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M.Ed (Research in Practice)**

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**How can I better support oral language development through playful learning
experiences in my Junior Infant classroom?**

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Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University, in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Research in Practice)**

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Abstract

This thesis details the journey of a Self-Study Action Research project. Its aim was to find ways in which oral language could be effectively taught through playful learning experiences. At the beginning of the Action Research journey, I identified my values: communication, play and equality. I then examined my practice to see if I had any concerns. I identified that oral language needed to be developed in my class. I also recognised that the opportunities which I provided oral language experiences needed to be more engaging and playful. This led to the formulation of my research question, ‘How can I better support oral language development through playful learning experiences in my Junior Infant classroom?’

Self-Study Action Research was the most appropriate for this study. The focus of Self-Study Action Research is on oneself in relation to others and to your practice (Mc Donagh, 2021). The study involved 16 Junior Infant children, aged between four and six years old at the time of the research being carried out. The intervention took the form of the introduction of a puppet to the class with a cross-curricular planned approach to teaching targeted vocabulary and language. The research was conducted over three cycles, lasting three months. During the research I gathered a mix of qualitative and quantitative data and through thematic data analysis, I triangulated the results.

The findings suggest that the introduction of the puppet had an overall positive effect on the children’s motivation, listening, engagement and vocabulary. The intervention caused me to reflect on my value of play and created an opportunity for me to critically examine my own practice. Finally, and the most interesting and unexpected finding of

the introduction of the puppet to the classroom was its effect on a child with Selective Mutism. The introduction of the puppet acted as a vehicle for communication for him.

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List of Abbreviations

ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
CEA	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
CECDE	The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EECE	Early Childhood Care and Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Science
NCCA	The National Council for Curriculum Assessment
NIPT	National Induction Programme for Teachers
PBL	Play Based Learning
PLC	The Primary Language Curriculum
PSEC	Primary School English Curriculum
RTT	Resource Teacher for Travellers
SM	Selective Mutism
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SET	Special Education Teacher
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SPHE	Social Political Health Education
TA	Thematic Analysis

Chapter One

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

This thesis provides a detailed account of the Master's in Education (Research in Practice) project which I have embarked on within the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in Maynooth University.

Chapter one examines the research question I set myself and endeavoured to answer during my research. It also provides details of the aims of the study, my personal and professional background, a description of my values and a brief summary of each of the five chapters within this thesis.

1.1 Research question

Self-Study Action Research appealed to me because it focuses on the development of oneself, which in turn, if acted appropriately on, will enrich the lives of others (McNiff 2014). Initially, I identified an area which I felt needed development within my own practice. I then reflected on ways in which I could foster experiences for children which could develop their oral language. I then set about answering the research question:

How can I better support oral language development through playful learning experiences in my Junior Infant classroom?

1.2 Research Aims

The aim of this Self-Study Action Research project was to examine how could I playfully develop the oral language of the children in my Junior Infant class, through

the pedagogy of puppetry. By carrying out this research, I aimed to examine if the introduction of a puppet would enrich the oral language experiences for the children in my class.

1.3 Personal and Professional background

'Each individual teacher brings with him or her a unique mix of personal and professional experiences and commitments (Buchanan, 2015, p.700). I agree with Buchanan (2015), as teaching and life experiences have shaped the teacher I am today and will evolve and change over time. I also agree with Mockler (2011) who said that teachers have multiple identities. These identities are directly linked to their values, their school, their life experiences, and to their changing interests or professional development and understanding of specific curriculum areas throughout their career. I grew up in suburban Dublin. I completed my primary and secondary education in Dublin and went on to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts Degree from Maynooth University in 2008. After this, I obtained a Post Graduate Certificate in Primary Education from the University of Ulster in 2009.

Since then, I have taught in the same primary school in suburban Dublin. The school is classified as being one of social and economic disadvantage. In the time I have worked in my school, I have taught in a variety of roles. Within the mainstream class setting I have taught Junior Infants (4–6-year-olds) , Senior Infants (5–7-year-olds), Second class (7–9-year-olds) , Fifth class (9–11-year-olds) and Sixth class (10-12-year- olds). I have also taught in a specialised class for children with Special Educational Needs. While there, I taught children with a range of special needs including, Down's Syndrome, Spina bifida, Deafness, Bi-Polar Disorder, and mild and moderate learning difficulties. I also worked in a support role for Traveller children in our school. This

role was known as the RTT (Resource Teacher for Traveller Children). Its aim was to support, communicate and develop relationships with children from the Traveller community and their families. This was to encourage education attainment and retention within the Traveller community.

However, since 2013, I have mainly taught Junior and Senior Infants. I am passionate about teaching infants, and I have a keen interest in playful learning experiences and literacy. I believe that every child should be given the opportunity to develop their literacy skills through accessible learning in school and at home. I am the author of two published phonics books as well as published blending and vocabulary cards. I am also a mother of two children, aged 7 and 2 years old and I am a Principal Teacher and Co-owner of an Irish Dancing school.

1.4 Values

At the outset of undertaking a Self-Study Action Research project, it is imperative that the researcher's values underpin what they are doing and the reasons for doing so (Conroy et al, 2013). My values which are important to me reflect Fredrich Froebel's approaches and principles to learning. There is a connection between Self-Study Action Research and Froebelian principles (Mc Donagh, 2021). In Self-Study Action Research collaboration is encouraged. There is an opportunity for learners to learn in their own way and at their own pace. The learning experience is a positive one and finally it is an inquiry-based approach to research (Mc Donagh, 2021). The Froebelian principles of unity and connectedness, allowing children to be autonomous learners, valuing childhood and relationships, elevating creativeness and play and being a nurturing educator who supports the children's holistic development has certainly influenced my own values (Smedley & Hoskins,2018). Mc Niff (2002) states that Action Research

begins with the identification of one's values. These values have evolved through experiences and over time. When reflecting in August 2021 on my values I came up with many. *'I value love, happiness, safety, play, care, kindness, respect, harmony, communication, self-worth and equality'* (Byrne, 2021). However, upon reflection and deep thought, there were three values which stood out and were important to me. These are communication, play and equality. .

1.4.1 Communication

Communication is the way in which we connect with others. Traditionally this was considered as how we speak or talk to each other; but communication is far greater than that. It can be done through the arts, facial expressions, writing, technology, body language, gestures etc (Magagna, 2019). Silence itself can act as a very loud and meaningful means of communication (Lask, 2019). Communication is something that I value because it is an important factor in communicating needs and building relationships. Froebel said that relationships are central and important to a child's life (Smedley & Hoskins, 2018). Growing up I was always encouraged to communicate in our home and in school. It helped me to learn, develop relationships and overcome obstacles in my life. Now that I have my own children, I can see the importance of open lines of communication for relationships and for their holistic development. In school, I see the importance of effective communication with my colleagues, the children that I teach and their parents and guardians. Effective communication and using a variety of communication enhancers, can make the classroom an exciting place (Johnson, 1999). Communication with parents is essential to support children's learning in school (Graham-Clay, 2005). As I teach in a school which is classed as socially disadvantaged, the establishment of good communication helps to develop a strong partnership between teachers and parents which ultimately can support learning, success, and

retention in school (Graham-Clay, 2005). We are fortunate to have a parent's room attached to our school. The parent's room is a specific room allocated to parents where they can attend courses, meet with other parents, and build relationships in the school community. I have utilised it numerous times to run literacy courses for parents to attend. This has given parents the opportunity to learn how I teach literacy and gave them the opportunity to ask questions, communicate and build a relationship with me. For the purposes of this study, I decided to facilitate a zoom meeting for parents to inform them of my research. This gave me the opportunity to explain what I was doing and gave them a platform to ask questions. I think that this open communication attributed to the 100% recruitment of parents and children from my class, for this Self-Study Action Research project.

1.4.2 Play

Play is the second value which I identified. As a teacher who values Froebelian principles, play is a priority within the teaching and learning in my classroom. Froebel's principles emphasised that a child's learning, wellbeing, and development are aided best through play and creativity (Bruce, 2012). To educate children holistically, Froebel maintained that all aspects of learning should be linked through playful learning experiences (Liebschner, 1991). Play and a teacher's role during play time is one which has been met with conflicting theories (Broström, 2017). There are theorists who advocate for teachers to scaffold, interact, and support play. There are others who support the idea of uninterrupted play (Broström, 2017). There have also been conflicts between play-based approaches to learning and academic based learning (Stephen, 2010). However, seeing first-hand the influence of play on the children in my care; it is a pedagogy and value which I feel enriches my classroom.

When I was studying for my Post Graduate Certificate in Education I was first introduced to the theories of Froebel. Immediately, I became interested in play-based learning. My first teaching practice was where I first saw the benefits of play. As I trained in Northern Ireland, my first teaching practice was in a nursery. The children were aged between three and four years old. There is a specific curriculum for Nurseries in Northern Ireland entitled, '*Curricular Guidance for Preschool Education*' (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2018).

The guide states that '*Each day it is important that the children have access to a long period of uninterrupted play*' (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2018, p.7). It was during this first teaching practice that I saw the benefits of play. The children played indoors and outdoors. They had access to a variety of toys and resources. The '*Curricular Guidance for Preschool Education*' (2018) details the curriculum around Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Physical Development and Movement, Language Development, Early Mathematical Experiences, The Arts and The World Around Us. I was made aware of the role of adults of planning, preparing, supporting, and scaffolding play around the curriculum, while being personal and responsive to the needs of the children of the group they were working with. This initial introduction to play and to have had such a positive experience, ignited the value which I place on play. When I began teaching Junior and Senior Infants in my school it was important for me to incorporate Aistear and play based learning into my classroom. I have completed many CPD (Continuous Professional Development) courses on the topic of play. I was trained in Aistear. I was part of a group of three teachers who wrote the Aistear whole school 'Aistear plan' for my school. I wrote our whole school Policy for Aistear which was ratified by our Board of Management in 2020.

1.4.3 Equality

Equality is the third value which I identified. Ireland today is a diverse society, ethnically and culturally. There are those in Ireland who experience prejudice and discrimination. Such inequalities are based on gender, class, religion, disability, economic status, sexual orientation, language, race, and age (Murray & Urban, 2012). The 'Éist Report' published in 2001 said that discrimination and inequality *'continually and profoundly affect the lives of children and their families in Ireland'* (Murray & O' Doherty, 2004, p.18). The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE, 2004) states that it is important to nurture equality and diversity among young children. In doing so, it will promote a fairer society, one in which everyone can be themselves and reach their own potential and in which conversations about individuality, understanding and celebrating difference can take place (Duignan & Walsh, 2004). Equality in education is something which became important to me when I was 15 years old. It was the first time in my life that I experienced educational inequality. I was not welcome into a particular teacher's class because of my family situation and because of my home address. The same teacher told my mother that I would never make a primary school teacher because people like 'us' were not teachers. This incident ignited the value of equality for me. Twenty years on and it has contributed to the teacher I am today. Therefore equality, access, and opportunities for all within education is something which I value.

1.5 Pedagogy of Puppetry

After consulting with my thesis supervisor, I decided to use the pedagogy of puppetry for my intervention for this Self-Study Action Research project. The use of puppets as a pedagogical tool has a long-standing tradition with Early Years education. However, in recent years, there has been a decline in the use of puppets in the classroom (Råde,

2021). Other professionals such as paediatricians and child therapists still strongly favour the use of puppets (Råde, 2021). This conflicts with a survey I conducted during this research. I discovered that 71.9% of teachers surveyed use puppets in their classroom (Byrne, 2022). Those who do not make use of a puppet (28.1%), explained that self-confidence and the age of the children were the reasons for not using one (Byrne, 2022). I found this very interesting as reflecting on my own childhood, puppetry was a highly influential pedagogy used while I was growing up. Therefore, my research was based on the use of a puppet to help to teach and retain new language.

1.6 Aistear

‘Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework’ is a curriculum framework for children from birth to six years old. It is intended to provide opportunities for educators to plan enjoyable, playful, challenging learning experiences, assess children and build relationships and partnerships with parents and guardians (NCCA, 2009). The Aistear guidelines state that children’s development is attributed to *‘holistic learning, active learning, play, meaningful experiences, communication and language and the learning environment’* (NCCA, 2009, p.10-12). In my research setting, Aistear is a daily activity which takes place as a ‘stand-alone’ play time for fifty minutes to an hour each day. For this study, I devised a plan for each cycle of the research to integrate most of the primary school curriculum subjects, based on the Aistear theme for that time. I did this to maximise the opportunities to expose the children to the oral language and vocabulary which I wanted them to learn, using a puppet.

1.7 Thesis Structure

Below is a summary of the structure of each chapter of this thesis.

1.7.1 Chapter One- Introduction

Chapter one details the research question and aims of the research for this Self-Study Action Research Project. It also gives an insight into my values, the pedagogical tool I chose, and Aistear.

1.7.2 Chapter Two- Literature Review

Chapter two examines the literature which was relative to this Self-Study Action Research Project. It examines literature relevant to my values of communication, play and equality. It explores the use of puppetry in the classroom. Finally, it investigates literature on a Special Educational Need, specifically Selective Mutism. This emerged during this Self-Study Action Research project and was an unanticipated finding. Because of this, I read and revisited the literature review to incorporate and learn more about Selective Mutism.

1.7.3 Chapter Three-Methodology

Chapter three is the methodology chapter. It describes various research paradigms that can be used when conducting research. It has a specific focus on Self-Study Action Research. It also details the research design, the intervention, the research, the data collection tools, data analysis and the ethical considerations for this Self- Study Action Research Project.

1.7.4 Chapter Four- Findings and Discussion of Data

Chapter four is the findings and discussion of data chapter. It details the qualitative and quantitative data collected for the purposes of this research. It describes how triangulation is a positive outcome for using a mixed method approach. It details Clarke and Braun's (2017) six step system for thematic analysis. This was the model used to analyse the data for this Self- Study Action Research Project. It explains the messiness

of Self-Study Action Research and the importance of the researcher adhering to their values. Within the findings, it labels the five themes which have been discovered during this research. I became aware of how the intervention had a positive impact on the children's acquisition and retention of language. I found that the intervention helped to break down the barrier of power between the students and myself. I discovered that I was a living contradiction to my value of play. Finally, the chapter documents an unanticipated, positive finding which resulted from the intervention on a child with Selective Mutism.

1.7.5 Chapter Five- Summary and Conclusion

Chapter five is the summary and conclusion chapter. It provides a detailed summary of this Self-Study Action Research Project. It describes the limitations of the study due to the availability of literature and the social context in which it was set. The chapter provides recommendations for future and further research. Finally, it suggests ways in which the research and findings can be shared.

