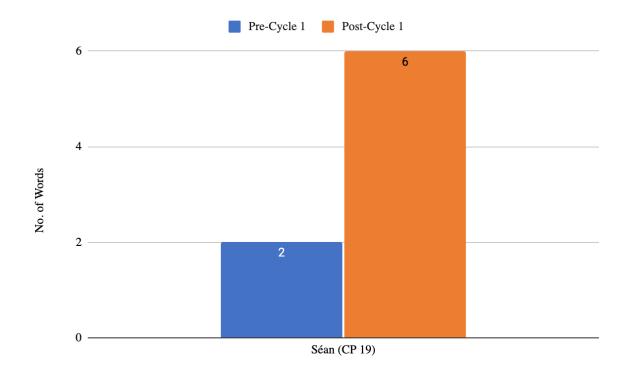


Figure 4.18: Séan's Pre and Post-Cycle One VC Scores

In the next data sample, the important role of adults in developing children's vocabulary through play methodologies can be seen through teacher modelling of content specific vocabulary. In this example, the CP has, unbeknownst to herself, acquired and utilised new vocabulary through simple discussion with, and prompts from, her teacher.

Ella - Conference	Ella "Yeah, it was really busy in the farm
12/05/21	shop today. I delivered all the fresh food
12/03/21	to the shop and then I had to get my
	crops."

Teacher: "Oh, brilliant. Did you use your
tractor or car to deliver the fresh fruit and
vegetables to the farm shop?"
Ella: "I used my tractor because it had a
trailer to carry the vegetables and fruit."
T 1 "OL 1 1
Teacher: "Oh, that was a great idea, good
thinking! Then you had to gather up your
crops, what did you use to do that? Did
you use a machine?"
Ella: "Yeah, I used the tractor for the food
and then the combine harvester to gather
the crops in the field."

In the above sample of data, Ella's extended use of content specific vocabulary, as a result of teacher prompts and modelling, is evident. Ella begins by using content specific vocabulary such as "crops" and "fresh food" to describe her work as a farmer that day. However, by the end of the discussion, and as a result of teacher modelling, Ella has included a wider variety of content specific vocabulary to describe her day, with the addition of words such as "tractor", "vegetables", "fruit", "trailer", "combine harvester" and "field". The teacher, acting as a language contributor and modelling the correct use of farm specific vocabulary, has prompted the development of Ella's own vocabulary. This development can also be seen in the graph below (Figure 4.19), which highlights the expansion of Ella's content specific vocabulary throughout cycle three of the intervention, as a result of teacher modelling and engagement.

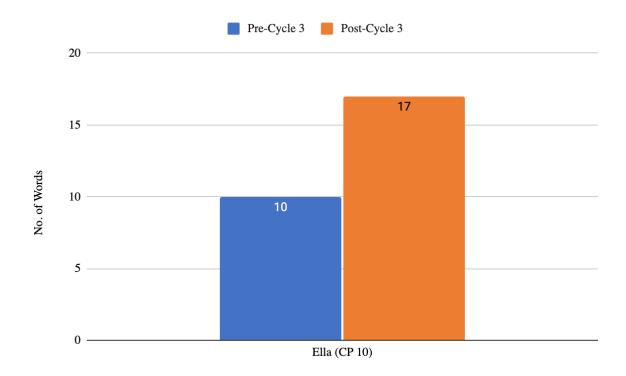


Figure 4.19: Ella's Pre and Post-Cycle One VC Scores

Mooney (2000: 29) states that "children learn best by doing and through repetition". In this case, Ella listened intently to the teacher's responses and through doing so, adopted a wider range of vocabulary, through repetition. This showcases the important role that adults can have in developing children's vocabulary through prompting, contributing and modelling the correct use of new vocabulary. Examples of the socio-dramatic farm shop and farm play area, which prompted the previous discussion, can be found in the Appendices (Appendix K).

In an entry from my reflective journal below, I had come to the realisation that my involvement in the play scenarios, and discussions as part of the play scenarios, was having a remarkable impact on the development of my students' vocabulary. In the journal entry, I write that I have witnessed a notable improvement in Jane's vocabulary, as a result of my engagement in the play methodologies.

Today, I noticed a huge improvement in Jane's vocabulary when she was involved in discussion of our story. Yesterday, I modelled the use of vocabulary associated with the frog's life cycle during our game and today, I noticed how Jane had picked up on and put to use that same vocabulary. It gives me great confidence as a teacher to know that the language I model for my students, both during formal and informal activities, is being transferred to their own vocabulary, ready for use at the next appropriate opportunity! It's a really wonderful feeling ((O'Donnell, Reflective Journal: 26/04/21).

The above reflective journal entry showcases the evident development of Jane's vocabulary as a result of my ongoing involvement in the play methodologies. Having noted the impact of my involvement in the play scenarios on the children's ELS at an earlier stage of the research process (see reflective journal entry above dated 19/03/21), I vowed to continue my involvement in the play methodologies, with the hope of continuing to develop the children's OL skills. The result of this continued involvement is evident in the above journal entry as I note that the vocabulary, which I had pre-taught and modelled, was then being utilised by Jane the very next day. This demonstrates Jane's engagement in both activities alongside an increase in her ability to recall new vocabulary, as a result of teacher engagement and modelling. The increase in Jane's ability to recall and utilise this new vocabulary can be seen in the graph below (Figure

4.20), which highlights an increase of 20% across Jane's pre and post-cycle two VC scores.

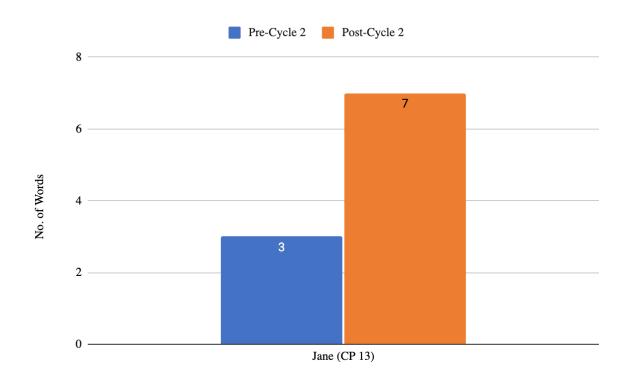
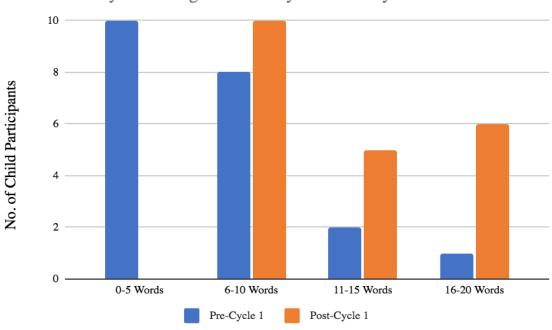


Figure 4.20: Jane's Pre and Post-Cycle One VC Scores

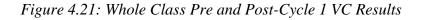
The above excerpts of data showcase a clear link between adult involvement and the development of children's vocabulary and ELS, during play methodologies. The role of an adult in play methodologies can prove crucial to extending children's OL skills. Vygotsky's (1978) idea of the zone of proximal development suggests that adults can help children partake in advanced forms of play, which they may not otherwise manage on their own. Be it as a language contributor, corrector or simply to model and prompt the appropriate use of new language, the role of the adult, in the context of play, is one which deserves increased emphasis and recognition.

The aforementioned three themes emerged as findings through the critical analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data collected. This combination of data has demonstrated the hugely beneficial effect that collaborative learning and enjoyment of learning activities can have on the development of children's OL skills, alongside the vital role that adults have in extending children's language skills, through methodologies of play. The impact of play methodologies on the development of the vocabulary and ELS of the twenty-one child participants (CP) in this research study can be viewed through the following graphs (Figures 4.21-4.27). These graphs showcase the comparisons of pre and post-cycle VC results and pre and post-intervention ELR scores for each individual CP, followed by discussion and interpretation of the results.

The results of the VCs showcase a significant improvement in every CP's vocabulary as a result of participation in the intervention. This result corroborated with the initial research study claim that the introduction of play methodologies, into the classroom, expands and develops children's vocabulary. The following graphs (Figures 4.21, 4.22 and 4.23) present the results from each of the pre and post-cycle VCs.