1.8 Summary

This chapter has detailed the research question and aims of this Self-Study Action Research Project. It provides personal and professional background about me, the researcher. It introduces my values of communication, play and equality. It gives details of my chosen pedagogy of puppetry. It details Aistear- the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework which I based my themes, language, and vocabulary around for each cycle of my research. Finally, it gives a brief account of each of the five chapters which are included in this thesis.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a of the literature related to oral language, playful learning experiences and barriers to successful oracy because of a Selective Mutism.

The first section examines oral language, the importance of its development and its role in literacy and reading in the context of communication. The second section looks at Aistear and its role in the Infant classroom. The third section focuses on the specific pedagogy of puppetry and how it can be brought into the infant classroom to enhance language development. Finally, the fourth section examines a barrier which some children face in becoming competent within oral language, specifically Selective Mutism.

2.1 My Values

This study is influenced by my values of communication, play and equality as I strive to answer the following research question: How can I better support language development through playful learning experiences in my Junior Infant classroom?

2.1.1 Communication

The term ‘communication’ means different things to different people. For some it simply means the way in which we speak to each other. For others, like me, communication is so much more than that. It is the way in which we learn, communicate our needs, express

ourselves, create our identity and shape our values (Magagna, 2019). Communication is an overarching phrase which includes oral language, reading, writing, body language, dance, drama, sculpture, photography, facial expression, sign language, music, painting, poetry, and play (NCCA, 2009). Communication is something which I value as it enables education, the formation of relationships, and helps to express needs, desires, and dangers. Therefore, it is no surprise that my self-study action research centred around an element of communication, which I hoped to explore and develop further, that of oral language.

2.1.2 Oral Language

‘Oral language is the child’s first, most important and most frequently used structured medium of communication, as well as contributing significantly to the promotion of literacy skills and general academic development, oral language activity contributes enormously to the all-round growth and development of the child.’

(Cregan, 1998, p.7)

Oral language is the way in which we use words and phrases to communicate with each other and the way in which we listen to each other (Peterson, McIntyre and Forsyth, 2016). The Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (2016) notes that *‘Language enables children to engage emotionally, socially, cognitively, imaginatively, and aesthetically in relationships and cultural experiences. It empowers children to develop their thinking, expression, reflection, critique, and empathy, and it supports the development of self-efficacy, identity, and full participation in society’*, (NCCA, 2016, p.6). Children present themselves in school at the age of four or five years old with little ‘formal’ oral language education. However, for the most part, they can communicate their needs, form friendships and step into the world of education quite well (Cregan, 1998). Some,

therefore, question the value of explicitly teaching oral language as children have an excellent comprehension of explicit communication (Schulze & Buttelmann, 2021). However, there are many studies which reinforce the importance of oral language development, as the foundation stone for reading and writing and all learning (Kumaravadivelu, 2005).

In 2015, Hulme et. al conducted a study entitled *'The Foundations of Literacy Development in Children at Familial Risk of Dyslexia'*. The study involved the examination of a group of preschool children who either had a family history of dyslexia or poor oral language skills, and the possible reading and writing difficulties they faced. The report concluded that success within reading fundamentally depends on oral language skills (Hulme et.al, 2015). The report determined that schools should be inclusive in their teaching of phonological awareness and phonics as well as the inclusion of broader oracy (Hulme et.al, 2015). Similarly, a report from Catts et al, (2002) found that 48% of children who had language difficulties at 5-and-6 years-of- age, had literacy difficulties when followed up at 9-and-10 years-of-age (Myers & Botting, 2008). Correspondingly, Stothard et al, (1998) discovered from their sample of 5- and 6-year-old children who had been identified as having difficulties with language, when followed up at 15 years of age, 93% had literacy difficulties (Myers & Botting, 2008).

Snow, Burns and Griffins (1998) acknowledge that children's acquisition of good oral language skills at an early age, plays a key role in the success of literacy in later life. Likewise, the importance of narrative oral language skills amongst preschool children, has been documented to be an important factor in long term school success (Reese et al,2010). Similarly, Barnes (1988, p.52) said *'Spoken language should be developed in a context of living issues, of critical inquiry into how the world is.... This implies that the context for speech should be the whole curriculum'*. Archer et al, (2012) agrees that there

has been an advancement in Ireland in that the spoken word has gained recognition and traction as a legitimate form for teaching and learning in primary schools. Therefore, it is little surprise that in the most recent updated Primary Language Curriculum, oral language has gained an elevated status within literacy education in Ireland (NCCA, 2016).

2.1.3 Primary Language Curriculum

The Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) was introduced into Irish primary schools in September 2016 (NCCA, 2016). The new PLC was developed to replace the 1999 Primary School English Curriculum (PSEC). The PLC was created in response to developments within Irish society, e.g. the introduction of the Early Childhood Care and Education (EECE), and enhanced research on oracy, reading and writing development amongst children (NCCA, 2016). The new PLC differs to the 1999 PSEC by its delivery and amalgamation of both Irish and English teaching and learning in primary school (NCCA, 2016). An information leaflet distributed to parents by the NCCA notes *'your child will have lots of opportunities to talk in class...The curriculum highlights the importance of children developing their oral language skills as well as learning to read and write'* (NCCA, 2016, p.1).

There are three strands in the Primary Language Curriculum, oral language, reading and writing. Included in these strands are 3 elements which include developing communicative relationships through language, understanding the content and structure of language and exploring and using language (NCCA, 2016). Notably, the elements and strands are all interwoven and interestingly the PLC states that, *'while each strand supports the development of the other, the oral language strand requires specific attention in the early years of primary school as it is fundamental to the development of reading, writing and learning across the curriculum,'* (NCCA, 2016, p.15). The idea that

oral language should be central to the delivery of the curriculum is not something new in Irish primary schools (Cregan, 1998)

Curaclam Na Bunscoile (DES, 1971), advocated for oral language development in classrooms (Cregan, 1998). However, the publication of '*The Quinlan Report*' (1990), described how oral language was neglected in most primary school classrooms (Cregan, 1998). One of the reasons given for this was that the curriculum was rooted in an Aristotle approach to learning, which focused on the traditional 'reading, writing and arithmetic' (Cregan, 1998).

During the development of the 1999 PSEC, there was a feeling of excitement that finally oral language was being recognised as a significant aspect of primary school education (Cregan, 1998). In response to the 1999 PSEC, Dunphy (2008, p. 33), commented that it was envisioned that oral language would be part of '*every aspect of the curriculum*'. However, a report commissioned in 2012, '*Oral language in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years)*', comments that despite the innovation that the 1999 PSEC had regarding oral language, its success was limited by planning, implementation, assessment and understanding by educators (Archer et al. 2012). The report suggests that due to several changes since when the 1999 PSEC was introduced, namely an increased comprehension of how language develops in young children and increased focus on pre-school education and the introduction of Aistear, a new Primary Language Curriculum would need to be devised (Archer et al. 2012).

2.2 Play

The idea of the integration and the extension of pre-school and early years education into primary school leads me on to my next value, play. There are many definitions of play from psychologists and theorists including Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget, Froebel,

and Vygotsky who have all documented a variety of research supporting the effectiveness of play-based learning (Mooney, 2013). Accompanying the various definitions there are various opinions, values and importance placed on play in the classroom. Froebel advocated that play is the principal means of learning for children, and that their comprehension of the world is shaped through it (Liebschner, 2006). The National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA, 2009) states that play helps the holistic development of children. It helps them to express their feelings, develop their thinking, language, and social skills, become creative and imaginative and helps to establish a base for them to become competent learners. I agree that play is the most natural way children learn, therefore it is one of my values.

2.2.1 Aistear

In 2009 a programme known as '*Aistear- the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*' was introduced in Ireland (Hayes & O' Neill, 2017). Aistear is the conceptual framework for play based learning which was introduced for Early Years Settings and primary school children from birth up to 6-years-of-age (NCCA, 2009). Aistear, the Irish for journey, promotes a journey of learning in an environment which is child-lead and orientated around play. It should be supported by adults for the initial six years of a child's life (Kernan, 2007). This idea of a children learning in a child-led environment is linked closely to the ideas of Froebel, who advocated for children to be free from rote learning (Bruce, 2021). Rather, the focus of their learning should be centred around the child's own ideas and first-hand experiences which are all linked to play (Smedley & Hoskins, 2018). Aistear describes play as a powerful learning tool (Woods et al, 2021). The purpose of Aistear is to ensure that children are stimulated in an environment that has an abundance of learning opportunities, suitable age-appropriate resources, and equipment which in turn initiate discovery, language, relationships, and learning (Woods

et al, 2021). It is widely recognised that the aims and policies of Aistear are heavily influenced by Vygotsky's theory of play being a child's first interaction with self-education (NCCA, 2008). It empowers parents as the children's primary educators, and promotes relationships between practitioners and parents (NCCA, 2008). It is said to '*complement and extend (the) existing curriculum and materials*' (NCCA, 2008, p.6).

2.2.2 Aistear and The Primary Language Curriculum

The idea that Aistear was to complement the Primary School Curriculum (1999) is something which I think heavily influenced the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) in 2016. The PLC recognises the importance of Aistear and its aims and characteristics (NCCA, 2016). The popularised idea of a play-based curriculum is something which has been globally implemented in recent years. In 2009, Australia introduced '*The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*'. In 2010, Poland initiated '*Core Curriculum*'. Both Canada and Estonia revised their curriculums respectively. In 2014, the United Kingdom introduced the '*Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*' (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Despite specific curriculum differences, each of the countries elevated play-based education through their childhood pedagogy and practice (Gray & Ryan, 2016). The Irish PLC (2016) strives to '*show the importance of play and playful learning experiences for children's language learning*' (NCCA, 2016, p.31). The idea of playful learning experiences in both Aistear and the PLC are innovative and a move away from previous 'traditional education', which focused mainly on academics rather than on the holistic development of the child (Churchill-Dower et al, 2013).

2.2.3 Primary School Curriculum, Primary Language Curriculum and Aistear.

There are clear similarities and differences between the Primary School Curriculum (PSC), Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) and Aistear (Gray & Ryan, 2016). All the documents hold play in early childhood education in a high regard (Gray & Ryan,

2016). The PSC specifically mentions that play has an imperative role in all levels of teaching and learning (Conway, 2007). Aistear celebrates the journey the child is on with a focus on the present, whereas the PSC focuses on being able to '*enable children to meet, with self-confidence and assurance, the demands of life, both now and in the future*' (NCCA,1999, p.6). All three documents support the idea that that each child is on a journey and that each stage of that journey should be integrated (Gray & Ryan, 2016). However, the differences between the PSC and Aistear lie within assessment and the role of adults in children's learning. Both documents acknowledge the importance of the role of adults, but it is in the definition of their roles that differ (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Aistear highlights the shared relationship between the child and the adult, whereas the PSC takes more of a traditional role of the adult being the child's instructor (Gray & Ryan, 2016).

2.3 Playful Learning Experiences

For many years a teacher's role in play has been controversial (Golbeck, 2014). There are those scholars who believe that there is no place for a teacher during play time. (Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 2001). Then there are other theorists who believe that a teacher's involvement in play elevates it to meet its full potential (Manning-Morton & Thorp, 2003; Singer et al, 2014; Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2010). Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) note that play is important to unite academic, social, and emotional development in young children. There are numerous trends which attempt to integrate play and academics in early years education (Råde, 2021).

2.3.1 Play Based Learning

One attempt to integrate play and academics is known as play-based learning (PBL). PBL is specifically child-centred learning in a playful manner. It is concerned with the

child's development and interests specific to the individual child (Taylor & Boyer, 2019). The learning, playing, and teaching experiences created by PBL are sometimes called learning outcomes. These outcomes within PBL can become complex and the focus on play can be lost to academics; thus, narrowing pedagogical approaches and play (McArdle et al, 2019).

2.3.2 Scaffolding

'Scaffolding' is a term which originates from Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Van Der Stuyf, 2002). It relates to how a child can learn by the supported help of an adult. Vygotsky himself defined scaffolding as the *'role of teachers and others in supporting the learner's development and providing support structures to get to that next stage or level'* (Raymond, 2013, p. 176). Scaffolding acts as a temporary bridge to build on knowledge that the children already know, to extend that knowledge to make new discoveries (Van Der Stuyf, 2002).

2.3.3 Playful Language Teaching

Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) describe how playful language teaching and learning can embrace two separate approaches to scaffold and develop oral language experiences for children. The first includes a focus on play with language being included into it, for example socio dramatic play (NCCA, 2016). The second is language which is experienced in a playful way for example using puppets, tongue twisters, jokes, or teacher-in-role (NCCA, 2016).

2.3.4 Guided Play

Another attempt to integrate academic work and play is known as guided play (Wallerstedt and Pramling, 2012). The trend of guided play favours academics and play equally (Råde, 2021). Guided play combines children's free play and learning outcomes

with the support of adults. Guided play is underpinned by two key elements, child autonomy and adult guidance (Weisberg et al, 2016). With this self-study action research in mind and my ability to scaffold language in a playful way, I have been drawn to a question posed in the PLC, *'how can playful characteristics be infused purposefully and meaningfully into aspects of language teaching and learning in children's primary school experience?'* (NCCA, 2016, p.9) The pedagogy I chose to attempt to fuse play and language experiences together in my classroom was that of puppetry.

2.4 Pedagogy of Puppetry

A puppet is an inanimate doll which is manipulated and moved, conveys emotions and is given a voice by a puppeteer (Krögera, 2019). Puppets have been long established as successful pedagogical tool in teaching (Råde, 2021). In some countries across the world, puppets are used as a methodology in teaching and learning in schools (Winslow, 2020). In the classroom, hand puppets can be used in a variety of ways, which can be scripted- as in a traditional puppet theatre or unscripted. The unscripted use of the puppet involves discussion, questions, dialogue, and assessment in the classroom (Remer & Tzuriel, 2015). Puppets are diverse in that they can be used in a variety of ways across a variety of lessons in a variety of subjects (Kroflin, 2011).

2.4.1 Benefits of Puppetry

The benefit of puppetry is that they are very visual. They can stimulate children, create excitement, encourage engagement and motivation (Tierney, 1995). Simon et al, (2008) noted that the introduction of a puppet to a science lesson encouraged the children to converse and get involved in thought provoking discussions. Another study conducted by Remer and Tzuriel (2015) discussed how the puppet helped to broaden the class

discussion on a scientific topic. Puppets can help teachers improve classroom talk (Kröger, 2019). Maharani (2016) agrees that puppets can act as a springboard for the development of oracy skills. Gupta and Lee (2015) state that by introducing puppetry to the classroom children provide children with an opportunity to promote oral language. Lepley (2001) noted that there was much value in introducing a puppet to children, specifically for the development of language skills. A puppet can help with bringing subjects, specifically literature to life for students (Gupta, 2020). Bernier, O'Hare and Linn (2005) say that puppets are very versatile; they can communicate with people of all ages, cultures and learning abilities.