Cycle 1: Integration of Play into Literacy & SESE



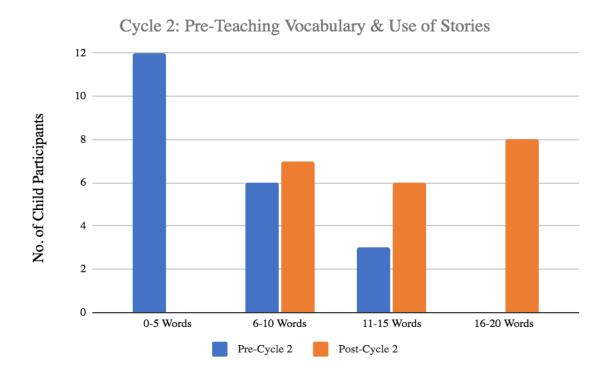
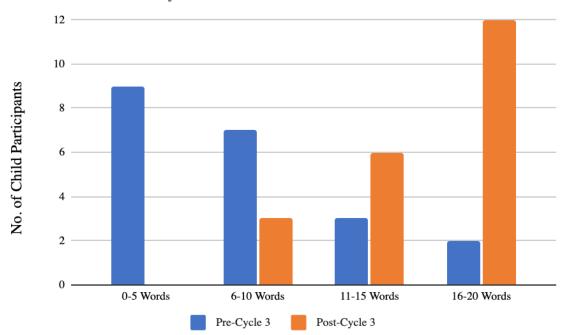


Figure 4.22: Whole Class Pre and Post-Cycle 2 VC Results

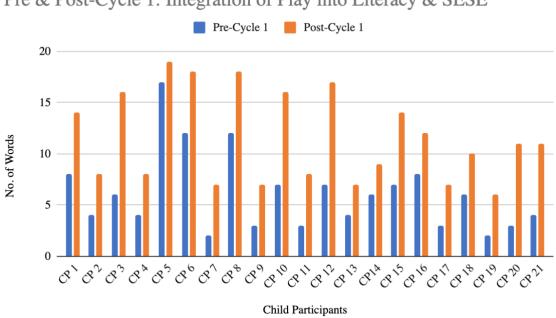


Cycle 3: Use of Aistear Framework

Figure 4.23: Whole Class Pre and Post-Cycle 3 VC Results

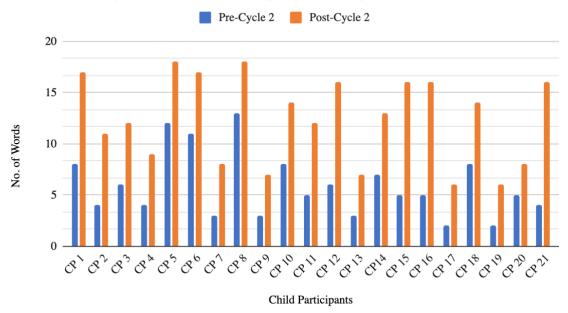
In the above results, the increase in the number of CPs scoring in the higher range of vocabulary retention, as a result of the intervention, is complimented by an equally desirable result in the form of a decrease of CPs scoring in the lower range of vocabulary retention. Thus, in support of the original hypothesis, these results demonstrate the powerful impact that engaging with methodologies of play can have on the development of children's vocabulary.

See below (Figures 4.24, 4.25 and 4.26) for a direct comparison of individual CP results from the pre and post-cycle VCs.



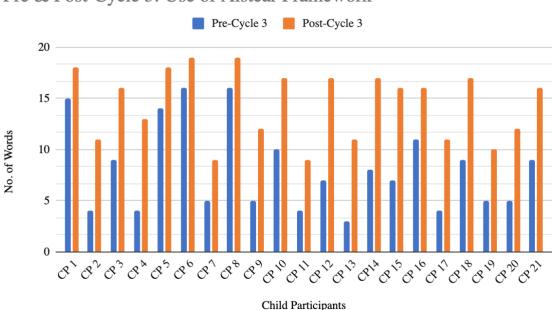
Pre & Post-Cycle 1: Integration of Play into Literacy & SESE

Figure 4.24: Individual CP's Pre and Post Cycle 1 VC Results



Pre & Post-Cycle 2: Pre-Teaching Vocabulary & Use of Stories

Figure 4.25: Individual CP's Pre and Post Cycle 2 VC Results



Pre & Post-Cycle 3: Use of Aistear Framework

Figure 4.26: Individual CP's Pre and Post Cycle 3 VC Results

The following results of the pre and post-intervention ELR demonstrate a notable improvement in each of the CP's ELS, as a result of the intervention. In line with the results of the pre and post-cycle VCs, the ELR results also corroborate with the initial research study claim that the introduction of play methodologies into the classroom develops and enhances children's ELS. The following graph (Figure 4.27) presents a view of the overall results of the pre and post-intervention ELR, while also outlining each of the individual CP's results.

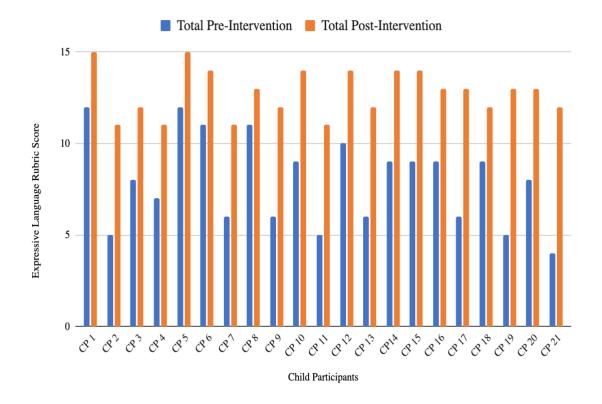


Figure 4.27: Individual CP's Pre and Post-Intervention ELR Scores

The above pre and post-intervention ELR scores highlight the immense development of ELS, which each and every CP attained, as a result of their engagement with the intervention. In summary, as is evident, 100% of the CPs (twenty-one children) had developed their EL competencies when the results of the pre and post-intervention ELR were compared. These results showcase the powerful impact that engaging with methodologies of play can have on the development of children's ELS.

The above collection of qualitative and quantitative data presents a valid claim that the play-based classroom intervention had a remarkably positive effect on the development of the CP's vocabulary and ELS. The overall results of this research study highlight the

powerful impact that methodologies of play can have on children's OL skills, particularly in the areas of vocabulary and EL. As a result of their engagement with the intervention, each of the CPs demonstrated an expansion of their vocabulary and a development in their EL capabilities. Alongside these noteworthy results, I too, have been impacted positively from my engagement with both the classroom intervention and this research study process, as a whole. Not only have I been enabled to develop and enhance my students' vocabulary and ELS through the introduction of play methodologies, but I have also become a living embodiment of my core educational values, and as a result, a better practitioner. Below, I will now acknowledge the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on this research study before finally concluding this chapter.

# 4.7 The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Research and Data Collection

As a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, teaching and learning moved online throughout the months of January and February 2020. Initially, it was intended that the research, and subsequent data collection, would begin online in January. However, due to the discovery that the enthusiasm levels and responses from the children were much lower than anticipated, data collection proved almost impossible and so, the research was paused temporarily. During conversation with my supervisor, it came to light that this 'lack of data' was in fact, data in itself. It highlighted the cruciality of in-person teaching in relation to the development of children's OL skills, and the difficulties in engaging sufficiently with younger children, through the online medium.

As previously mentioned, the research resumed upon the return to school in March 2020, albeit now parallel to growing curricular demands as a result of the earlier school closures. Irish teachers now had the added responsibility of prioritising and teaching only

the most crucial elements of the curriculum, alongside the requirement to focus on core subjects Literacy, Maths and Gaeilge predominantly. As a result of this, difficulties started to arise in ensuring the appropriate collection of data and in-class time allocation to my research. Consequently, the intervention was adjusted to a more integrated and cross-curricular approach. Hattie (2003) states that teachers who are proficient at making practical adjustments are those who acquire the most satisfaction from their work and indeed, this has been my experience.

# 4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the three main findings that emerged from the qualitative and quantitative data collected and presented the overall results of the research process. Theme one examined collaborative learning as a tool to extend vocabulary and ELS during play. Collaborative learning enabled the children to act as a supportive scaffold for one another, developing not only their confidence, self-esteem and belief in their own abilities but also extending their vocabulary and ELS significantly. Theme two focused on the impact that enjoyment of play methodologies can have on developing vocabulary and ELS. Methodologies of play allow for a relaxed and natural context for children's language development. When children feel safe and at ease in their environment, their enjoyment and engagement levels increase. Children then associate these enjoyable play experiences with positive memories, which, in turn, results in increased retention of new learning, in this case newly acquired vocabulary and extended ELS. Theme three discussed the role of adults in expanding children's vocabulary and ELS through play. The variety of important roles that adults can have in play methodologies such as, language contributor and play facilitator, were outlined followed by evidence which highlighted the positive effects of these roles on the children's vocabulary and ELS.