2.4.2 Power Barrier

Puppets can break down the power barrier between the adult and the child, thereby, encouraging children's participation (Hunt & Renfo, 1982). Simon et al, (2008) discusses how when a puppet is given equal status as the children, it encourages them to communicate more openly and with confidence. This is because there is no power barriers distinguished. Brezigar (2010) agrees that a puppet can encourage even very shy children to get involved in conversations, articulate feelings and become more involved in oral language activities as power barriers are diminished. Çağanağa and Kalmış (2015) support this by stating that puppets create an open, more relaxed atmosphere where children feel stress-free when speaking to a puppet rather than a teacher. Lepley (2001) noted that children are more comfortable to express themselves, share their ideas and develop a more collaborative classroom, working together with the teacher with the introduction of a puppet. Rief and Heimburge (2007) agree that puppets empower students to speak up and give children a boost in confidence.

2.4.3 Communication and Oral Language

Most notably for me is how the use of a puppet in a classroom can enhance and encourage children's communication and oral language skills. Eleven studies I researched (Ahlcrona, 2012; Brèdikytè, 2002; Çağanağa & Kalmış, 2015; Hackling, Smith, & Murcia, 2011; Simon, Keogh, Naylor & Maloney, 2008 ; Korošec, 2012; Korošec, 2013; Maharani, 2016; Moriguchi, Sakata, Ishibashi, & Ishikawa, 2015; Remer & Tzuriel, 2015; Simon, Naylor, Keogh, Maloney, & Downing, 2008) detail in their findings about how the introduction of a puppet increased communication and helped generate oral language and discussions in classrooms.

2.4.4 Impact of Puppetry

However, despite the documented benefits of the use of puppetry in children's playing and learning, Råde (2021) notes that there are few theories supporting such benefits. Kröger (2019) agrees that puppets are a useful pedagogical tool, but also acknowledged that the impact of puppets on learning is at an infancy stage. However, both agree that puppets should be integrated into teaching education, and they should be utilised particularly when there are barriers to communication and oral language development.

2.5 Selective Mutism

Selective Mutism (SM) is a rare, childhood anxiety disorder which is characterized by a child's inability to speak in certain, specifically social situations (Vasudevan et al, 2021). It affects less than 1% of children and often goes undiagnosed until a child is 4 or 5-years- of- age. The child's age at the time of the diagnosis is relative to the child's transition into preschool or primary school. This can be because it is possibly their first time away from their primary care givers (Vasudevan et al,.2021). It has been also suggested that the situation of school causes children with SM to have increased levels

of anxiety, because of the demands placed on them in school, which are primarily rooted in communication (Viana, Beidel, & Rabian, 2009).

2.5.1 Selective Mutism and Relationships

A key component of a child's development in school is down to the relationship they form with their teacher. This is particularly important for children who develop atypically (Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003). Collins, O'Connor, Supplee, & Shaw (2016) agree that a strong student-teacher relationship is crucial in a child's early introduction into school. In children who are diagnosed with SM, the student-teacher relationship is even more integral for the development of the child academically, socially, and emotionally (Longobardi et al, 2018). There are of course difficulties with this, as both Longobardi et al, (2018) and Prino et al, (2016) discuss. They argue that teachers who have a child in their class who presents with SM find it difficult to form a relationship, or it may take a longer period to do so. The suggested reasons for this are the silence, lack of eye contact or lack of smiles that a child with SM may present with. Thus, the formation and maintenance of student-teacher relationship can be difficult (Pasta et al, 2017).

2.5.2 Puppetry and Special Educational Needs

As equality is one of my values, it is important to me to make a continuous effort to communicate, teach and build a relationship with each child in my class. It has been noted that the pedagogy of puppetry can be an effective tool to encourage children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to converse and communicate (Belfiore, 2013). Hunt and Renfro (1984) note that when puppets are used with children with SEN, the puppet helps to build the child's self-worth, encourages emotional regulation, helps to establish relationships, breaks down the power barriers and encourages communication. Aronoff

(1996) agrees that puppets used during Speech and Language Therapy sessions with children ensured engagement, communication, and attention during the sessions. Therefore, the use of puppetry has the potential to be an inclusive tool to generate communication, build relationships and create a positive atmosphere in the classroom (Kröger & Nupponen 2019).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed relevant literature pertaining to oral language, play, playful learning experiences, the pedagogy of puppetry, and Selective Mutism. The literature reflects the values I hold of communication, play and equality. In reviewing articles for this literature review I have become even more aware and reflective of the role that playful pedagogies and have on my own practice.

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Self-Study Action Research involves examining one's own practice to ensure it is upholding one's values, identifying something that needs improvement and exploring a means to make said improvements (Mc. Niff, 2016). The purpose of this Self-Study Action Research Project was to examine how I, the researcher, could scaffold and support oral language development among children aged 4-and-5 years-old.

Specifically, I examined their daily playful language experiences and how I could make the best use of the pedagogy of puppets to support their oral language development in my Junior Infant classroom.

The research question which I focused on was, 'How can I better support language development through playful learning experiences in my Junior Infant classroom?'

This chapter includes a description of the various research paradigms, the research design, the intervention, the research, the data collection tools, data analysis and the ethical considerations for this Self-Study Action Research Project.

3.2 Qualitative and Quantitative Research

When we embark on a journey of research, we do so to find out something new, that we don't already know (Glenn, 2021). We then make a claim that we have made a new discovery, describe how we came to our conclusions, why the new knowledge we have acquired is important and finally we explain how we have tested our findings against

critical feedback from other people (Mc. Niff, 2016). This is the case for all forms of research. Research always centres around knowledge, if the research does not, it cannot be validated as research (Cohen et al, 2000).

3.2.1 Quantitative Research

Quantitative research is known as a scientific investigation. It uses experiments, emphasises control and quantifies measures of performance (Capaldi, 2005). Statistics are central to quantitative research. This form of research tests and develops hypotheses and generates new theories of explanation (Hoy & Adams 2016). For the purposes of this study the quantitative data which I collected took the form of pre- and- post language checklists, children's interviews and a teacher's survey

3.2.2 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research focuses on behaviour and the reasonings behind such behaviour (Hoy & Adams, 2016). Generally, it has an abundance of descriptions, that of people, places and conversations which happen mainly among small studies of people (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). For the purposes of this research the qualitative data which I collected was mainly in the forms of my reflective journal and observations. The qualitative data which I collected was obtained and reflected upon in respect of Brookfield's (2017) four lenses of critical reflection. Brookfield (2017) states that by informing ones teaching practice through the four lenses of our students, colleagues, personal experience and using theory will help one's critical reflection. My reflective journal documents my Self- Study Action Research journey from August 2021 until June 2022. The reflective journal details my thoughts, honest opinions, and reflections on each day in school. Prior to beginning this Self- Study Action Research project, I could never have imagined the importance and value which the reflective journal would be in terms

of data collection. During the data analysis process, I read and reread back through all the daily entries highlighting words which corresponded to the themes I identified. I recorded observations on post-it notes. These too were invaluable because I could jot down immediately a response, an observation, or a thought, which later could be stuck into my reflective journal. For the purposes of this study my reflective journal entries and observations formed much of my research data.

3.3 Research Paradigms

There are many ways to conduct research. They differ in that they are designed to suit the purpose for which they are intended for. Choosing a form of research depends on what the desired outcome is. All research intends on finding out something which is unknown (Mc. Niff, 2016).

Research paradigms have been described in many ways. Kühn and Hackling (2012) described paradigms as sets of beliefs that provide theoretical frameworks which navigate the purpose, reasoning and means of research. Lather (1986) said that a paradigm reflects the researcher's beliefs about the world that they want to live in. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) explain that a paradigm is a framework based on theory.

Below are examples of some of the research paradigms that are available when conducting educational research. Each individual paradigm carries its own pedagogies and theories relating to teaching and learning. The information gathered via the researcher's preferred means then informs policies, practices, assessment, professional and personal development (Taylor & Medina 2011).

3.3.1 Positivist Approach

The positivist approach to research is one which is objective. Testing is conducted, quantitative data is collected, and it ensures certainty. For this reason, scientists use the positivist approach as their preferred paradigm of research. This type of paradigm is usually used to test theories or hypotheses (Taylor & Medina, 2011). It is useful for collecting data on a large scale. As it is quantitative by nature, the positivist approach investigates, uses experimental methods or treatment and most of the time the data is gathered via pre and post testing to quantify results (Wang & Zhu, 2016). Given (2008, p.715) argues that those who are involved in quantitative research are reliant and concerned with '*internal and external*' validity. For this reason, they can be dismissive of qualitative research. However, qualitative researchers question the validity of quantitative research methods on philosophical grounds (Given, 2008).

3.3.2 Interpretative Approach

The interpretive approach to research is one which is subjective. It is as the name suggests- it is interpretative in nature, and from the data collected, one can draw their own conclusions on the information (Taylor & Medina, 2011). It provides qualitative data. The interpretive paradigm is largely used in the humanities and is heavily influenced by anthropology (Taylor & Medina, 2011). The researchers engage in a process where they try to understand their subjects by walking in their shoes (Taylor & Medina, 2011). Within educational research the interpretive approach encourages teachers to engage in more reflection, to further develop their understanding of the students which they are teaching (Palmer, 1998). Teachers who centre their lessons or themes on the interests of the children in their class, and those who use student-centred pedagogies by means of the emergent curriculum, practice the interpretative approach (Taylor & Medina, 2011).

3.4 Action Research

The Action Research approach to conducting research is one which is suitable for the social sciences and teaching and develops qualitative opinions, resulting in the researcher developing a theory (Mc Niff, 2016). According to Carr & Kemmis (1989, p.162) “*action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out*’. Mc Niff (2016, p. 9) says that ‘*Action Research is about evaluating your practice to check whether it is as good as you would like it to be, identifying any areas that you feel need improving, and finding ways to improve them*’. She continues to say that if teachers engage in Action Research, they can be transformed into what Schön (1991) described as reflective practitioners and as Brookfield (2013) has described as critical thinkers, and finally as Arendt (1958) called agents for social and personal change (Mc Niff, 2016).

Action Research is underpinned by six key principles. These principles guide the research (Winter, 1987) . It is notable that despite being qualitative in nature and sharing several similarities with interpretative research, Action Research is determined as being a paradigm of praxis (Nielson, 2014). This essentially means that the researcher decides on their research paradigm, then they outline their procedure or method they used to implement an intervention and then they judge the quality (praxis) (Fassinger, 2005). There are various types of Action Research including Narrative Enquiry Participating Research, Practitioner Research, Living Theory Action Research and finally Self-Study Action Research (Mc Donagh et al. 2020).

3.4.1 Living Theory Action Research

'Living theory Action Research establishes the relationship between the individual and the social context with the explicit use of action-reflection cycles in moving forward the inquiry that includes the expression of concerns if the values of the individual are lived fully in practice or not' (Shrestha, 2021, p.20). Living theory Action Research was developed by Jack Whitehead in the early 1970's to address issues which he came across while conducting research centred around the psychology of education (Shrestha, 2021). Whitehead (2019) stated that Living Theory Action Research must not only centre around the educational learning derived from the research; but that the learning, to constitute as educational must include values, hope, and make strives for the overall improvement for humanity.

3.4.2 Self-Study Action Research

Self-Study Action Research involves research into one's own educational practice. Those who embark on it have a desire to enhance their practice (McDonagh et al, 2020). McNiff and Whitehead (2005) discuss two reasons why teachers should conduct Self-Study Action Research. The first is to improve their own teaching and learning and secondly to create some sort of new theory from it. It is important to note that this style of research is rooted in the *'enquiry by the self into the self... in the company of others'* (McNiff & Whitehead 2002, p.15)

3.5 Why Did I Choose Self- Study Action Research?

Self-Study Action Research is rooted in research into one's educational practice, with a desire for enhancement of that practice (Brookfield, 2017). Self-Study Action Research is said to be appropriate for teachers who recognize a shortcoming in their educational setting or activity and act upon it by formulating a plan, carry out an intervention,

evaluate the outcomes and develop further strategies to embrace a change (Hopkins & Ahtaridou, 2008). Self-Study Action Research appealed to me. It required me initially to critically examine my own educational practice. I decided that a change was needed, and I went on to develop a plan to implement changes and detailed my findings and recorded data related to the changes (Sullivan, 2022). As the focus of Self-Study Action Research is on the 'self', one's values must be articulated at the beginning of a Self-Study Action Research project (Brookfield, 2017). After reflecting and focusing on my values, I decided upon the three which were most important to me. My values of play, communication and equality were at the forefront of my research for this project. The researcher is then required to identify a problem in their own practice (Mc Donagh et al, 2020). They then must critically determine if change is required. I had noted that the oral language and vocabulary of the children in my class needed development. Also, my own practice of enhancing the children's learning experiencing using a playful pedagogy needed enhancement. A plan, action, observations, and reflections are formulated, data is collected and is analysed, and the findings are articulated (Mc Niff, 2016). I then engaged in three cycles of Self-Study Action Research. These cycles involved planning, acting, researching, observing, collecting, analysing, and making conclusions based on the findings from my research. What appealed to me most about Self-Study Action Research was that it is personal, value-based and practice-enhancing. Also, because Self-Study Action Research relates to the Froebelian principles which will be described in the next section (Mc Donagh et al, 2020).

3.6 Froebelian Principles in Terms of Action Research

Froebel maintained that teachers are knowledge creators, that collaboration is valuable and should be encouraged for good social relationships (Bruce, 2021). He said that learning should be done in a way which is individual and suited to the needs of a person

and at their own pace (Liebschner, 2006). Froebel stated that learning itself is something which should be non-coercive. It should always be a positive experience and finally that any inquiry was the best approach to educational research (Lawrence, 2011). Self-Study Action Research and the Froebelian principles are concerned with learning about oneself, the world around us in which we live, the enhancement of social relations and collaborating with others (Mc Donagh et al, 2020). From an epistemological stance both believe that knowledge is developed through a creative means using a various discovery and inquiry methods (Mc Donagh et al, 2020). The integration of the Froebelian principles and self-improvement and study, heavily influenced my decision to embark on my Self-Study Action Research journey.

3.7 Research Design

The following research design section outlines a description of my research setting , my research participants, a description of my intervention and the timeframe involved in the research study.

3.7.1 Research Setting

Given (2008, p.788) said that the research setting can be viewed as the '*physical, social, and cultural site in which the researcher conducts the study*'. What makes the research setting unique is that the setting is not necessarily controlled by the researcher, i.e., in a laboratory. Instead, it is the natural place that the researcher finds themselves in (Given, 2008). Furthermore, Smith (2012) states that the research setting is far more than merely the location in which the research is being conducted. It encompasses location, people, feelings, films, texts, interpretations, and realities that researchers are investigating.

My research was conducted in a DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) Band 1, multi-stream, vertical school, located in an urban setting. The school has been given a DEIS status because the children who are enrolled are at risk of educational disadvantage (Department of Education, 2020). At the time that the research was conducted, the school had 362 children enrolled. There were 18 mainstream classes, an ASD (Autism) class and 2 preschools on site. There were 18 mainstream class teachers, with 7 SETs (Special Educational Teachers) and 15 SNAs (Special Needs Assistants). The research was conducted in a Junior Infant classroom in which, I, the researcher, was the mainstream class teacher.

3.7.2 Research Participants

According to Winter (1987) participants in an Action Research project act as co-researchers. The participants in my Self-Study Action Research were as follows:

- Myself the researcher (the mainstream class teacher in Junior Infants)
- Sixteen pupils between the ages of 4-5-years- old in Junior Infants
- Two critical friends
- My thesis supervisor
- My validation group members

Critical friends

A critical friend is a trusted person who provides feedback to a researcher (Costa & Kallick, 1993). A critical friend asks provoking questions, examines data, offers suggestions and a critique of the research (Costa & Kallick, 1993). They take the time to become familiar with the research and what the researcher is working towards (Costa & Kallick, 1993). Finally, they support the researcher and the success of their research project (Costa & Kallick, 1993). My two critical friends are two individuals

who I started my undergraduate degree with in 2004. One works in education as a primary school teacher and the other is a Speech and Language Therapist. My critical friends have been supportive, provided feedback, and challenged my research throughout this process. They have been invaluable. We have met over zoom. They provided feedback and ideas during the process. They also challenged my ideas and findings and gave me a platform to explain the process I was going through at each step. They supported me, shared their expertise, and made suggestions during the cycles of my research and during the writing of the thesis.

Thesis Supervisor

A thesis supervisor is a person who provides support, knowledge for students to enhance their research during the preparation, organisation and writing of their thesis (Heath, 2002). They also ensure that the thesis is of an acceptable standard (Heath, 2002). My thesis supervisor has been a significant person during this process. He has given me his time, challenged my thoughts, made me think at a higher level, teased out ideas and thoughts, provided resources and literature, offered corrections and suggestions, and has supported the success of this research from the very beginning.

Validation group

A validation group is a group of people who are gathered from the researcher's professional circle (Mc Niff, 2002). Throughout the research process the group meet to listen to the progress the researcher is making, challenge ideas and offer suggestions (Mc Niff, 2002). My validation group provided helpful feedback and suggestions throughout my research. For the purposes of this research, I sent a questionnaire out to my validation group asking their opinions about oral language, playful learning experience and Aistear in their classrooms. I got a 100% return rate on the

questionnaires. According to Baruch and Holtom (2008), the average rate of response for questionnaires is 52.7% with a standard deviation of 20.4%. I think that I had such a high level of responses to my questionnaire was because it was done over Google Forms, so it was quick to complete. It was anonymous and the teachers were known to me and had an interest in the research I was doing. Their feedback, interaction, suggestions, and challenges were a vital part of the research process for this project.

3.8 Description of Intervention

3.8.1 Time Frame of the Study

Action Research is completed in cycles. The cycles are usually represented in a cyclical or spiral illustration and usually consist of four steps. These include reflection, planning, acting and observation (Mc Niff, 2016). Upon reflection, the researcher may make another plan which can result in the beginning of another cycle (Mc Donagh et al, 2020). Lewin (1946, p.206) described action research as *'a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action'*.

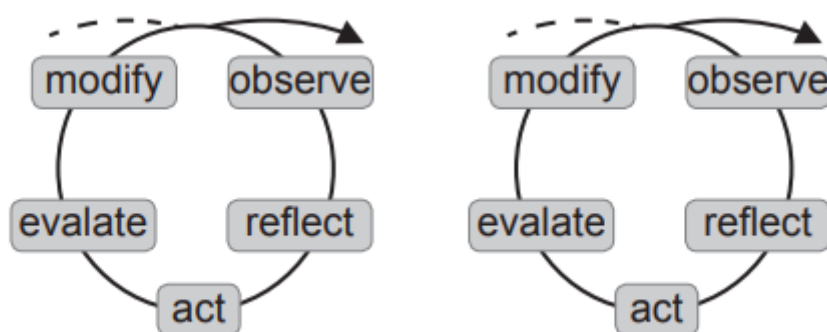


Figure 1: Kurt Lewin's Action Research Model (1946)

McNiff and Whitehead's (2006, p.8) model of Action Research consists of five steps known as '*action-reflection*'. These five steps are known as '*observe, reflect, act, evaluate and modify*'. Whitehead and Mc Niff (2006) state that when the researcher engages in observing, they will identify a concern. Reflecting results in the thought or planning process. The act involves implementing an intervention. The action reflects the gathering of data. And finally, the evaluation of if the intervention has been a success will be conducted from through reflection. Modification happens if a further change is needed, and the cycle begins again in a new direction (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006).

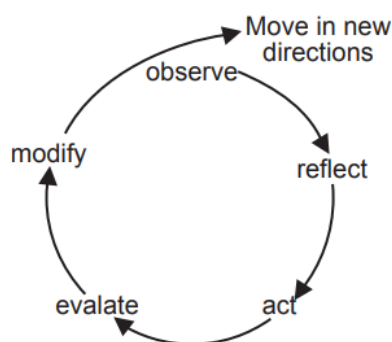


Figure 2: McNiff and Whitehead's Action Research Cycle (2006)

Figure 3 below is the research cycle schedule for my Self-Study Action Research project. The research schedule was planned over a three-month period from February-April 2022.

Each month had a new Aistear theme, for example in February our theme was 'At the Hairdressers'. In March the theme was 'At the Restaurant'. In April the theme was 'At the Farm'.

Before the start of each cycle, I wrote an integrated subject plan. Appendix A details an integrated subject plan which I used during one of the cycles. An integrated subject

plan integrates several primary school subjects around a particular theme. I decided on the oral language and vocabulary which I would explicitly teach relating to the theme. Using the language checklist (Appendix B and Appendix C) I pre-tested the children's vocabulary prior to beginning the theme /cycle. I sourced the resources I would need for each cycle. I then followed the integrated subject plan and taught the subjects and language which I had identified. At the end of each cycle, I tested and then re-tested the children on their vocabulary and language they had acquired.

Research Cycle Schedule		
Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
February 2022	March 2022	April 2022
Theme: At the Hairdressers	Theme: At the Restaurant	Theme: At the Farm

Figure 3: Research Cycle Schedule

3.8.2 Steps Taken During Each Cycle.

Figure four below, details the steps which were taken during each of the three cycles of my Self-Study Action Research Project.

Pre cycle 1 January 2021
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical approval was given by the Board of Management and Principal of my school. • The parents and children of my class were informed of the research and consent and assent for their participation was obtained. • Aistear themes chosen • Integrated subject plans devised. • Pre and Post vocabulary and language check lists developed. • Resources gathered and created to support teaching and research. • Puppet introduced to the class.
Cycle 1 At the Hairdressers February 2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-vocabulary and language checklist completed. • Explicitly taught vocabulary and language. • Taught and delivered the integrated subject plan.

- Aistear socio-dramatic area and alternative stations set up.
- 5 Aistear sessions a week for 50-60 minutes each day.
- Aistear sessions were unstructured, and children freely moved from station to station during the sessions.
- Teacher, making use of the puppet circulated the groups using a variety of strategies to scaffold, converse and play along with the children to support the targeted vocabulary and language.
- Sent out questionnaire to my validation group.
- Collected data.
- Post-vocabulary and language checklist completed.

Cycle 2 At the Restaurant

March 2022

- Pre-vocabulary and language checklist completed.
- Explicitly taught vocabulary and language.
- Taught and delivered the integrated plan.
- Aistear socio-dramatic area and alternative stations set up.
- 5 Aistear sessions a week for 50-60 minutes each day.
- Aistear sessions were structured, and children were stationary for each of the sessions.
- At the beginning of each session the children were encouraged to plan what they would do at their designated Aistear station.
- Teacher, making use of the puppet circulated the groups using a variety of strategies to scaffold, converse and play along with the children to support the targeted vocabulary and language.
- At the end of each Aistear session, children reviewed what they did during their Aistear session.
- Met with my validation group.
- Collected data.
- Post-vocabulary and language checklist completed.

Cycle 3 At the Farm

April 2022

- Pre-vocabulary and language checklist completed.
- Explicitly taught vocabulary and language.
- Taught and delivered the integrated plan.
- Aistear socio-dramatic area and alternative stations set up.
- 5 Aistear sessions a week for 50-60 minutes each day.
- Aistear sessions were structured, and children were stationary for each of the sessions.
- At the beginning of each session the children were encouraged to plan what they would do at their designated Aistear station.
- Teacher, making use of the puppet circulated the groups using a variety of strategies to scaffold, converse and play along with the children to support the targeted vocabulary and language.
- At the end of each Aistear session, children reviewed what they did during their Aistear session.
- Collected data.
- Post-vocabulary and language checklist completed.

Figure 4: Steps taken during each cycle.

3.8.3 Pedagogy of Puppetry

Råde, (2021) commented that the pedagogy of puppetry has been a long-established successful resource for teachers in a classroom. Our class puppet ‘Rosie’ was introduced to the class in January 2022. Remer & Tzuriel (2015) stated that puppets can be used for teaching, assessment, discussion, and questions in a classroom. I carefully planned an integrated, cross-curricular plan to maximise the targeted language for the children (Appendix A) . Puppets are visual, they stimulate, spark interest and motivation in children (Tierney, 1995). I scripted ways to explicitly teach the targeted language using Rosie our class puppet, and various resources- picture cards, concrete materials etc during oral language lessons, SESE, SPHE etc. I engaged in discrete language lessons during the other chosen integrated subjects. I also engaged in mini lessons, individually and as part of a small group with the children. We played lots of language games; I Spy, Shopping List, Cluiche Kim to help. Rosie the puppet was there to learn alongside the children.

I role-played during Aistear with Rosie the puppet. Making use of the puppet, I conversed with the children during Aistear. These conversations included asking them for a description of what they were doing, scaffolding where needed, focusing on the specifically chosen vocabulary and language for that month. I used the puppet to help to demonstrate how to make an appointment or how to ask for a particular hairstyle in the hairdressers or how to order food in the restaurant or finally how to be a shopkeeper in the farm shop. During Aistear, Rosie and I would circulate around the room going from station to station, listening, observing, and playing with the children. Rosie’s role was to scaffold the targeted language and hopefully develop the oral language of the children. Bernier, O’Hare and Linn (2005, p.75) noted that *‘now more than ever, puppetry has a role in building student motivation, providing opportunities to develop a*

love of language and literature, and so much more. Teachers should be excited by the possibility and the power of puppets’.

3.8.4 Data Collection

Whitehead et al, (2019, p. 72) argue that *‘the most important aspect of data collection is producing an evidence-based validated explanation for educational influence’*. The data which was collected during this Self- Study Action Research project was done so through various means. These included my schemes of work, observations, reflective journal entries, interviews, pre and post language check lists, artefacts, and role play.

3.8.5 Schemes of Work

Rule 126 of the 1965 Rules for National Schools says that at the beginning of each year teachers must prepare detailed schemes of work for each subject, suitable to the needs of the children in their class (Department of Education, 1965). In recent years the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) have provided guidance, details, and layouts for planning for long- and short-term planning (NIPT, 2022). Following the publication of the New Primary Language Curriculum in 2015, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) produced a sample planning template for teachers to access (NCCA, 2015). Alongside my monthly planning, which is done in collaboration with my colleagues from Junior Infants, I devised a separate template which I found helpful for integrating the chosen topics across the curriculum. I found by doing this they allowed me to clearly see the language I wanted to focus on and the opportunities I had throughout the day to ensure I was explicitly teaching them.

Appendix A shows an example of the ‘integrated language planner’ that I used in my class during cycle 3. It details the differentiated language and integrated opportunities across the primary school curriculum as well as Aistear for the topic of The Farm.

3.8.6 Observations

Patton (2002 pp. 203-204) says that '*Observational data are attractive as they afford the researcher the opportunity to gather 'live' data from 'live' situations. The researcher is given the opportunity to look at what is taking place in situ rather than second hand*'. Observations were used regularly throughout my research process. If something stood out or I wanted to record something that happened, I would write it down on a post it, date it and later record it formally in my reflective journal.

3.8.7 Reflective Journal

A reflective journal was a place where I considered my day in my class. The purpose of it was to reflect on an experience of a day, positive or negative. Schön (1991) developed the theory of reflective practice. His theory encourages reflection to be done during an event (reflection in action) and after an event (reflection on action).

Reflection in action occurs as something happens. The researcher acts and responds immediately to an event in the moment. Research on action occurs after something happens. The researcher takes time to think, consider and reflect on an event and think about any changes which are needed for the future (Schön, 1991). My reflective journal began in August 2021. I used it most days to reflect on something which stood out, either positive or negative in my day. As mentioned above, I also used reflection in action, whereby if I noted something in class that happened or response a child had given, I would note it down on a post-it and keep it for my reflection journal entry for later that day. I found it far more beneficial than I ever imagined, and it acted as the main source of data collection for this study. Chapter four details entries and themes that emerged from the data collected in my reflective journal.

3.8.8 Interviews

The use of interviews in research breaks the barrier between seeing research subjects as merely humans who generate quantitative data and humans who converse, build relationships, discuss the world they live and express opinions (Steinar, 1996).

Interviews take many forms however for the purpose of this Self-Study Action Research project they took the form of a structured, semi-structured and unstructured/ conversational interviews. My focus was to ensure that the interviews are qualitative in their approach, i.e., they looked from the inside, were open-ended, individual, subjective, and ethnographic (Cohen et al, 2000). I used a structured interview with the children (see Appendix D). These were time consuming as I had to interview each child individually. They did however inform my research and gave me an insight into the children's likes and dislikes for a particular topic. If I had the opportunity to conduct research again, I would come up with an age-appropriate questionnaire on Google Docs that the children could access on iPads or tablets in the classroom.

3.8.9 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews require the researcher to loosely sketch a map of the direction of the interview but is flexible in terms of adapting to the way in which the interviewee responds (Conroy et al., 2013). I chose four members of my validation group to conduct this semi-structured interview with during cycle two of the research project. Appendix E details the guideline of questions that were asked during the semi structured interview.