#### Cassandra O'Donnell

The qualitative data collected during the research process was aligned with the quantitative data and indeed, a relationship between the two was noted. The results of the qualitative data had a direct correlation to the results of the quantitative data collected. Both sets of data then led to discussion of the overall conclusive results of the research process. These results showcased the powerful impact that play methodologies can have on children's acquisition of vocabulary and the development of their ELS in comparison to more traditional and didactic teaching methodologies. It was evident from the data presented that methodologies of play are an appropriate and child-centred approach to teaching OL skills in the classroom, specifically vocabulary and ELS. When compared to literature in the field, the findings from this study were closely aligned with those of the literature and of the original research hypothesis. As a result of undertaking this research, becoming a living embodiment of my values and enhancing my practice with the inclusion of more child-centred and playful approaches to learning, my students' learning was significantly developed in the areas of ELS and vocabulary acquisition. Thus, I believe it is evident from the above analysis of data, and the findings which have transpired from that data, that a valid research process was executed; one which demonstrates significant learning both, for my students and myself, the practitioner. The next chapter summarises the outcomes of this research process and its findings, discusses the impact of these on my practice and the wider context, it addresses the limitations of this study, provides recommendations for future research and finally, concludes the research study with a personal reflection on the research process in its entirety.

# **Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This self-study action research (SSAR) project was designed to explore the ways in which I may realign my practice with my core educational values and as a result, become a better practitioner. The aim of this study was to investigate the ways in which the development of children's vocabulary and expressive language skills (ELS) may be supported by methodologies of play. The findings of this research allow for my claim to new knowledge, as a result of my generated living theory, and also demonstrate the ways in which I now consider myself a living embodiment of my core educational values. This chapter wishes to provide a synopsis of the research findings, discuss the limitations of the research, highlight my evolving values and identity and give recommendations for both, my future practice and future research. Finally, I will conclude this research project with a personal reflection on the process as a whole.

#### 5.2 Outcomes of the Research Process and Findings

Two main findings arose from this study; the powerful impact that play can have on expanding children's vocabulary and the significant impact which play can also have on the development of children's ELS. Using my research for guidance, I created a childcentred and play-based classroom intervention, which then allowed me to demonstrate the remarkable benefits of the use of play methodologies. Not only did each CP's vocabulary and ELS evidently improve as a result of the intervention, but the benefits of collaborative practice were highlighted, the children's enjoyment of their learning was strengthened and the important role of the adult during play was also recognised. Throughout this research process, I have also become more aware of the importance of my core educational values and the ways in which I can live, and teach, through these values. I have identified factors which influence my practice and established ways in which I can continue to build upon and develop my capabilities, both personally and professionally. As a result of this research process, I now believe that I am more childcentred in my teaching methodologies and am representative of my core values, showcasing trust, respect and compassion for my students and their learning, while also calling upon their creativity, through the continued inclusion of enjoyable and engaging play methodologies in my daily practice. The introduction of more playful, engaging and child-centred methodologies into my teaching has allowed me to witness the magnificent skills and competencies that my students possess, and are enabled to demonstrate, once confident and comfortable in their learning environment. I feel that my students have not only enjoyed the classroom intervention during this research study but that they now also have a more positive view of me as their teacher, one who places their needs, wants and abilities at the highest level of priorities.

# 5.3 Limitations of the Study

During this research study, I became aware of several limitations to the study. For the purpose of presenting the "full picture", I will now discuss these limitations (Sullivan et al., 2016: 79). Firstly, the time constraints of undertaking this research study while also teaching other curricular areas proved challenging at times. In an ideal world, there would be no limit on time available for research during the school day. With that being said, I feel confident that I have carried out a thorough and honest research process despite the aforementioned time constraints.

Given that the research took place in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic and upon the return to school after two months of online teaching, the growing pressure to focus solely on core curricular areas such as Literacy, Maths and Gaeilge was immense. Thus, this added to the already stretched time constraints of carrying out research in the classroom context.

The research participants involved in this study were very young in age and therefore needed a high level of teacher support during the day. This meant that the data collection methods differed to those of other research studies. The data collection instruments used in this study were tailored to the young CP's abilities and were more teacher-dependent than that of other studies.

As my critical friend was a colleague, another potential limitation to the study may be the provision of biased feedback. Although asked to provide honest responses, my critical friend may have felt compelled to offer overly positive feedback due to the close proximity in which we work.

As mentioned by the BERA (2018), undertaking the role of both teacher and researcher can prove difficult. Despite best efforts to prevent these roles from amalgamating, there is a possibility that this may have transpired at some stage of the research process.

Finally, this was a small scale study with twenty-one CPs. Although this is not entirely a limitation of the study, as it was intended to focus on one class of students solely, I am aware of and acknowledge the possibility of a larger scale study providing differing results. This research study was also created for my class, with provisions for the differing needs in my class and so, it is important to note that the intervention and approach used would require adaption and flexibility if utilised in another classroom context.

The above paragraphs offer an idea of the limitations which can arise during a SSAR project. However, each of these limitations provided a compelling amount of professional learning during the research process and so, it can be said that none of the aforementioned limitations were significant enough to inhibit or alter the research or its subsequent findings.

# 5.4 Embracing Values and Personal and Professional Development

In this section, I wish to describe the realignment of my core educational values and the re-establishment of my teacher identity as a result of my engagement with this research process.

# 5.4.1 Values

This AR process began with a prompt to consider my core educational values. At first, I found it difficult to identify these values. However, as I revisited my past experiences of education and began to look at my everyday practice, I soon realised that my values were focused on child-centred methodologies and an enjoyment of learning, which showcased respect, compassion, creativity and trust. Through the completion of this AR study, I feel that my values have not only been realigned with my practice but have also been strengthened in the process. Having witnessed the enormous impact that child-centred methodologies of play had on my student's learning, it encouraged me going forward to continue my strive to be a practitioner whom is evidently living and teaching in respect of their core values. This process has shown me the importance of living and teaching in a way which is congruent to these values and also, the importance of always being true to oneself.

# **5.4.2 Teacher Identity**

Palmer (1997) states that teachers teach who they are. In other words, our teacher identity is "intertwined" with our personal identity, our experiences and our beliefs (McDonagh et al., 2020: 192). As teachers, we must first truly understand ourselves before we can attempt to understand how we teach and why we teach in this manner. In a sense, Palmer (1997) argues that good teachers are a result of interwoven elements of life, experience, values, identity and one's students. I too believe that, as Palmer (1997) suggests, good teachers are those who know themselves and their capabilities, those who are aware of, and live by their core values, staying true to their identity in the process. I feel that this research process has allowed for the exploration and re-establishment of my teacher identity. Having meta-reflected on my early reflective journal entries, it appears as though I was implementing didactic and traditional teaching methods as a result of time constraints during the short junior infants school day, alongside growing curricular demands. However, from my engagement with this research process, I now know that child-centred and playful teaching methodologies, with careful planning and an integrated approach, can be easily woven into the junior infants school day, thus decreasing curricular pressures. Not alone that, but as a result of this careful planning and integration, I have also witnessed a significant development my students' OL skills. I feel proud of my ability to identify myself as a "living contradiction" to my values, establish an intervention, enhance my student's learning and in turn, teach in harmony with my core values and re-establish my professional identity (Whitehead, 2000: 93).

#### **5.5 Recommendations for Future Practice and Research**

In this section, I wish to outline my intentions for my future practice, recommendations for future research and describe the ways in which I intend to disseminate my research further afield.

#### 5.5.1 My Practice

The findings that emerged from this research are in support of my claim that notable and beneficial changes have been made to my practice. Through my exploration of educational theorists, relevant literature and my engagement in self-reflection journaling, I was able to pinpoint areas of my practice which I felt needed change. From this, I designed a playful, classroom-based intervention for the teaching of vocabulary and ELS in my classroom, which proved successful. Not alone were the CP's vocabulary and ELS significantly developed, but their engagement and enjoyment of learning was also enhanced. This research experience has not only showcased the power of play methodologies on extending children's OL skills but also the impact that collaborative practice, children's enjoyment of learning and adult involvement in play have on children's overall educational development. Going forward, I will utilise my learning experiences from this research study to continue to live and teach in harmony with my core educational values, continuously reflect upon and update my practice, stay true to my teacher identity and in general, endeavour to become the best teacher that I can be.

#### **5.5.2 Future Research**

If I had the opportunity to continue my research in this area, it would consist of:

- Exploring other areas of children's OL skills such as phonological awareness (rhyme, alliteration, blending) and investigating how they may be impacted by play
- Investigating a further variety of play methodologies for use in the classroom context
- A follow up study with the children involved in this research project to establish if the developments in their vocabulary and ELS were sustained over time
- Investigating the impact of play methodologies on children's writing skills
- Exploring the impact of carrying out this research study early on in children's educational lives

#### 5.5.3 Disseminating the Research

Upon concluding the research, I gave a presentation to my university colleagues recounting the research process and my findings. This was a great opportunity to have my research validated in a group setting. Having outlined the research process and subsequent findings to the principal of my school, she has asked me to present my research study to my work colleagues and also stated her interest in adopting a school-wide approach to play, with the intention of introducing play methodologies to each stream in the school. I also wish to present my research findings at the Literacy Association of Ireland conference. Due to the delay in the research process, resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, I have unfortunately missed the deadline for this year's proposals but have every intention to submit my proposal for next year's conference. Finally, I hope to submit an article for publication outlining the main features of my research study to the Irish National Teacher's Organisation magazine, InTouch.