3.8.10 Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured conversational interviews also took place with my validation group and children in my class. Unstructured interviews generate data through open-ended

questions. They are informal in nature and are more conversational than formal. The positives of unstructured interviews are that they are flexible, generate more data as the interviewer can probe and ask deeper questions and have increased validity (McLeod, 2014). I used these very informally with the children in my class when we were finished each theme. I then tried to use their suggestions going forward into the next theme. Appendix D details the questions which I asked the children during the interview at the end the topic 'At the Hairdressers'. One of the responses that came up numerous times was that the children enjoyed using 'real life' props, rather than toys. Therefore, when we began the theme of the farm, I ensured I used fresh vegetables, real money, real bags, empty cartons, and other resources for them to play with. Furthermore, I got permission and organised a mobile farm visit our school at the end of the topic. This visit exposed the children to 'real life' animals and equipment used on the farm. It was a very successful experience for the children.

3.8.11 Questionnaires

Questionnaires are very useful for gathering information (Artino et al., 2014). The validation group consisted of those who work/ have worked with infants in my school. They were asked to answer questions relating to playful language experiences in their classrooms, specifically the use of oral language, puppetry, Aistear, and playful learning experiences. During cycle 1, using Google forms, questionnaires were distributed amongst the group which included open and closed questions see Appendix E and Appendix F. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions. I approached 32 teachers who all had experience with teaching infants and asked them to fill in an anonymous questionnaire relating to oral language, puppetry, and Aistear on Google Docs (Appendix E and Appendix F). I had 100% return rate on the questionnaire. From the literature from Baruch and Holtom (2008), I know that this is an unusually high

return rate. I think that it was so high because I know the teachers personally, they all took an interest in this Self-Study Action Research project and because it was anonymous. I decided to use the format of Google Docs for the questionnaire as it was a quick and easy format to circulate and quantify results. The results from the teacher's questionnaire informed a decision I made to the intervention in cycle two. It also gave me an insight into how other teachers teach oral language and how they might use the pedagogy of puppetry in the classroom. The teacher's questionnaire acted as a valuable piece of data which I collected.

3.8.12 Pre-and-Post- Language Checklists

According to Jaluo Murunga, Gatumu and Origa (2019) checklists are important to help to inform teaching and to assess children's knowledge. I devised checklists of language and vocabulary that I would expect the children to know at the end of the intervention. These lists were differentiated. Prior to the intervention taking place, I distributed a check list to the children and see what vocabulary and language related to the theme they already knew. Following the intervention, I distributed the checklist again to see if the intervention attributed to the acquisition of more language or not. Appendices B and C give examples of the checklists which were completed pre and post the topic of 'At the Farm'. Notably, I conducted a further language checklist after each cycle, to tally the amount of language retained by the children.

3.8.13 Artefacts

Artefacts in the form of pictorial responses were collected from the children during the research process. Given (2008) states that artefacts are recordings of events that happened in the past. They are also a means of formally documenting an event, time, or

experience which someone had. The children were encouraged to use pictures as a means of reflection or as an artistic response to the theme.

3.8.14 Role-Play

Taylor and Walford (1978) stated that there are advantages to using classroom stimulation / role play. These include heightened excitement in learning, a sustained level of interest, a transformation in the relationship between teacher and pupils, an increased role awareness , increased communication, it works as a vehicle to bridge the gap between school and real-life situations, decision making experiences and learning that awakens the ‘whole’ child- cognitively, emotionally, and socially. Gupta and Lee (2015) agree that role play helps children to practice their language, interact with each other stimulate thinking skills and increase dialogue with others. Initially I chose an Aistear theme and devised vocabulary and language lists relating to the theme. I then created an integrated subject plan for the month. Using the means of roleplay and puppetry I introduced the children to the Aistear theme and vocabulary. Figure 5 shows an example of the role play area which was set up during cycle one. The role play area included resources which the children availed of. There were pictures of hair styles and also equipment found in the hairdressers, all of which included the targeted language for the topic which I expected the children to know at the end of the cycle. Similar role play areas were set up for cycle two and cycle three. They also included resources for the children to play with suitable for each theme. The targeted language was also displayed for each cycle in the role play areas also.



Figure 5 : Cycle One Role Play area

3.9 Analysis

Data analysis is an essential part of research. Depending on the type of data collected, i.e., qualitative, or quantitative data, the analysis too will differ (Conroy et al, 2013).

Qualitative research data which has been collected via interviews, focus groups, reflective journaling etc required a qualitative data analysis approach and then identifies common patterns for them. The researcher then critically analyses them to support their studies (Dudovski, 2018).

The form of data analysis which I used in this Self- Study Action Research Project was thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2017). This will be discussed further in chapter four.

3.10 Validity

Validity can be defined as *'a construct that can be used to evaluate the quality of qualitative research studies, including Action Research, and that because of the moral and political aspects of Action Research we are compelled to ask whether the results of our inquiries are valid'* (Feldman, 2007, p.7). Heikkinen et al, (2007) composed five principles for validation for Action Research. They claimed that validation in Action Research should be narrative in nature. Firstly, it should begin with disclosing the current practice, the principle of historical continuity. Secondly it should give thought,

the principle of reflexivity. Thirdly it should elaborate the journey, the principle of dialectics. Fourthly it should produce practices which can be utilised by others, the principle of workability and finally the validity should be ethical, the principle of ethics (Heikkinen et al, (2007). For this research and its validity, the data I collected was triangulated between my critical friends, validation group, and the literature. This process ensured consistency and allowed me to establish the limitations of my findings.

3. 11 Ethics

There is importance placed on upholding ethical guidelines while conducting Action Research (Mc Niff, 2016). It is important that the researcher is flexible and responsive to any matters which may arise during the research. It is vital that the researcher is open with all participants, ensures confidentiality and maintains security. The combination of all the above strives to ensure that ethical standards are upheld while conducting Action Research (Forster & Eperjesi, 2017). In accordance with the ethics guidelines in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education in Maynooth University as per the 'Master of Education (MEd): Research in Practice Student Handbook, 2021-2022 which states *'it is imperative that the ethics and integrity of research are beyond question as the individual has a responsibility to him/herself and society.'* (Wrynn, 2021). I went about seeking ethical approval for my Self- Study Action Research Project and the ethical application which was submitted was approved by the relevant ethical committee members from Maynooth University.

After this, I wrote to the Board of Management and principal of my school seeking approval for my project (Appendix H). This was granted in January 2022. I then informed the parents and pupils of my class about my research. I made a special PowerPoint and information sheet, which were age appropriate for the children, explaining the project (Appendix I and Appendix J). I also hosted an online 'Zoom'

meeting for the parents and guardians in my class to inform them about my research (Appendix K). This also gave them a platform to ask questions about the research. I felt it was important to open the platform of discussion, give all the information and allow the parents and children time to comprehend the research project themselves.

The parents were then given consent forms (Appendix L) and the children were given assent forms (Appendix M) to participate in the research. Each child was told they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research. By facilitating the Zoom meeting, I feel that this attributed to the successful agreement to participate in the research.

Baruch and Holtom (2008) note that participation rates in research ranges between 30 and 50%. I think that because of the zoom, because I am an established teacher in the school and because I was open to questions at any stage during the research contributed to the 100% participation rate in the research for this study.

3.12 Data Storage

Data storage and retention which relates to this research is in line with the Maynooth University Research Integrity Policy, General Data Protection Regulations, and the New Data Protection Bill 2018. All data including transcripts, observation notes and signed consent forms are stored in a locked filing cabinet only accessible to the researcher. Electronic data is stored on a password protected computer and data will be stored for at least a minimum of ten years after publication. This ensures confidentiality and anonymity for all participants involved.

3.13 Conclusion

In this chapter I have given a description of the various research paradigms, the research design, setting, timeframe, participants, a description of the intervention, the

research the data collection tools, data analysis and the ethical considerations for this
Self-Study Action Research.

Chapter Four

Findings, Results, Discussion.

4.0 Introduction

This chapter details the methods and findings from the data which I collected. It explains the organisation and analysis of the data. It considers the main findings and themes which emerged from the data analysis, and its impact on the children and on the researcher. The chapter also details an unanticipated finding. Finally, it gives a conclusion of what I discovered during this Self- Study Action Research project.

4.1 Methods for Data Collection

As mentioned in chapter three there were a variety of tools used to collect data. These included primary and secondary sources. The tools which I made use of were schemes of work, observations, reflective journal entries, interviews, questionnaires, artefacts, and role play.

4.1.1 Qualitative Data

Boeiji (2009, p.76) said that *'qualitative analysis is the segmenting of data into relevant categories and the naming of those categories with codes while simultaneously generating categories from data to generate theoretical understanding of the social phenomenon under study in terms of research questions'*. I made use of observations, my reflective journal and artefacts when analysing the data which I collected. The data gathered for this Self-Study Action Research project was primarily gathered using qualitative data.

For example, when the topic was ‘At the Hairdressers’ during cycle one, some of the children drew a particular hairstyle in response to Rosie the puppet’s question: *‘If you could have any hairstyle in the whole world, what would you like yours to be?’*

Answering this question Child E drew the image below and said, *‘I’d have rainbow hair with blonde highlights. My Mammy gets blonde hair’* (Child E, 8th February 2022).

The words blonde and highlights were included in the vocabulary which were being explicitly taught to the child during the cycle. Therefore, I thought it was important to record their response (Figure 6). The image from Child E was photographed as an artefact, the response was recorded and photographed and later the incident was written in my reflective journal. This incident also showed me that Child E had remembered some of the vocabulary which was being explicitly taught. They engaged in a conversation with Rosie the puppet and spoke about their parent at home to her.

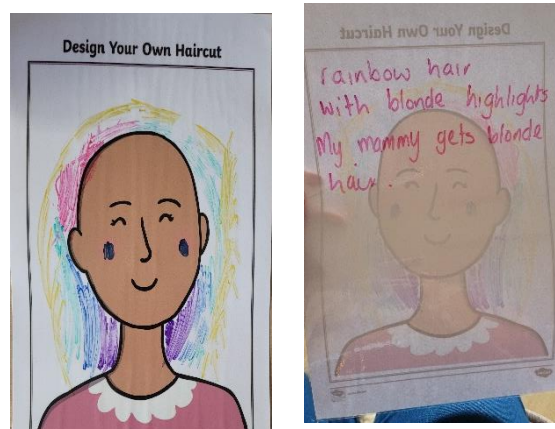


Figure 6: Design your own haircut 8th February 2022

4.1.2 Quantitative Data

I also collected quantitative data in the form of pre and post language check lists and questionnaires for example. This type of data is seen to have more objectivity than qualitative data (Putman & Rock, 2018). Some of the most interesting quantitative data

which I collected came from a questionnaire which was distributed amongst teachers.

The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions incorporating oral language, playful learning experiences, the pedagogy of puppetry and Aistear (Appendices F & G). The questionnaire caused me to reflect on the teacher's responses and make changes to my own practice, especially during cycle two of the research project. The questionnaire provided quick, accessible data which I could easily formulate into a chart and analyse.

The data which I collected gave me an insight into my colleague's opinions about oral language.

When asked about the importance of the explicit teaching of oral language, 100% of those who answered agreed that it is very important (Figure 7), (Byrne, 2022).

Do you think the explicit teaching of vocabulary and oral language is important?
32 responses

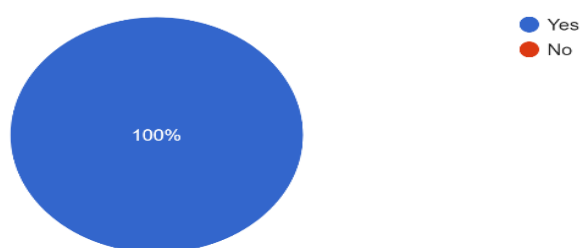


Figure 7: Percentage of teachers who think the explicit teaching of vocabulary and oral language is important (Byrne, 2022).

The questionnaire also gave me an insight into the teacher's opinions and experiences with playful learning experiences. 93% of teachers surveyed for this Self-Study Action Research Project said that they include playful language learning experiences with their class (Byrne, 2022). Of the teachers who responded, commented that they do so by including *'Nursery rhymes, PAT programme, whole class/partner news, rhymes,*

poems, tongue twisters, sentence building games, word of the week / idiom of the week, discuss an image, topic vocab for SESE, picture books, adding voice notes to photos/projects done online, show and tell, matching games, bingo , conversation station, hot seating, nonsense poems and drama’ (Byrne, 2022).

The questionnaire also contradicted the opinion of Råde (2021) who argued that the use of puppetry is in decline in the classroom. When asked about the use of a puppet in the classroom almost 72% of teachers said that they have used one before (Figure 8).

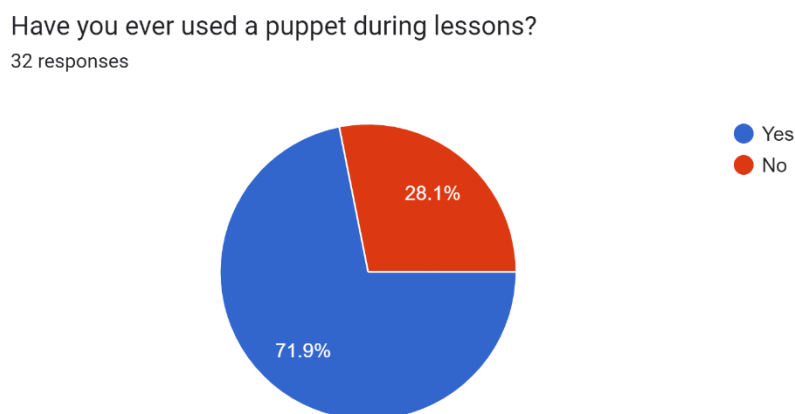


Figure 8: Percentage of teachers who have used a puppet during lessons (Byrne, 2022)

Teachers surveyed for this research stated a variety of ways in which they use puppets in their classrooms. I found it interesting to note that most teachers commented that they used the puppet to teach Irish (Gaeilge), *‘I’ve used puppets in Gaeilge lessons in the junior end to teach vocab and phrases.... , used for Irish lessons years ago.... our old Irish programme had puppets of the characters and I would ask the children questions via the puppet*’ (Byrne, 2022). Another use observed was during SPHE (Social Political Health Education) when teaching about specific topics such as kindness and bullying *‘When completing circle time activities.... in SPHE, emotions, sensitive content,*

bullying discuss emotions etc ... Used in SPHE lessons eg kindness..... Use for circle time activities (Byrne, 2022). Other teachers spoke about how they used puppets to model oral language and teach vocabulary in English, *'modelling.....to illicit vocabulary, teacher using puppet to model and ask questions ... used for conversations and new vocab'* (Byrne, 2022). A few teachers remarked they use puppets during role-play and drama, *'puppet use during drama.... , Have used a puppet in drama'* (Byrne, 2022). Teachers noted that they used puppets during Aistear time, *'during play time to model/ get the children to correct the puppet and model play skills'* (Byrne, 2022). Other teachers noted that puppets were used to teach *'vocab and phrases'*, for *'modelling conversational and oral language skills'* and for *'illicit teaching of vocabulary'* (Byrne, 2022).