#### 5.6 Final Reflection

This journey of AR has been hugely enriching both personally and professionally. It has been wonderful to engage with the work of educational theorists such as Whitehead, Brookfield, Braun and Clarke and to become aware of the vital role that we, educators, play as agents of change in the world. It feels as though Pandora's box has been opened and a world of opportunities has been presented to me. I am now eager to continue to explore and build upon my capabilities, not solely as an educator but also as an action researcher. I feel confident in the knowledge that my practice is now representative of my core values and that I have, in turn, become a better practitioner. With the introduction of the new Primary Language Curriculum in 2019, which places significant emphasis on children's OL skills, I feel that my research provides a guide for teachers who wish to develop their students OL skills through the use of play methodologies. This AR project highlights specific play methodologies which were found to be hugely beneficial in developing my students' vocabulary and ELS, while also outlining the numerous benefits of the inclusion of these play methodologies in the classroom, such as collaborative learning, the role of enjoyment in learning and the positive impact of adult involvement in play. Alongside these benefits, this SSAR process has renewed my passion for my vocation, re-established my educational beliefs and grounded my teacher identity. It has reminded me to ensure that I never become lost in the 'fog' of paperwork or growing curricular demands but to always stay true to myself, my values and most importantly, my students (Sullivan et al., 2016). "It is not what is poured into the student, but what is planted, that counts" (E.P Bertin, n.d.).

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# Appendices

## **Appendix A: Information Letters and Sheets**



Dear Parent(s)/Guardian(s),

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is to examine the changes that I can make to my practice in order to help develop my students' vocabulary and expressive language skills using different play methodologies. Expressive language refers to how your child uses words, sentences, gestures and writing to convey meaning and express themselves.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by engaging my students in a variety of play methodologies, supported by both theory and practice. I hope to clarify which methodologies benefit the students the most. Play methodologies may include socio-dramatic play, games, rhymes and so on. It is important to note that the students are not the focus of this research. Instead, it is a self-study action research which aims to examine my values as a teacher and the ways in which I can improve my practice.

I intend to gather information on the pupils' vocabulary and expressive language skills by implementing different play methodologies, after which I will observe the pupils in the classroom. I will also gather information by conducting short conferences with the pupils, using language rubrics/checklists, assessing the pupils' work and by keeping a daily teacher reflective journal. The children will be involved in discussions about the activities and methodologies used throughout the research. Finally, I will repeat the short discussions with the pupils and use language rubrics/checklists to assess changes in their vocabulary and expressive language as a result of my teaching practices.

In the event of a school closure as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, I may need to complete research using online platforms such as 'Seesaw', Zoom calls and email. Should the school closure continue, I may also need to conduct a short questionnaire/survey via email with parents/guardians.

The pupils' names, your name and the name of the school will remain anonymous both during and after the research and will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of this research process. Participation in this research is voluntary and your child/you may withdraw from the research process at any stage.

All information will be confidential and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

I would be very grateful if you and your child would participate in this research project.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project or require further information, please feel free to contact me by email at: <u>cassie.odonnell.2021@mumail.ie</u>

Thanking you in advance.

Yours sincerely,

Cassandra O'Donnell.



**Information Sheet** 

# **Parents and Guardians**

#### Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for parents and guardians.

## What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers undertaking the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University, are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using observation, reflective notes and teaching interventions. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

#### What are the research questions?

- How can I improve my teaching of vocabulary/expressive language through play?
- What play methodologies help to develop children's vocabulary/expressive language?

## What sorts of methods will be used?

• Observations, conferences, assessment of pupils' work, teacher reflective journal, questionnaires/surveys etc.

## Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by myself as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leader Dr Bernadette Wrynn and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

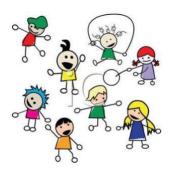
#### What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to permit me to undertake this study with my class. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with University guidelines.

## Contact details -

Student: Cassandra O'Donnell E: <u>cassie.odonnell.2021@mumail.ie</u>





Child's name .....

Teacher loves to learn new things, just like you! I am trying to find out the best way to help you to learn new words and to help you to express yourself. Expressing yourself is when you share your ideas and opinions with other people like teacher or your classmates. I would love to find out more about this so that I can be the best teacher that I can be! I will teach you some new things, you can try them out and we will talk about them. I might want to talk to you about some of the new activities we do and write about our discussions.

I have asked your mum, dad or guardian to talk to you about this. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. If you are happy with that could you tick or circle "Yes" on the form that I have sent home?

If you change your mind after we start, that's ok too.



Dear colleagues and critical friend,

I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is to examine the changes that I can make to my practice in order to help develop my students' vocabulary and expressive language skills using different play methodologies. Expressive language refers to how children use words, sentences, gestures and writing to convey meaning and express themselves.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by engaging my students in a variety of play methodologies, supported by both theory and practice. I hope to clarify which methodologies benefit the students the most. Play methodologies may include socio-dramatic play, games, rhymes and so on. It is important to note that the students are not the focus of this research. Instead, it is a self-study action research which aims to examine my values as a teacher and the ways in which I can improve my practice.

I intend to gather information on the pupils' vocabulary and expressive language skills by implementing different play methodologies, after which I will observe the pupils in the classroom. I will also gather information by conducting short conferences with the pupils, using language rubrics/checklists, assessing the pupils' work and by keeping a daily teacher reflective journal. The children will be involved in discussions about the activities and methodologies used throughout the research. Finally, I will repeat the short conferences with the pupils and use language rubrics/checklists to assess changes in their vocabulary and expressive language as a result of my teaching practices.

In the event of a school closure as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, I may need to complete research using online platforms such as 'Seesaw', Zoom calls and email. Should the school closure continue, I may also need to conduct a short questionnaire/survey/discussion via email and/or phone/Zoom calls with my colleagues and critical friend.

The pupils' names, your name and the name of the school will remain anonymous both during and after the research and will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research process. Participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw from the research process at any stage. All information will be confidential and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

I would be very grateful of your participation in this project.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project or require further information, please feel free to contact me by email at: <u>cassie.odonnell.2021@mumail.ie</u>

Thanking you in advance.

Yours sincerely,

Cassandra O'Donnell



## **Information Sheet**

## **Colleagues and Critical Friend**

#### Who is this information sheet for?

This information sheet is for my colleagues and critical friend.

## What is this Action Research Project about?

Teachers undertaking the Master of Education in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University, are required to conduct an action research project, examining an area of their own practice as a teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. Data will be generated using observation, reflective notes and teaching interventions. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

#### What are the research questions?

- How can I improve my teaching of vocabulary/expressive language through play?
- What play methodologies help to develop children's vocabulary/expressive language?

## What sorts of methods will be used?

• Observations, conferences, assessment of pupils' work, teacher reflective journal, questionnaires/surveys etc.

## Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by myself as part of the Master of Education course in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. The thesis will be submitted for assessment to the module leader Dr Bernadette Wrynn and will be examined by the Department staff. The external examiners will also access the final thesis.

#### What are you being asked to do?

You are being asked for your consent to participate in this research project. In all cases the data that is collected will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and the analysis will be reported anonymously. The data captured will only be used for the purpose of the research as part of the Master of Education in the Froebel Department, Maynooth University and will be destroyed in accordance with University guidelines.

## Contact details -

Student: Cassandra O'Donnell E: cassie.odonnell.2021@mumail.ie

## **Appendix B: Letters of Consent and Assent**



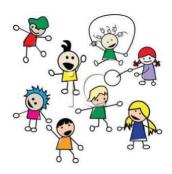
## Parental/Guardian consent form

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree/disagree to the participation of myself and my child in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Please sign and return as soon as possible.

Yes,	_ (insert child's name) will participate in the	
study.		
No,	_(insert child's name)	will not participate in the
study.		
Parent/Guardian's Signature:		Date:
Yes, I will participate in a short quest	tionnaire/survey.	
Parent/Guardian's Signature:		Date:
	··· · /	
No, I will not participate in a short qu	iestionnaire/survey.	
Parent/Guardian's Signature:		Date:





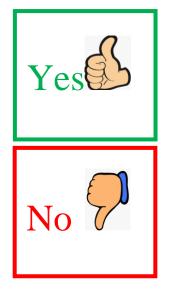
Child's assent form

My parent/guardian has read the information sheet with me and I agree to help you with your work and take part in this research. I know that I can change my mind about the research at any time if I want to.

Name of child (in block capitals):

I would like to help you with your work but I can change my mind later if I want to.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_





# **Colleagues and Critical Friend Consent Form**

I have read the information provided in the attached letter and all of my questions have been answered. I voluntarily agree/disagree to participate in this study. I am aware that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my information.

Please sign and return as soon as possible.

Yes, I will participate in the study and questionnaire/survey/discussion.

Signature:

Date:

No, I will not participate in the study or questionnaire/survey/discussion.

Signature:

Date:

## Appendix C: Letter to the Board of Management of the School



Dear Chairperson and Board Members,

This year, I have enrolled in a Master of Education (Research and Practice) programme in Maynooth University. During this Master's programme, I am required to complete a thesis. My thesis focuses on what I can do in my practice to develop and extend my pupils' learning. My aim is to examine the changes that I can make to my practice in order to help broaden my students' vocabulary and expressive language skills using different play methodologies. In order to complete my thesis, I will need to carry out research in my classroom and so, I am requesting your permission to conduct this research in the school.

I feel it important to note that the research I will be carrying out does not focus on the pupils but on myself, as an educator. It is a self-study action research project which aims to explore how I can improve my teaching of vocabulary and expressive language in the classroom. This self-study research will allow me an opportunity to both explore and improve my professional practice.

I intend to gather information on my pupils' vocabulary and expressive language skills by implementing different play methodologies, after which I will observe the pupils in the classroom. I will also gather information by conducting short conferences with my pupils, using language rubrics/checklists, assessing pupil work and using a daily teacher reflective journal. The pupils will be involved in discussions about the activities and methodologies used throughout the research. Finally, I will repeat the short conferences with my pupils and use language rubrics/checklists to assess changes in their vocabulary and expressive language as a result of my teaching practices.

In the event of a school closure as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, I may need to complete research using online platforms such as 'Seesaw', Zoom calls and email. Should the school closure continue, I may need to conduct a short questionnaire/survey via email with parents/guardians whom have given their consent. I may also need to carry out a short questionnaire/survey/discussion via email and/or phone/Zoom calls with my colleagues/focus group and critical friend.

The participants' names and the name of the school will remain anonymous both during and after the research and will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research process. Participation in this research is voluntary and participants will be informed that they may withdraw from the research process at any stage without reason.

All information will be confidential and information will be destroyed in a stated timeframe in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval/permission is granted by both The Board of Management and Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

I would be very grateful of your permission to carry out this research project.

Lastly, if permission is granted to conduct my research, I would like to apply for five study leave days. The INTO have advised that these days are available to teachers at the discretion of the Board of Management. This would be a huge help in completing my research project and I would really appreciate if you could take this into consideration.

Thank you for your continued support.

Mise le meas,

Cassandra O'Donnell

# **Appendix D: Ethical Approval**



# Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education Master of Education (Research in practice) (MEd)

# Ethics Approval for Master of Education (Research in Practice)

(Please read the notes in the course handbook before completing this form)

Student name:	Cassandra O'Donnell
Student Number:	20251775
Supervisor:	Niamh Fortune
Programme:	M.Ed. (Research and Practice)
Thesis title:	Developing Children's Vocabulary and Expressive Language Skills Through Play.
Research Question(s):	How can I teach vocabulary/expressive language through play? What play methodologies help to develop children's vocabulary/expressive language?
Intended start date of data collection:	January 2021.
Professional Ethical Codes or Guidelines used:	Maynooth University Ethics Policy, Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy, The Code of Ethics informed by the British Educational Research Association, Children First: National Guidance for the Protection & Welfare of Children 2017, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, School's Child Protection Policy.

1(a) Research Participants: Who will be involved in this research?

Participants/group (tick all that apply)	
Early years / pre-school	
. , , ,	
Primary school students	х
Secondary school students	

Participants/group (tick all that apply)

Young people (aged 16 – 18 years)	
Adults	х

Provide a brief description of the individuals and their proposed role in your research below [Max 50 words]:

Students - The students will be the twenty-one Junior Infants in my class. I will be involving my class in this research for the purpose of identifying how I might extend their vocabulary and expressive language through play.

Adults - I will ask my colleagues/critical friend(s) to review and provide opinions on my research and findings throughout in order to ensure reliability/validity.

Should schools close as a result of Covid-19, 1 may also need to enlist the help of my students' parents in order to assess my students' vocabulary and expressive language.

**1(b) Recruitment and Participation/sampling approach:** How will these participants become involved in your research? What type of sampling is involved? Please describe the formal and informal recruitment processes? Please describe the type of participation and level of engagement of participants? Are there gatekeepers and what is their part of sampling process? [Max 100 words]

To begin, I will send a letter to the Board of Management of my school outlining my research proposal and requesting permission to carry out said research. Having received permission from the B.O.M., I will then provide the participants with letters outlining the purpose of my research. I will send letters of information and consent forms to the parents of students in my class. I will explain my research proposal to my students using age-appropriate language and I will assure them that they may withdraw from the research at any time without the need for reason. My hope is that the parents and children will then give consent/assent to take part in the research. I will use convenience sampling in my research. Convenience sampling involves members of the target population that meet practical criteria such as "easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate" (Dornyei, 2007). The gatekeepers to my research are the principal and Board of Management of my school.

**3. Ethical Issues**: Please outline the main ethical issues which may arise while undertaking this research. Outline the nature of consent and assent about participants. (You should discuss these concerns and outline the responses/supports you will provide in the boxes below)

The main ethical issues which may arise during my research are consent/assent, disturbance and self-esteem. I will combat these issues by the following: Consent/assent – I will ensure to adequately explain all aspects of my research to parents/guardians, colleagues, critical friends and students in order to gain consent/assent. I will use age-appropriate simplified language when explaining the research process to my students and ensure that each participant is aware of their ability to withdraw from the research at any stage without the need for reason. Disturbance - I will do my best to minimise any disturbances to the normal flow of my classroom and the children's learning in other curricular areas as a result of my research. Self-esteem – I will ensure that I remain aware of a possible effect on the children's self-esteem during my research i.e. highlighting their perceived difficulties or as a result of comparing themselves to their peers and so, I will make every effort to remind the children that this research is about me, their teacher and how I can become a better teacher and that it is *not* focused on them.

<u>Vulnerability</u> (minimising risk, discomfort, coping with unforeseen outcomes, can any aspect of the research give rise to any form of harm to participants, including the researcher)?) [Max 100 words]

During the research, I will do my utmost to minimise any risks and prevent any discomfort which may arise as a result of the research topic/process. I am aware that my students, by nature and as a result of their age, love to please their teacher. Thus, I will ensure that my students know that this research is not a test or study to see who can learn the most new words to add to their vocabulary or talk about a topic for the longest amount of time with the greatest amount of detail. I will remind my students that this research focuses on me as their teacher and what I can do to help their learning in the classroom. My hope is that in doing so, I will alleviate any pressure or stress that my students may put themselves under unnecessarily.

Outline the potential for increased risk to participants considering changing circumstances in the school environment because of immediate closure or threat to privacy or anonymity. Consider implications for a change or changes in methodological tools (virtual formats). [Max 50 words]

In the case of school closure, some of the research may have to take place online. In this case, I will more than likely use the online learning platform 'Seesaw' or email. My class on Seesaw may only be accessed for the first time through a specific code, of which I will only send to parents/guardians of the children in my class and which expires after seven days. Individual email accounts, including my own and those of the participants of my research, may only be accessed by password. Thus, the use of password protected email accounts and the 'Seesaw' online learning platform, which is afterwards accessed by individual passwords, will ensure the privacy of my students' and participants' work/contributions should my research move online. I will also set up a feature on Seesaw which allows only myself (the teacher) and the students' parents/guardians access to their work. This will maintain the students' privacy and prevent any comparisons from taking place, be it from the students themselves or their parents/guardians. I will also assure my students and participants that, although the research may now take place online, their anonymity will remain upheld in my research thesis.

<u>Power dynamics</u> (between researcher-participants, amongst participants, insider-research, reflexivity, gatekeepers, working with your colleagues, working with students, etc): [Max 100 words]

As an adult working with children, a power imbalance is undoubtedly present and so, I will ensure to use age-appropriate language and terms when explaining my research to the children. I will provide parents/guardians, colleagues and critical friends with a plain language information sheet about the research, allowing parents/guardians in particular to explain the research process to their child. I will include my university email address so that participants may contact me should they require any further information or have an queries about the research. I will also be aware of acquiescence and remind the participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage. The principal and BOM will act as gatekeepers for my research and will oversee the research process.