There were teachers who acknowledged that puppets help to break down the power barrier and encourage children to speak, *'puppet would talk to the children rather than teacher... To interact with children, to help them verbalise their opinions to encourage shy children'* (Byrne, 2022). Of those who said they never used puppets in their classroom, a lack of self-confidence and being unsure as how to use them effectively were the reasons that were given for their lack of use (Byrne, 2022).

Figure 9 shows that 93% of teachers said that they engage in playful learning experiences with their class (Byrne, 2022). The playful responses they noted were, *'Aistear, play to learn, hands on open ended playful opportunities, both free and guided play, creative play, socio dramatic play, free play, Lots of play in maths using Ready Set Go maths materials, I would say in the senior end this appears most in drama getting into character, freeze frames, child in role, conscience alley, puppets, board games, group work, floor time, during stem lessons around designing and making and during hands on activities eg use of Lego and art, cooperative*

games, social skills games, games using IT, drama games and imaginary play opportunities' (Byrne, 2022).

Do you encourage playful learning experiences in your classroom?
32 responses

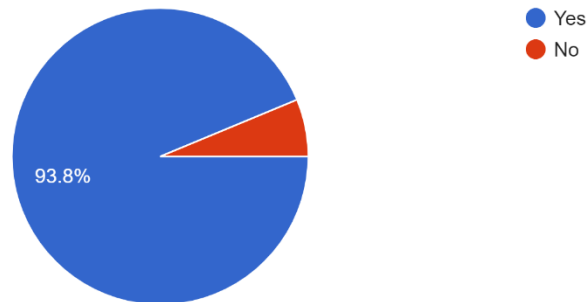


Figure 9: Percentage of teachers who engage in playful learning experiences in their classroom (Byrne, 2022)

Figure 10 shows that in terms of Aistear 71.9% of those teachers surveyed, facilitate Aistear within their class (Byrne, 2022).

Do you engage in Aistear with your class?
32 responses

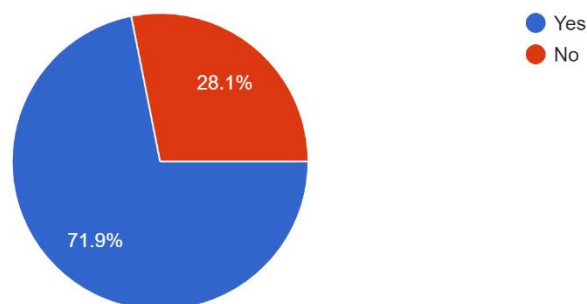


Figure 10: Percentage of teachers who engage in Aistear in their classroom (Byrne, 2022)

Following the feedback from the questionnaires, I decided to implement a change in the way in which our Aistear sessions are conducted in cycle 2. 37% of teachers allowed children to freely move between stations during Aistear. However, 43% of teachers keep the children stationary and implement a play rota (Figure 11). This means that in one week, each child will visit each Aistear station once (Byrne, 2022). Therefore, I decided to keep the children stationary during Aistear for cycle 2, as this was a popular response to one of the questions from the questionnaire. However, after testing this for a cycle, observing and considering the children’s feedback I reverted to the original model in which the children were free to move around stations during Aistear for cycle 3.

Do you allow the children to freely move around stations during Aistear?

32 responses

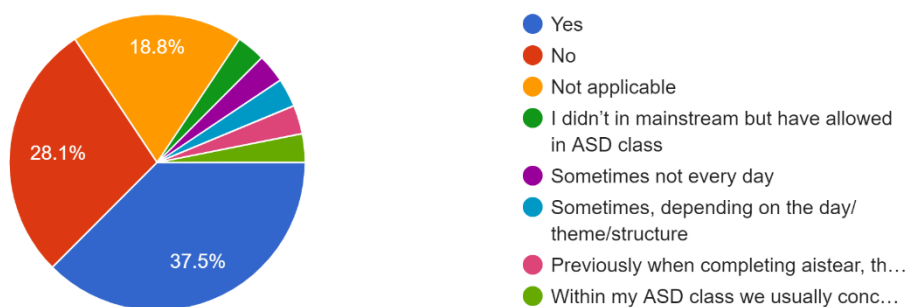


Figure 11: Percentage of teachers who allow children to move around during Aistear (Byrne, 2022)

4.1.3 Mixed Method Data Approaches

Mixed method approaches to data analysis allow for qualitative and quantitative data and themes to merge and connect (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). And, by using mixed method approaches there is a greater potential for triangulation to occur. Triangulation

is confirmation, cross checking or verification of data supports findings (Putman & Rock, 2018, p.96). Hinchey supports this claim by stating ‘*triangulation is simply a sophisticated way of naming the common-sense principle that the more evidence there is to support a finding, the more credible the finding*’. The reason I used a mixed method data approach was to help me gain a more complete picture and understanding of the study which I was conducting. It also incorporates the advantages of both methods (Mc Niff, 2002).

4.2 Methods for Data Analysis

As the data which I collected was mainly qualitative in nature. I decided to use ‘Thematic Analysis’ (TA) to develop categories and themes that originated from the examination and interpretation of the data which was collected (Creswell, 2014). T.A ‘*provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data*’ (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p.297). I followed Clarke and Braun’s (2017) six step system thematic analysis model. This can be seen in the figure below:

Step one Familiarisation of data	Step two Generate initial codes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I spread all the data I had collected out on to a desk in the library and on my living room floor. • I then began reading and rereading all the data which I collected. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using a high-lighter I looked for particular words and phrases which were repeated in the data. • For example, I used the colour purple to highlight increased engagement using the pedagogy of puppetry. (Appendix N)

Step three and Step four Search for themes and Review themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially I identified many themes relating to the data I collected. • These included: power, increased vocabulary, Special Educational Needs, play, academics, equality, parental involvement, educational disadvantage, Covid-19. • I then had to review the themes and decide which themes were most prevalent within the research.

<p style="text-align: center;">Step five Define and name themes</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Step six Produce a report</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I defined and named five main themes. • These included: acquisition of vocabulary, increased engagement, breaking the power barrier, a living contradiction and accessing education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The process of drafting and redrafting this thesis began. • Changes were made after consultations with my critical friends and thesis supervisor.

Figure 12 : Six Step Thematic Analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2017)

4.3 Messiness of Self-Study Action Research

It is important to note that during the process of this Self-Study Action Research project the management of teaching, data collection and analysis I sometimes found myself very muddled and confused. Schön (1991, p. 42) referred to this as ‘*swampy lowlands*’. McDonagh et.al (2020) and during lectures with Sullivan (2021) , I was reminded to navigate my way through the Self-Study Action Research process and accept the unkept nature of it. All the while keeping my values at the forefront of what I was trying to achieve and the question I was trying to answer. I feel that in doing so, the themes and subthemes of my research aligned with my values.

4.4 Main Themes and Findings

As mentioned above I always wanted to ensure that my values, communication, play, and equality were central to this Self-Study Action Research project. When I named and defined the themes for the purposes of this research, I then devised a diagram of my themes and how they related to the children and myself.

Themes relating to the impact of the intervention on the children		
Theme one: Increased engagement	Theme two: Acquisition of vocabulary and language	Theme three: Break in power barrier

Theme relating to the impact of the intervention on the researcher
Theme 4: Being a 'living contradiction'

Unexpected theme relating to Selective Mutism
Theme five: Selective Mutism and access to the curriculum

Figure 13: Diagram of themes.

4.4.1 Initial Reflections

After identifying that oral language and my approach to it needed development, prior to the intervention I reflected a lot about them. My reflective journal entries relating to oral language are extent, but the content is much the same; *'concerning, shocked, found it difficult to articulate, struggling, not verbalising'* (Byrne, 2021). The extracts below detail some initial extracts from my reflective journal.

<p><i>'Spoke to some of my colleagues today re: children's communication, conversation and ability to play with each other; all agree for the most part, their abilities to use oral language to communicate even their basic needs is worrying across Junior and Senior Infants.'</i></p> <p>(Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal': 10th November 2021)</p>
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<p><i>‘Today I have had bananas, shoes, bags and coats thrown at me. Noses pointed to and lunch boxes waved at me. Each time when I asked a child to tell me what exactly they wanted me to do, again they found it so hard to articulate what they needed.’</i></p> <p>(Byrne, ‘Teacher Reflective Journal’: 14th September 2021)</p>
<p><i>‘Decided to speak to the children about news from the weekend making use of a toy microphone. The children found it so difficult even after I modelled; I went to the _____ and saw _____’. They were so shy and could not speak in front of their friends.’</i></p> <p>(Byrne, ‘Teacher Reflective Journal’: 4th October 2021)</p>
<p><i>‘I want to improve the children’s oral language skills not only for literacy reasons but because I want the children to be able to communicate their needs, play together and have equality with others’ Byrne, ‘Teacher Reflective Journal’ (14th September 2021).</i></p>

The question which I set out to answer at the beginning of this study was, ‘How can I better support oral language development through playful learning experiences in my Junior Infant classroom?’ Out of 16 children in my class, all 16 children returned assent and parental consent forms to be participants in this Self-Study Action Research project. As mentioned in chapter three, this is a very high return rate (Baruch and Holtom, 2008) I think because of the facilitation of the zoom meeting and my reputation were the contributing factors to the success of the children’s and parental involvement. I devised language checklists and an integrated plan, acquired resources, and set up role play corners. However, the key to this study was the pedagogy of puppetry and how I might use it to support language development. Therefore, the initial step was to introduce Rosie our class puppet to the children.

4.4.2 Rosie

I saw many changes in the children after ‘Rosie’ our puppet was delivered to our classroom on January 31st, 2022. I had spoken to the children about a ‘new girl’ who was joining our class. I told them she had never been to school and as we were very experienced at being in Junior Infants, we might be able to ‘teach’ her some things.

Perhaps we, could help her to learn. Learn to read and write, make friends, play, and learn. Most of the children were elated that ‘a new girl’ had joined our class, other children took a little more convincing and overall feedback from the parents was positive (Figure 14).

Children’s initial reactions to Rosie	
<p><i>‘Teacher I am so glad we have a new girl’</i> Child D (January 31st 2022). <i>‘I can’t wait to teach her everything about school’</i> Child E (January 31st 2022).</p>	<p><i>‘It’s a puppet! Not a real girl’</i> Child R (January 31st 2022) <i>‘Teacher I can see your hand moving her mouth, she’s not real!’</i> Child CC (January 31st 2022)</p>



Figure 14: Dojo message to parents

Parent’s reactions to Rosie
<p><i>‘I love this and A will love her’</i> Child A’s parent (31st January 2022) <i>‘R told me all about the ‘new student’</i> ‘Child R’s parent (31st January 2022) <i>‘The way C was going on today I thought Rosie was a real new girl!’</i> Child C’s parent (31st January 2022)</p>

4.5 Theme One: Listening and Engagement

For the purposes of this research, I discovered that of those teachers surveyed, 93.8% of them explicitly teach oral language in their classroom. Furthermore, 100% of those surveyed stated that the explicit teaching of vocabulary and oral language is important (Byrne, 2022). Fler & Veresov (2018) note that the pedagogy of puppetry supports and promotes spoken language and communication among children.

The first theme to emerge was the improvement in the children's listening and engagement skills. Tierney (1995) noted that puppets can amuse, stimulate, and engage pupils. I noted that the children's listening, and engagement improved as soon as Rosie became involved in our lessons. I made note of these in my reflective journal entries.

Reflective Journal Entries (Byrne 2022)		
<p><i>'I cannot get over the children. As soon as Rosie appears, all eyes are on her! Even the sceptics!'</i> Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (8th February 2022)</p>	<p><i>'I told my colleagues, everyone needs a Rosie, her ability to get and maintain attention is amazing'</i> Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (11th February 2022)</p>	<p><i>'I have used puppets for Gaeilge and for SPHE, but never for oral language and play, the children's engagement has improved because of her!'</i> Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (8th February 2022)</p>

These also reflected comments which I had noted from the teacher's survey as to why they use a puppet in their classrooms (Byrne, 2022).

Responses from the teacher’s survey (Byrne, 2021)		
<i>‘I have used a puppet as an attention ;grabber.’</i>	<i>‘For engagement and for fun!’</i>	<i>‘To get attention in my ASD class.’</i>

;

4.6 Theme Two: Acquisition and Retention of Language

Theme two relates to the children’s increased acquisition and retention of vocabulary and language after the introduction of the puppet. At the beginning of each research cycle, I devised a list of vocabulary which I expected the children to know at the end of each theme. These lists were differentiated according to the children’s ability. The children were then grouped into three ability groupings: butterflies, grasshoppers, and bees. An example of the pre and post language check list are listed as Appendix B and Appendix C. Prior to the cycle I tested the children’s pre vocabulary which was relative to the theme. At the end of the cycle, I retested the children to see if there had been any improvement in the child’s vocabulary scores. A week into the new theme (cycle 2), I retested the children to see if they had retained any of the language which had been pre and post tested to the previous themes. I did this for each of the three cycles. I then examined the data and took averages based on the children’s grouping for each of the tests. Figure 15 graphs the average pre, post and revisited language checklist for the children in the Butterfly Group for each of the three cycles. I specifically chose the Butterfly Group to focus on because it was my largest group, with 8 out of the 16 children in it.

Averages taken from pre, post and revisited language checklists for Butterflies.

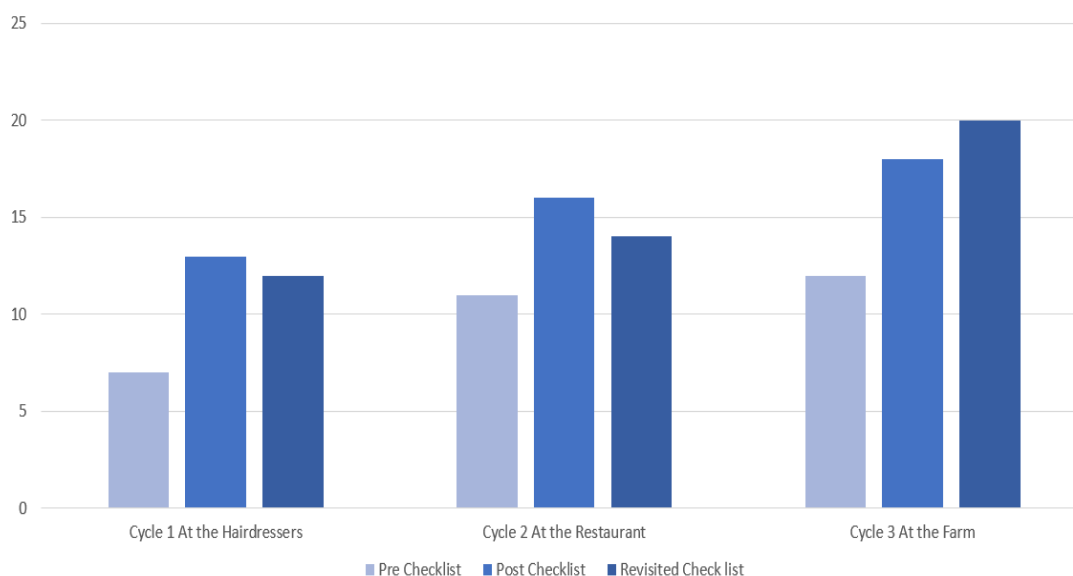


Figure 15: Butterfly Group Average Bar Chart.