<u>Informed consent and assent</u> (for participants - and guardians where appropriate. Please also note any other approvals that may be required from other bodies (i.e. Board of Management.): [Max 100 words]

I will apply in writing for permission from the BOM, including the principal, to carry out my research in the school. Next, I will receive approval from the Ethics Committee in Maynooth University. Having received approval from Maynooth University, I will then send out letters of information and consent forms to parents/guardians of the students in my class, my colleagues and critical friends. This will allow me to gain the necessary consent and assent from my colleagues, critical friends, students and parents of my students to participate in the research process. When outlining the research process to my students and other participants, I will use age-appropriate language with my students and include a plain language statement for parents/guardians, colleagues and critical friends. Having received all the required consent/assent, I will then begin the data collection process.

In the event of a school closure or illness, research data may need to be collected online. For this reason, I may need to also request consent/assent for the use of online learning platform 'Seesaw', email and for parent/guardian's willingness/unwillingness to participate in surveys, if necessary. The aforementioned changes to the research process will act as a means of carrying out the research/collecting data and of assessing the data collected/learning methodologies used in the case of a school closure or illness. I will remind the participants that all online data collected will be kept safe in password protected folders and physical data will be kept in a locked cabinet accessible only by me. I will also remind the participants that their anonymity will be maintained should the research process be moved online. My hope is that by including these scenarios, I will be enabled to continue my research to a high standard online.

<u>Sensitivity</u> (topics that may be potentially sensitive, intrusive or stressful, have you considered what to do in relation to dealing with the aftermath of a sensitive disclosure? how do you intend to deal with unexpected outcomes?) [Max 100 words] I will ensure that all materials/components of the research which I provide are age-appropriate and suitable for children. Should a sensitive disclosure occur during the research process, I will follow the school's Child Protection Policy by discussing and documenting the disclosure with the child in a sensitive manner and then passing on this information to the Designated Liaison Person in the school. Should the research process produce any unexpected outcomes that I am concerned/unsure about, I will seek advice from my principal as gatekeeper to the research or the head of the M.Ed. programme Bernadette Wrynn.

<u>Data storage (where will the findings be stored; will they be published? And by whom?)</u> [Max 100 words]

Physical data collected from the research process such as rubrics, samples of children's work etc. will be stored in a locked cabinet in my classroom, of which I have sole access to. Digital data collected such as recorded interviews, transcripts, observations etc. will be stored in a password-protected folder on my laptop. All data collected during the research process will be anonymised and in line with the Maynooth University Ethics Policy, Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy, General Data Protection Regulations and the New Data Protection Bill 2018. The names of research participants will not be labelled on any data or used in my thesis, I will use pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The completed thesis, including analysis of the research data, will be made available for any participant who may request it. The thesis *may* be published on Maynooth University's online library archive or shared with fellow members of the educational profession as a means of aiding educators in training and passing on new knowledge to fellow educators. In line with Maynooth's Ethics Policy, both physical and digital data collected will be securely stored for a minimum of ten years from the date of publication.

Ensure you have read University Ethics guidelines for Human Research and GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) related documentation to address the above questions on data.

#### Attachments

Please attach, where available and applicable, information letters, consent forms and other materials that will be used to inform potential participants about this research.

#### Declaration (Please sign and date)

'I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of undertaking this research.' If any of the conditions of this proposed research change, I confirm that I will re-negotiate ethical clearance with my supervisor.

Signed: <u>Cassandra O'Donnell</u> <u>07/11/20</u>

#### References:

- Dörnyei, Z. (2007) *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moon, J. A. (2004) *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice.* London: Routledge.

#### Supervisor use only:

Date Considered: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved	
Approved with recommendations (see below)	
Referred to applicant	
Referred to Department Research and Ethics Committee	

(Tick as appropriate)

Recommendations:

Signature of supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Department use only: (only where applicable)

Date Considered: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved by Froebel Department Research and Ethics committee	
Approved with recommendations (see below)	
Referred to applicant (changes to be approved by supervisor)	
Referred to Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee	

(Tick as appropriate)

Recommendations:

Signature of Dept. Ethics Committee Chair: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved by Froebel Department Research and Ethics committee	
Referred to applicant (changes to be approved by supervisor)	

Tick that apply)

Maynooth University Social Research Ethics Subcommittee use only (only where applicable)

Date Considered: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed:

FSS Research Ethics Committee nominee



Maynooth University Froebel Department of

Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhunagus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

### **Declaration by Researcher**

This declaration must be signed by the applicant(s)

I acknowledge(s) and agree that:

- a) It is my sole responsibility and obligation to comply with all Irish and
- EU legislation relevant to this project.
- b) I will comply with Irish and EU legislation relevant to this project.
- c) That the research will be conducted in accordance with the Maynooth University Research Ethics Policy.

d) That the research will be conducted in accordance with the Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy.

 e) That the research will not commence until ethical approval has been granted by the Research and Ethics committee in the Froebel
 Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

Signature of Student: Cassandra O'Donnell

Date: 07/11/20

	Î	xpressive La	Expressive Language Kubric	ric	
	1 Not quite there yet!	2 Nearly there!	3 Well done - you've got it!	4 Wow! Amazing!	Score
Articulation of Lacks focus on topic, Thoughts presents ideas with previding supporting details.	Lacks focus on topic, presents ideas with providing supporting details.	Good focus on topic, presents ideas with few supporting details.	Stays on topic throughout, expresses main ideas clearly and elaborates on supporting details.	Stays focused on topic, expresses main ideas very clearly and provides excellent supporting details.	
Sentence Structure/ Organisation	Presents ideas with little attention to sentence structure, transitional words or connecting ideas.	Presents ideas with some attention to sentence structure, transitional words and connecting ideas.	Structures most sentences in a logical manner with some evidence of transitional words and connecting ideas.	Structures all sentences in a logical and clear manner with effective use of transitional words and connecting ideas.	
Vocabulary	Presents ideas with little or no use of appropriate vocabulary.	Uses minimal appropriate vocabulary to describe events and ideas.	Uses colourful and appropriate vocabulary to describe events and ideas.	Confidently uses a wide range of appropriate vocabulary to present ideas and describe events.	
Non-Verbal: Eye contact/ Gestures	Presents ideas using little physical involvement. Appears distant or distracted.	Displays few feelings or emotions through gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, posture etc.	Displays few feelings or emotions congruent with ideas through gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, posture etc.	Displays all feelings or emotions congruent with ideas through gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, posture etc.	

# Evnreesive Landuade Puhric

/16 Possible Points

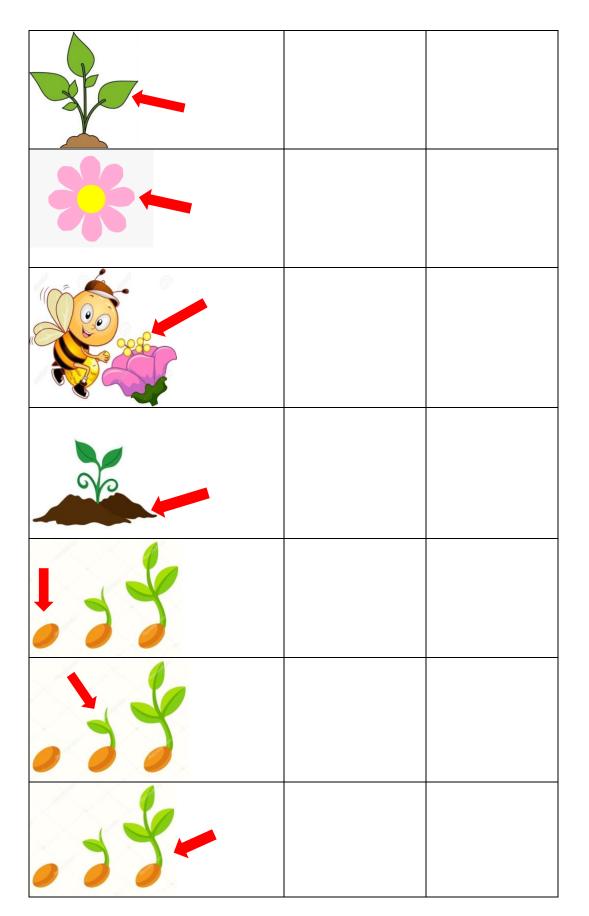
Appendix E: Expressive Language Rubric

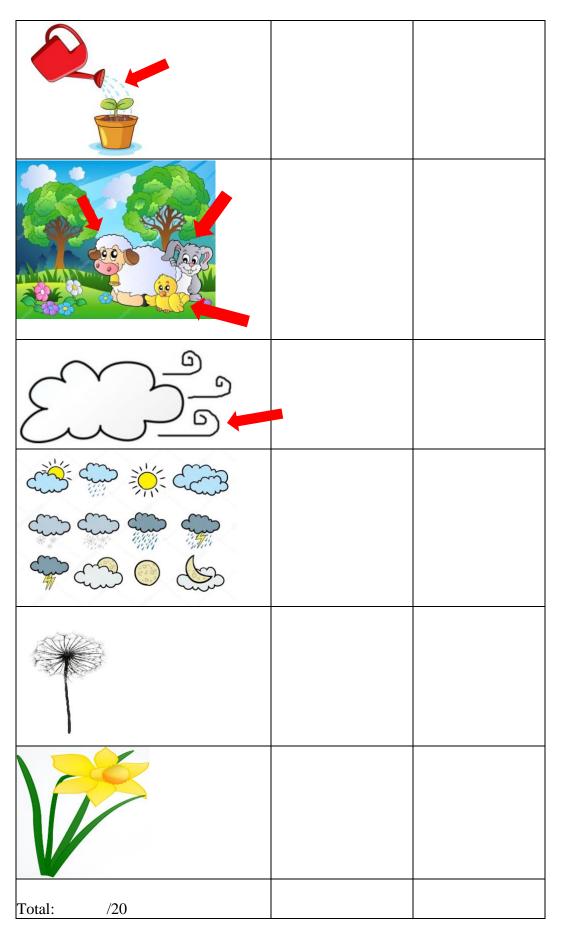
## **Appendix F: Vocabulary Checklists**