In cycle 1 ‘At the Hairdressers’ I explicitly taught the children in this group 14 words relating to the theme. The children in this group on average identified 7 of the words on the pre language checklist. After the intervention, on average the children in this group identified 13 of the words from the checklist. Finally, when the checklist was revisited when the second cycle began; the children were able to identify an average of 12 words from the checklist. This was an overall increase of 71% of the vocabulary the children in the butterfly group acquired and retained during cycle 1.

In cycle 2 ‘At the Restaurant’ I explicitly taught the children 18 words relating to the theme. During the pre-language check list, the children in this group identified 11 words. After the intervention, the children identified an average 16 of the words from the checklist. Finally, when cycle 3 began; the children on average identified 14 words

from the revisited language checklist. This was an overall increase of 27% of the vocabulary acquired and retained during cycle 2.

In cycle 3 'At the Farm' I explicitly taught the children 21 words relating to the theme. On average the children identified 12 words on the pre language checklist. Following the intervention on average the children identified 18 words. A week after cycle 3 was finished; the children in the Butterfly group identified an average of 20 words from the revisited language checklist. This was an overall increase of 66%.

In total there were 53 words taught to the children in the Butterfly Group over the 3 cycles. On average there was an increase of 56% in the number of words that the children could identify when comparing the pre and post language checklists. The retention of the vocabulary was an average of 53%.

Notably for me was the language retention after cycle 3. This was higher than the initial post language checklist. Following cycle 3, I organised a visit from a mobile farm to the school, see Figure 16. The children got to experience first-hand some farm animals and equipment. This incident caused great excitement and enthusiasm among the children. The children were able to connect the language we had been learning to a real-life situation. The children fed a sheep and got to hold a lamb. They sat on bales of hay. They tried on the farmer's overalls and hat. They held rabbits and chicks. They also got a talk from the farmer about caring for the animals, the names of the equipment that was brought and what life on the farm is like. Later that day I reflected on the experience in my reflective journal. *'Today was THE BEST day ever! I am so happy that we got permission for the farm to visit our school! The children's happy little faces*

and their excitement is something that I will treasure. They were so interested in the animals and were very proud to tell the farmer the names of the baby animals we have been working so hard to learn. I was impressed with the questions they asked, about feeding and caring for the animals. All of the time we have spent on learning the vocabulary, role playing, reading books came alive for the children today. It really was a magical experience’ (Byrne, ‘Teacher Reflective Journal’ (29th April 2022). After the visit I retested the children’s vocabulary. I think that relevant and meaningful experience of the mobile farm visit helped with the children’s language retention.



Figure 16 Mobile Farm Visit

4.7 Theme Three: Breaking the Power Barrier

Brookfield (2017, p. 26) says that focusing on power dynamics is *‘one of the things that make reflection critical’*. The introduction of Rosie, our class puppet helped to create a more empowering environment in our classroom. Simon et al, (2008) agrees that when

a puppet is given equal status as the children it opens the lines of communication and allows children to speak more openly. I was surprised at how the children were happy to express their feelings, give an opinion or speak directly to Rosie, ignoring me. When the children voiced an opinion or expressed themselves to Rosie, I quickly noted it down on a post-it, dated it and put it into my reflective journal. . Brezigar (2010) said that the introduction of puppet can help even very shy children to express themselves and articulate their feelings. Below are examples of incidents where the power barrier was diminished.

<p><i>'I hate this Rosie, this is NOT play! How come you get to move around, and we have to stay!'</i> Child R 1st March 2022</p>	<p>This quote was taken from a child during cycle 2. I decided to keep the children stationary during play time and to introduce a play rota. Child R was not happy with the situation. He felt he could freely express his feelings to Rosie (the puppet) but did not once express his feelings about the situation to me.</p>
<p><i>'Rosie, how come you weren't on the line and you're in here before us?'</i> <i>'Why she no answer me teacher?'</i> <i>'Rosie, can you hear me?'</i> Child E 2nd February 2022</p>	<p>Child E came into school and went directly to the desk where Rosie was sitting and posed a question to the puppet. It was interesting to observe. The child looked in the puppets eyes, asked about why the child was in school before everyone else. Immediately I noticed the Child E thought that Rosie was just like her and had come from a house that morning. Interestingly the child paused for a response from Rosie. When she didn't get a reply, the child asked me why Rosie didn't answer her. She then turned to Rosie again and asked the puppet directly if she could hear her.</p>
<p><i>'Rosie, will you come and say hello to my Mammy?'</i> Child A 11th February 2022</p>	<p>During the first cycle, many of the children asked me if Rosie could go and meet their parents. This one incident stood out to me</p>

	because Child A spoke directly to the puppet and asked her the question about meeting her parent.
<p><i>'Rosie, my Daddy died and went to Heaven when I was a baby'</i> Child K (10th May 2022).</p>	<p>Child K asked me could she speak to Rosie herself that she wanted to tell her something during Aistear. The child brought Rosie over to the library area, which is a quiet area of the classroom and told the puppet about the loss of her parent. I was aware that her father had passed away. Child K had told me herself in November 2021. However, she never mentioned it to any of the children in the class.</p>

The first quote was taken from cycle 2 . It was when the children had to stay stationary during Aistear. This was not popular amongst the children. I was amazed at how Child R articulated his feelings to Rosie. In the second quote, Child E was astonished that Rosie was in our class before school had started. She spoke directly to Rosie. I discovered very quickly that most of the children had separated me from Rosie. The third quote came from Child A and from many other children during the research, again demonstrating the separation of me and Rosie. The final quote came from Child K. She had never spoken about the death of her father to anyone prior to this incident. In a survey of teachers for this Self-Study Action Research project some of the responses noted that the introduction of a puppet could *'help shy children interact.....some children would talk to the puppet rather than the teacher'* (Byrne, 2022). Comer (2009) said that the introduction of a puppet allows children to be free, to voice their opinions, be accepted and acknowledged and be able to express themselves, because the power barrier has been removed.

4.8 Theme Four: Being a Living Contradiction

This section discusses the impact of the intervention on me, the researcher. In my reflective journals I write a lot about my passion and value I place on play.

'I hope that my own classroom is enriched with literacy, love, care, play, equality, communication, happiness exploration, discovery and learning' Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (29th October 2021).

I would consider myself a teacher who believes in Froebelian principles (Mc Donagh et al, 2020) . I am aware of the advantages of play for the holistic development of the child (NCCA, 2009). However, when reflecting on my own practice, I discovered that I was 'living in contradiction' (Whitehead, 1989) to my value of play and through critical reflection I began to change my approach because of the intervention.

Whitehead (1989) coined the term 'living contradiction' to describe the times that we may not be living or acting out our values in our practice. I experienced this 'living contradiction' in terms of my value of play. I began this Self-Study Action Research project initially to see how I could develop the oral language skills of the children in my class through playful learning experiences. As I began to critically reflect on my own practice. I developed an awareness of how I was a living contraction when my value of play was being denied in my own practice (Mc Donagh, 2020).

Biesta et al, (2019, p.1) says that '*educational research should contribute to educational practice*'. Reflecting on my initial entries from my reflective journal, I note how important play is to me and I identified it as one of my values back in August 2021. I surveyed the children about their favourite thing about school and 87% of them said it was play/ Aistear time (Byrne, 2022). I have always prided myself on encouraging play and playful learning experiences, setting up beautiful role play areas

and having hands on activities and concrete resources for the children to explore, use and play with across the curriculum.

'I have found observing the children in their most natural environment (that of play) with fresh, critically reflective eyes is a wonderful experience and one that I will be excited to explore' Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (13th September 2021)

However, upon critically reflecting on what I was doing, I was not living fully by my value of play. Prior to my intervention and being critically reflective, I thought I was valuing play. I was providing opportunities for the children to engage in play, filled with colour and resources. However, during playful lessons I was directing, not scaffolding, or allowing the children to freely explore. During Aistear sessions I was not engaging in play with the children. I was busy organising resources or doing mini phonics lesson and taking away from their play. Some days I found myself cutting their Aistear time short because I 'had' to finish part of a work scheme or a workbook.

Buchanan (2015) writes about teacher accountability being a reason that individual needs of children or a teacher's own identity succumbs to the pressures of standardised testing and finishing schemes of work. When I critically reflected on myself, I too had succumbed to work schemes and scores. I could not believe I was a living contraction to my values.

'I have written extensively about play, Aistear, playful learning experiences. However, getting homework ready or cramming in extra phonics or listening to reading during play or looking at plans, is that play? Am I valuing it? On reflection I am taking these children away from what they love, where they are most natural, and for what? A quick 2-minute check to see if they can recall their sounds? The ones who need the play, communication, love, fun are the ones who are taken away. I paused today when I said 'D... can I have you for a quick second?' His little face looked sad, as did the other children he was playing with. One of whom called after him; 'Don't worry, we'll pause the game.' This is not valuing play. My heart is heavy, trying to do my best' Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (14th December 2021).

'I talk a good game. The Aistear role play corner and stations look well, but is that what this is all about?' Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (7th February 2022).

'Here lies my conflict, if both oral language and play have been proven to be integral to the development of the child, why then are both not elevated in the planning and delivery of lessons in every primary school classroom?' Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (11th March 2022).

'The conflict I face is that need to 'prove' or quantify any improvements made by my research. I am also aware that I could face questions from my peers, management, and parents as they may see what I am creating as a 'noisy, chatty classroom.' And one in which they are 'just playing' or 'just talking.' Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (11th March 2022)

Interestingly the need for accountability, finishing schemes and curriculum pressures were also the reasons cited by teachers that I surveyed who do not commit fully to play in their classroom (Byrne, 2021). As mentioned below, one notable comment from a teacher was that time was always taken up with what they deemed 'more important' tasks (Byrne, 2021).

'Time is always taken up with other essential tasks'
Byrne, 2022 'Teacher Survey'

Therefore, I decided I needed to change. My role in these playful learning experiences needed to change. I needed to let the children play, listen to them, and get to know them individually and speak to them. I had to remind myself that oral language was the focus of this Self-Study Action Research project and my engagement with the children's playful learning experiences would contribute to its success.

'I have become very aware of my own role in the classroom. I am listening more, really focusing on the children in front of me, rather than succumbing to the pressure of 'schemes' which I have been given to complete. I am being more

critical of what I am doing, the questions I am asking, the means in which I am communicating, the resources I am choosing. I am listening to the children more. I am hearing their positive and negative feedback and trying to act more appropriately. I have been reading, speaking to colleagues and classmates. Above all my values are at the forefront of what I am trying to achieve.’ Byrne, ‘Teacher Reflective Journal’ (28th April 2022).

‘Prior to beginning this M.Ed programme, I had identified a problem, that of poor oral language skills which I felt was impacting some of the children’s ability to read in the Infant classes in our school. I felt that if I conducted research I would find a new way or write a new oral language scheme to help elevate this problem. I was hoping for a quick fix; that I would somehow increase the children’s oral language and in turn help them to develop into wonderful readers. This in fact has not been the case. I have discovered more about myself as a teacher, about critical reflection and about examining my values and staying true to them. This in fact will make me a better teacher, not devising schemes and paperwork’ Byrne, ‘Teacher Reflective Journal’ (16th May 2022).

This Self-Study Action Research project allowed me to be critically reflective on my own practice to see that I was a living contradiction to my value of play. I had been caught up in the aesthetics of what play ‘should’ look like, what my test scores ‘should’ be and how I wanted a quick ‘fix’ to what I deemed to be a problem. At the end of this the impact of this Self-Study Action Research project on me, the researcher has been a far more inward, self-reflecting journey; one which I will continue to embark on.

Living in the moment, playing with the children, facilitating discussions, scaffolding where needed and not being consumed with perfect scores and classrooms is what has ensured that I live more by my value of play.

4.9 Theme Five : The Unanticipated Impact on Selective Mutism

Sullivan et al, (2016, p.20) said that researchers need to be aware of the *‘possibility of anticipated and unanticipated outcomes, intended and unintended findings and any side*

effects'. The unanticipated impact of the intervention came during cycle one of the research project.

Child L in my class was diagnosed with Selective Mutism prior to beginning Junior Infants. Despite efforts from myself, SNA, his family, and the children in the class from 1st of September 2021 until the 2nd of February 2022 Child L did not speak or play with anyone in the class. He had very limited communication with me. This is an anxiety disorder and a learned emotion-regulation strategy (Steains, et al, 2021). Therefore, I had to approach the child with behaviour management strategies to try to ease his anxiety. I used picture cards to help him to communicate his basic needs. The communication was limited to him pointing to a card to tell me something.

On the 2nd of February, Child L approached the role play area where Rosie and I were sitting. He sat beside us, and I tried to initiate a conversation with him. He did not respond and continued to play alone. I decided to see if he would respond to Rosie. Much to my surprise; Child L spoke for the first time. He spoke to Rosie. I later wrote about it in my reflective journal.

<p><i>'He spoke! I cannot believe it! He actually spoke! He has NEVER spoken to any of us! Never, ever... I heard his little voice today, I could actually cry! I think Rosie is going to change our little world here in room 12!'</i> Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (2nd February 2022).</p>

Child L continued to speak with Rosie about going to the barbers and we discovered the reasons why he didn't like going, through words and hand gestures he used.

<p><i>'Me no like it!'</i> Child L 3rd February 2022</p>	<p><i>'Too loud!'</i> Child L 3rd February 2022</p>	<p><i>'Too scratchy!'</i> Child 4th February 2022</p>
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Child L told Rosie that he did not like going to the barbers. The razor was loud. The scissors made a noise he did not like. The gown was scratchy, and that the hair hurt him when it fell on his neck. Each time the child opened up about his dislike towards the barbers, Rosie the puppet sympathised with him, acknowledging that there were times when she did not like the hairdressers. This instance is supported by Freire (1970), who discussed the importance of communication as a reflection on life experience and moving that reflection into action. Freire (1970) discussed this process of reflection and action and referred to it as praxis. This can be directly related to Child L's situation where the child acknowledged his own dislike to going to the barbers and continued to discuss and explain his feelings after reflecting on the puppet's acknowledgment of her fears and dislikes about going to the hairdresser also.