Vocabulary Checklist Cycle 1

Child's initials: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Picture:	Identify word here? √ / X	Use of word during discussion? √ / X
shutterst.zk		

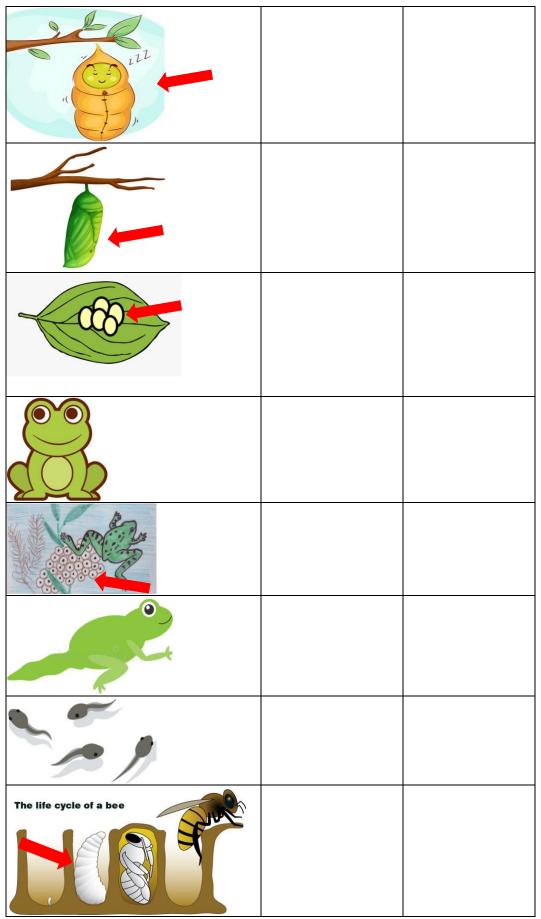


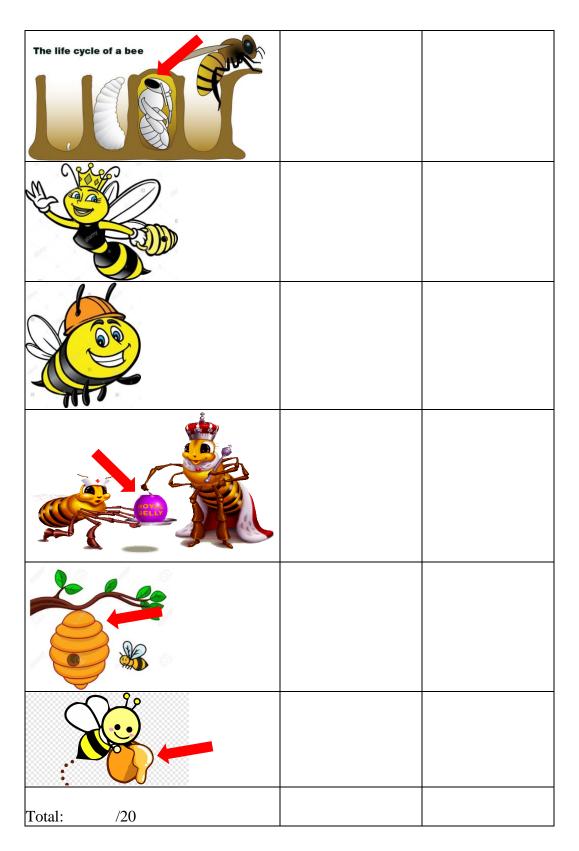


### Vocabulary Checklist Cycle 2

Child's initials: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's initials: Date:		
Picture:	Identify word here? √ / X	Use of word during discussion? $\sqrt{X}$
	а,	
SH -		

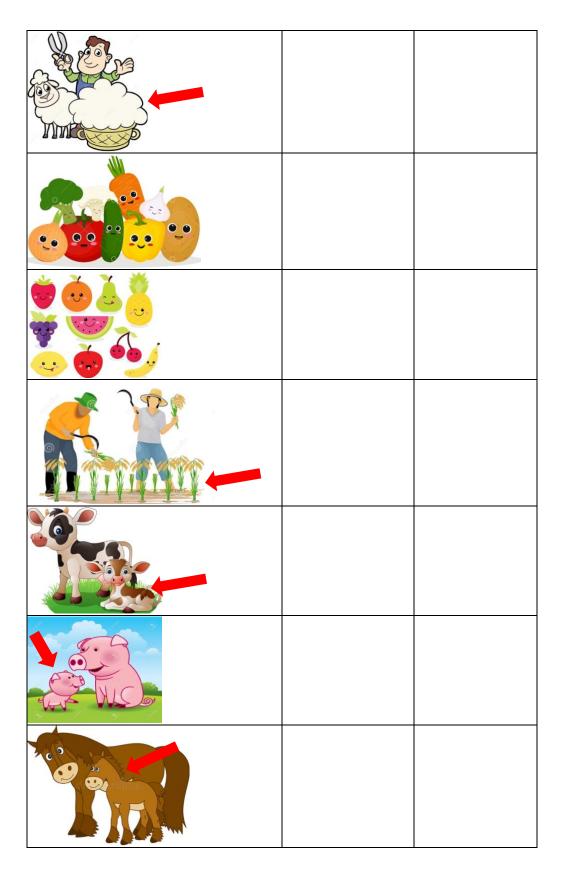


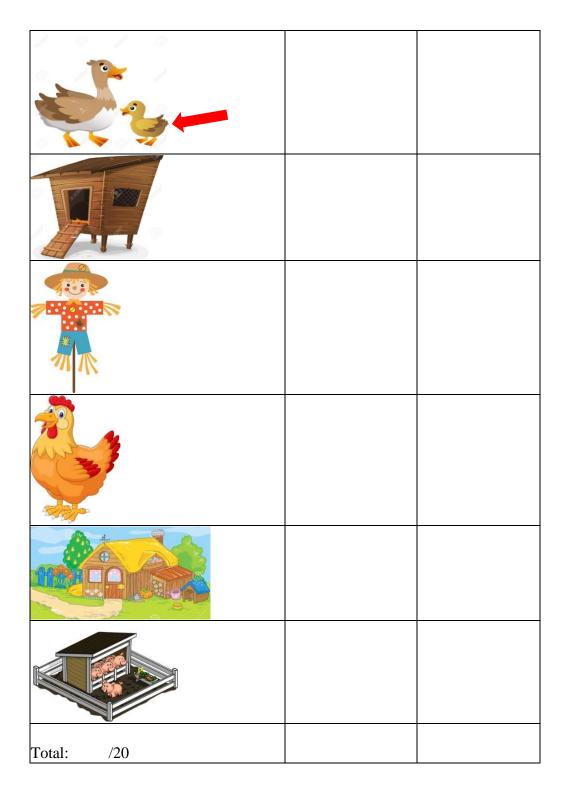


## Vocabulary Checklist Cycle 3

Child's initials: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Picture:	Identify word here? √ / X	Use of word during discussion? √ / X
And a second secon		





# Appendix G: List of Child Participant Pseudonyms

Child Participant 2 S Child Participant 3 I	Daniel Sarah Lucy Jamie
Child Participant 3	Lucy
	-
Child Participant 4 J	Jamie
Child Participant 5	Michael
Child Participant 6	Tom
Child Participant 7 C	Cora
Child Participant 8	Mark
Child Participant 9	Michaela
Child Participant 10 H	Ella
Child Participant 11	Clara
Child Participant 12	Patrick
Child Participant 13 J	Jane
Child Participant 14	Sophie
Child Participant 15	Thomas
Child Participant 16 S	Séana
Child Participant 17 J	Josh
Child Participant 18	Lisa
Child Participant 19 S	Séan
Child Participant 20	Laura
Child Participant 21 J	Jacob

Themes	Data
	• Yeah, it was so much fun! We made our own poem! We all came up with different ideas for the poem like spring animals and piglets and spring rainy weather. I wanted to add in the parts of the flowers in spring like their roots and also the insects looking for pollen but there wasn't
Impact of Enjoyment on Engagement Levels	<ul> <li>yonen but unere wasn't roommaybe in the next poemand I'll put in stem and pollen for 'sp'yeah!"</li> <li>"and then Sarah made a huge field but the pigs didn't like it, they escaped because they wanted the shade. It was so funny. So we created muck for themthat's like their sun cream. Tomorrow we're going to make a muck playground for the pigs and their piglets! I can't wait!"</li> <li>"I found a cool way to remember some of my spring wordsit's like our poem – everything is growing and then the man lost his hat when the wind was blowing because sometimes I think spring has all sunny weather but that helps me remember and then the spring air and the sheep lose their hair! It's funny!"</li> <li>"Yeah, I loved it. *Sings* A seed for me to sow, soil to make it grow,</li> </ul>

# Appendix H: Thematic Analysis Colour-Coding Process

	little shower and here's our flower."
Collaborative Learning	<ul> <li>"yeah and then that's me and Ella. The sun was going and we had to go to the hen house and collect the hen's eggs for dinner. Ella wanted two fried eggs but the hen only laid two today so we had one each for dinner."</li> <li>"Me and Mark liked learning about the frogs earsand then I couldn't remember the small frog but Jamie told me it was a froglet".</li> <li>"Me and Cora want to try the royal jelly because it sounds special and it's for the queen bee so it has to be good".</li> <li>"I didn't do that before but Michael does it and he came with me so I wasn't scared he's good at talking so I can be too."</li> <li>"Sometimes I get scared to say things but Lisa does it and we have fun together so it's okay. She says I have good ideas. Everyone likes my ideas."</li> <li>"Well, me and Patrick think that the caterpillar is very cool because he eats and eats and then sheds his skin when it gets too tight. That's so cool. And because he can change and be awhat was it Patrick? Oh yeah, a chrysalis in his cocoon."</li> </ul>

	see them in Sophie's house like the one in school."
Role of Adults in Play	<ul> <li>"My favourite part was when you Iteacher] came to the farm shop for your shopping because we had to make sure that the farmers gave us their food and that all the food was fresh. We had to make sure that it was right."</li> <li>"I liked teacher's silly rhymes because they made me laugh".</li> <li>"Yeah, it was really fun and then teacher had a good idea to serve fresh ice cream in the farm shop and then it got really busyit was from the cow's milk".</li> <li>"I found it hugely interesting to note the change in the children's engagement levels when I created some silly spring rhymes! To see Josh joining in on the fun, creating his own rhyme and confidently sharing it with the class was wonderful! It definitely makes me want to increase my own involvement in the play interventions going forward." (RJ)</li> <li>"Well, I thought it was fun when me and teacher were talking about the bees. Teacher said she would like to be a queen bee because she would get to eat all the royal jelly, but I want to be a worker bee because they get to go out and explore all the nice gardens and get nectar in the flowers. It's more fun."</li> </ul>

but notice their increased
engagement in the activities when
you participated. To see Michaela
structuring her thoughts and
opinions and using appropriate eye
contact and hand gestures while
presenting to the class was
powerful. She really wanted to join
in on the <mark>fun with teacher</mark> and
pushed herself to do so, with
wonderful results."



# Appendix I: Pictures for Initiating and Prompting Discussion

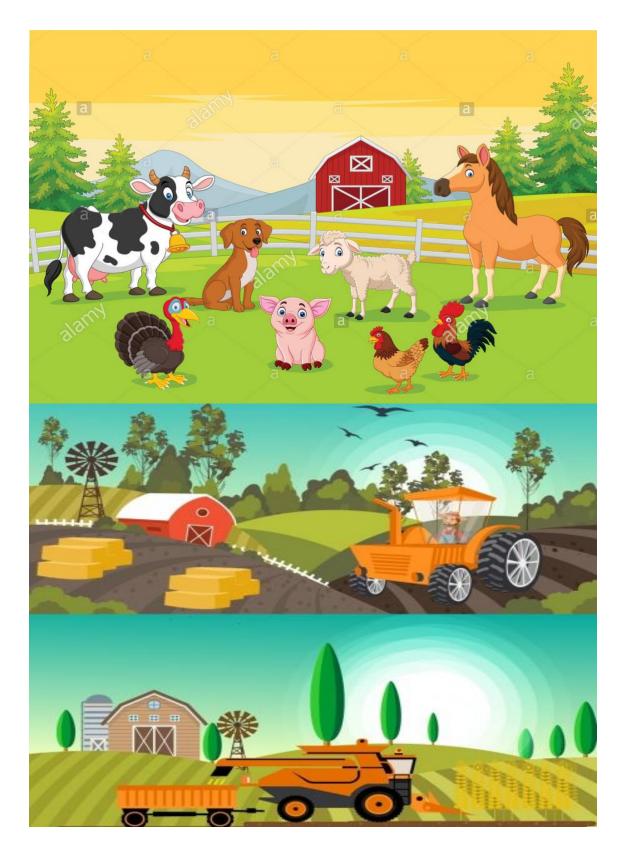








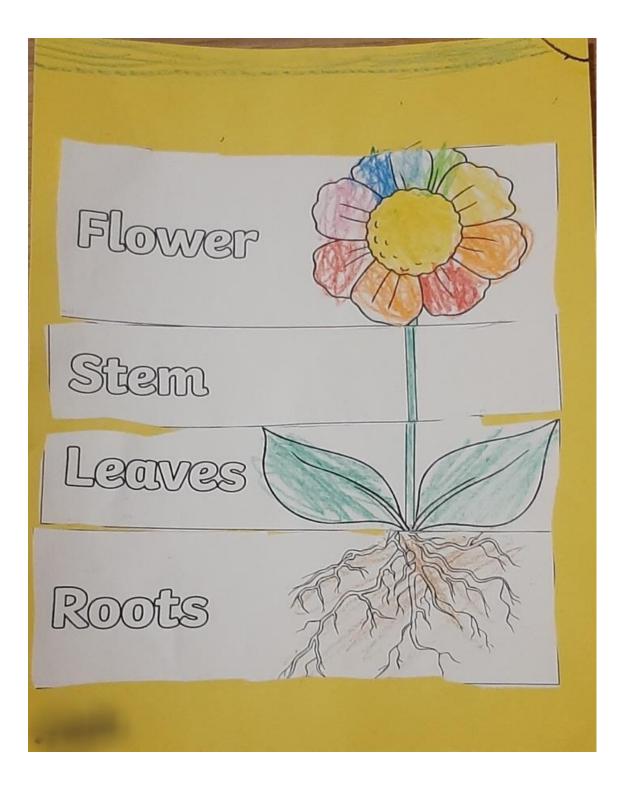




# Appendix J: Children's Work Samples



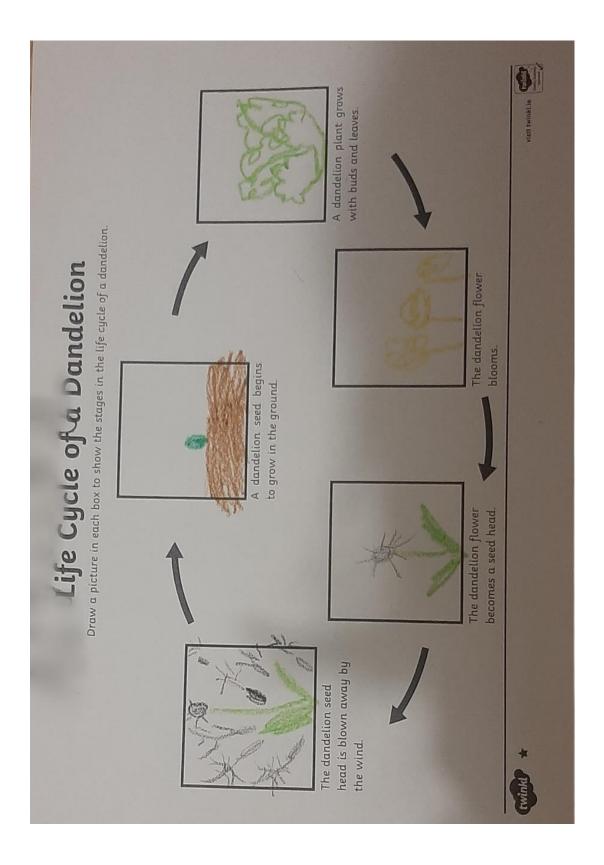
Lisa's Painting



Laura's Parts of a Flower Worksheet

F Rain CP G

Daniel's Spring Acrostic Poem



Séan's Life Cycle of a Dandelion Worksheet

## Appendix K: Socio-Dramatic Play Area



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