Using role playing with Rosie the puppet, and a social story, I tried to help Child L. Social stories are written to help children with special educational needs to cope with changes or to introduce them to new routines or to help them cope with situations (Kuoch & Mirenda 2003). They help to provide an insight into the thoughts and feelings of others and teach social skills and offer alternative possibilities to problematic behaviours (Kuoch & Mirenda 2003). I used a toy razor and ear defenders to help him with the noise. I put tissue around his neck before putting on the gown to help with the Velcro and finally I used feathers to help him to get used to the hair falling on his neck. After several weeks Child L's mother approached and asked if Rosie could accompany him to the barbers. Child L got his haircut. This finding can be related to Whitehead's principles of self-creation (1978). The introduction of the pedagogy of puppetry, which can also be viewed as a form of art, allowed Child L to become more social and emotionally expressive through role-play (Gronna, Serna, Kennedy, & Prater, 1999). In doing so, the puppet allowed him an equal opportunity to

speak and become more sociable in our class. Phei Phei Oon (2010) notes that drama therapy (use of puppets, role play, masks, costumes) can help children with Selective Mutism to overcome their anxiety of speaking. Phei Phei Oon (2010) comments that using puppetry a child in their care, who was diagnosed with Selective Mutism began to speak initially with vocalisations, which progressed to spontaneous speech, finally to full conversations when a puppet was introduced to their speech therapy sessions. Phei Phei Oon (201, p.12) acknowledged that the child became *'became liberated'* using puppetry and her ability to speak.

'He cut his hair. He was so proud. His Mam can't believe it! This is what it is about! Understanding is important and creating an environment where they can be equal is important.'

Byrne, 'Teacher Reflective Journal' (8th March 2022).

The impact of the intervention on Child L highlighted for me the importance of creating a classroom environment and giving the children the opportunity to be equal. Child L has progressed and is speaking more in the classroom still while using Rosie the puppet.

Leyser, (1984) said that puppets can assist children with special educational needs with social skills and communication. Freire (1970) acknowledged the importance of giving every child a voice. Comer (2009) said that puppets help to open communication with children with disabilities and helps to develop peer relations. The introduction of Rosie, the puppet, afforded me the opportunity to assist a child with Selective Mutism to begin to overcome his anxiety of speaking.

4.10 Conclusion.

This chapter has explored the findings, both qualitative, quantitative from the research. It details the advantages for using mixed methods during research. This chapter

explores the thematic analysis which was used to develop categories to analyse the data. It discussed the main themes which emerged and divided them into subcategories; namely those which impacted the children, the those which impacted the teacher. It emerged that the children had acquired more language. The impact on the researcher was a realisation that I was a living contradiction to my values of communication and play. I looked at my role during playful learning experiences differently and how the introduction of the puppet facilitated the power barrier being broken down. The research also facilitated a surprise finding, that of the impact of the introduction of the puppet on a child with Selective Mutism in my class. Freire (1970), said that children should be recognised for what they know and what they share and that their contribution and knowledge can inform teachers. It is with the help of my co-researchers that my teaching, findings, and values have triangulated.

Chapter Five

Summary and Conclusion

5.0 Summary of Research.

This Self-Study Action Research project sought to answer the question; ‘How can I better support oral language development through playful learning experiences in my Junior Infant classroom?’

As I adopted the Self-Study Action Research approach, it facilitated me to state my values, which are communication, play and equality. I then sought to identify an issue which I saw in my own class and practice, that of oral language development and my role in enhancing playful learning experiences to enrich its development. I then had to consider a means which would act as an intervention to cultivate oral language in a playful manor. After consulting with my thesis supervisor and the literature I decided upon the pedagogy of puppetry to assist with oral language in my class. I then had to reflect on and make changes for each new cycle (Ms Niff, 2004).

Prior to the research cycles starting, I sought permission from the Principal and Board of Management from my school to conduct my research. Once this was granted, I pursued assent from the children and consent from their parents to participate in the research. I presented the children with an age-appropriate presentation explaining the research and their role as co researchers. One of the objectives of Self-Study Action Research is to research with, not on participants (Martin et al, 2019). I then hosted an online information meeting for the parents to facilitate any questions that they may have had. Out of 16 children and parents; all agreed to participate in the study.

I then set about devising an integrated, cross curricular subject plan, which was centred around 3 Aistear themes. I differentiated the children into three groups and decided

upon key language, relating to the specific theme, which I would explicitly teach to them.

I then introduced our class puppet to the children . I pre-tested the children's language recognition prior to starting the cycle. I then set about explicitly teaching the vocabulary for the theme of that cycle. With our classroom puppet Rosie, I used a variety of playful means to reinforce the language- poetry, rhymes, picture cards, concrete materials, and Aistear stations to allow the children to become more familiar with the targeted language.

During Aistear time, I circulated the room with Rosie our puppet, modelling, observing, scaffolding, and playing alongside the children. Finally, at the end of the cycle I completed a post check list and a revisited language check list with each child.

After 3 cycles of the intervention, I discovered that there were 3 themes; namely my values and subthemes which were relative to the children and myself which were the findings of this Self-Study Action Research project.

5.0.1 Communication

My first three themes relate to my value of communication. I noticed that the children's attention and engagement improved with the introduction of the puppet. Zuljevic (2005) said that the introduction of puppetry in a classroom creates a mystical power to improve the communication skills of the children in the class. Palumbo's (1986) research supports this idea that the introduction of a puppet can change a child's behaviour. Cagno and Shively's (1973) study also supports this idea, as they found that a puppet can motivate children to learn. For the purposes of this research, I agree that puppets motivated the children in my class. Each time Rosie was introduced to our lessons, they were visibly more excited and were eager to learn.

I also discovered that the children's vocabulary improved since the beginning of the intervention. With my specifically targeted group, their targeted vocabulary identification and retention improved by 53% (Byrne, 2022). A study conducted by Comer (2009) found that the children in their study were more enthusiastic to learn content from the curriculum because of the introduction of a puppet, and thus, scored higher in post testing.

Finally in relation to communication, I noted that the introduction of the class puppet allowed for the power barrier to be broken down. A puppet can make children feel comfortable and confident and provides them with inner strength (Kruger, 2004).

5.0.2 Play

My fourth theme was centred around my value of play. The focus of the Self-Study Action Research is self-enquiry (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). I noted that I was a 'living contradiction' to my value of play. As Self-Study Action Research is an investigation into one's work, my reflections helped me to realise my position as a living contradiction (Mc Niff, 2014).

Prior to the intervention I critically reflected upon my role during Aistear and playful learning experiences. Despite my every effort to live by the Froebelian principles, I was not fully committed to them. I faced a conflict which I was not aware of, until I engaged in critical reflection. My conflict was with the curriculum, pressure to finish schemes and workbooks and finally my children achieving perfect scores. Prior to the intervention I was withdrawing children from play, reducing the amount of time spent during play time and some days not playing at all.

The intervention during the 3 cycles allowed me to re-evaluate play- the importance of it and my value of it. This allowed me to live in the moment, engage in more oral

language with the children and get to know the children on an individual basis, which helped to form better relationships.

5.0.3 Equality

My fifth unexpected theme relates to my value of equality. The intervention had an unexpected impact on a child in my class. The introduction of the puppet resulted in the child who had being diagnosed with Selective Mutism to speak. The introduction of Rosie the puppet allowed the child the opportunity to access equality in the classroom. Comer (2009, p. 101) discusses a similar instance whereby a child with a disability in the study was given '*a sense of freedom*' and an '*openness to overcome barriers to learning*' when they verbally opened up to a puppet. Phei Phei Oon (2010) conducted a study whereby a five-year-old girl, with Selective Mutism, began to speak after a puppet was introduced to their therapy sessions. Prior to that connection the child was reluctant to interact with anyone else. Therefore, it can be said that the introduction of a puppet can help a child to overcome a difficulty with communication.

5.1 Limitations of the Study

There are limitations within all studies and acknowledging them allows for growth and opportunities for further research. The limitations of this study were attributed to literature available on the topic of the pedagogy of puppetry.

The literature relating to clear theoretical support for the use of the pedagogy of puppetry within the classroom is limited (Råde, 2021). Phei Phei Oon (2010, p. 218) agrees that there is '*very little literature*' on the effects of puppets in the classroom, particularly amongst children with special educational needs. Much of literature which I came across was dated. I found many books, Ted Talks and instructional videos which

assist in detailing the use of a puppet in the classroom. However, as mentioned, theoretical support is limited and at times dated.

5.2 Recommendations

5.2.1. *Future Research*

Upon reflection of this Self-Study Action Research project which has centred around the promotion of oral language, playful learning experiences and puppetry I think there are opportunities to explore and research these topics further. As I identified one of the limitations of this study has been its lack of diversity; a recommendation for research into the use of puppets in a more diverse setting would be beneficial. Specifically, the effects of puppetry as a pedagogy to teach children who are learning English as an additional language (EAL). Further research could also be carried out on using the pedagogy of puppetry for the promotion of social skills among children with special educational needs.

5.2.2 *A Sharing Platform*

I would love to have the opportunity to share my experiences of using the pedagogy of puppetry in the classroom, as well as presenting my findings to several platforms. These platforms would include providing CPD training in the form of a Summer Course for teachers about using puppetry in their classroom to enhance playful language experiences. I would recommend that all teachers are provided the opportunity to support the use of puppetry as a pedagogical tool. I intend to share my findings with my colleagues in school and promote the use of puppets for a variety of purposes. I aim to spread the findings of this research and would be open to publishing an article for a teaching blog or for a teacher's magazine such as Intouch. I think it would be important to speak about the findings of this research to student teachers; to

provide them with an insight into the pedagogy of puppetry in the classroom. Finally, I would like to deliver a talk to parents about using puppets to promote oral language at home.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed a summary of this Self-Study Action Research project. It has also discussed the limitations of the research; due to the literature available and the social context in which the research took place. It has also explored recommendations for further research relating to this study finally ways in which this research can be shared.

This Self-Study Action Research project has been an extensive learning experience for me. Staying true to my values; is something which I will carry with me into this teaching year and far beyond. I will continue to strive to make an environment that has open lines of communication, whereby children can express themselves and offer opinions and thoughts freely. A classroom which is enriched with play and playful learning opportunities, in which I fully engage in. Finally, I hope to continue to provide a classroom whereby each child is equal and is encouraged to dream and to strive for their dreams to become a reality.

'In every job, that must be done, there must be an element of fun!'

-Mary Poppins.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Copy of integrated subject plan

Integrated language plan April 2022		
Teacher name: Ms Jade Louise Byrne	Dates: 4 th - 8 th April 2022 and 25 th - 29 th April 2022	
Oral language to be taught		
Butterflies	Grass hoppers	Bees
farm, farmer, seeds, hay, animals, cow, pig, hen, sheep, horse, moo, oink, cluck, baa, neigh, spring, tractor, carrots, onions, apples, potatoes, milk, cheese, butter, money, shop.	farm, farmer, seeds, hay, animals, cow, calf, pig, piglet, sheep, lamb, hen, chick, horse, foal, moo, oink, cluck, baa, neigh, wool, spring, tractor, barn, vegetables, carrots, onions, apples, potatoes, milk, cheese, butter, cream, money, shop, shopkeeper, customer.	farm, meadow, farmer, seeds, hay, animals, cow, calf, pig, piglet, sheep, lamb, hen, chick, horse, foal, moo, oink, cluck, baa, neigh, wool, spring, tractor, barn, chicken coop, milking parlour, crops, harvest, vegetables, carrots, onions, apples, potatoes, milk, cheese, butter, cream, money, shop, shopkeeper, customer.
Writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free writing: The farm. Genre writing: Report. 	Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farmer Duck Rosie's Walk What the Ladybird Heard What the Ladybird Heard Next. 	Additional: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poetry: 'The Cow' by Robert Louis Stevenson Rhymes: Mary had a little lamb, Baa, Baa black sheep, 5 little ducks. Games: Who am I?, Feely Bag, Headbandz using animals.
Gaeilge integration: Children will be taught bó, muc, caora, sícín, madra, capall. Play Cluiche Kim. Read and act out the story Na Tri Múicín'.		
Maths integration: Data: Record how many children have been and have not been to the farm, create a pictograph using data. Record what is the children's favourite farm animal, create a pictograph using data. Money: Revise 1c, 2c, 5c coins for use in the role play area. Encourage the children to give the shop keeper the right number of coins.		
SESE integration:		
History: Farm equipment now v's farm equipment long ago.	Geography: The story of milk.	Science: Conduct the experiment how to make butter. Examine what happens when butter is melted.
SPHE integration: Healthy eating, healthy teeth and milk, farm safety.		
The Arts integration		
Music: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Old Mc Donald had a farm The Farmer in the Dell Down in Grandpa's Farm 	Art: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design your own farmyard. Paper plate farm animals. Cardboard holder farm animals 	Drama <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recreate freeze frame from Farmer Duck Hot seat Lanky Len, Hefty Hugh and the Ladybird from What the Ladybird Heard.

Week	Theme/ Topic	Station Type	Activity	Resources
1	At the farm	Socio dramatic.	The farm shop. Children will role play in the roles of shop keeper, farmer and customer, to provide, sell and buy items in the farm shop. These will include breads, dairy products, vegetables and fruit.	Empty cartons of milk, yoghurt, cheese, cream, 'real' vegetables-carrots, onions, potatoes etc, 'real' fruit- apples, pears, bananas, oranges etc, toy food, cash register, bags, money, purses, baskets, signs, phone, table, chair, name labels, photos of the farm, animals, paper, pencils
		Construction.	Design and build a new shed for the Prize Cow from What the lady bird heard.	Image of the Prize Cow, toy cows, lego, clip boards, paper, pencils.
		Small world.	Using toy farm animals, people and machinery, the children will design and build their own miniature farms.	Farm photographs, picture books, toy animals, people, machinery, blended cereal, artificial grass
		Creative play.	Design their own farm yard using What the Lady Bird Heard as a stimulus.	What the Lady Bird Heard book, paper, pencils, colours, farmyard stickers.
		Art.	Colour in various pictures of animals on colouring sheets for our weekly collage.	Colouring sheets, markers, colouring pencils, crayons, scissors, glue, paper.
2	At the farm	Socio dramatic.	The farm shop. The farm shop. Children will role play in the roles of shop keeper, farmer and customer, to provide, sell and buy items in the farm shop. These will include breads, dairy products, vegetables and fruit. New addition will be the opportunity to 'milk' the cardboard cow.	Empty cartons of milk, yoghurt, cheese, cream, 'real' vegetables-carrots, onions, potatoes etc, 'real' fruit- apples, pears, bananas, oranges etc, toy food, cash register, bags, money, purses, baskets, signs, phone, table, chair, name labels, photos of the farm, animals, paper, pencils, cardboard cow, glove, water, basin.
		Construction.	Build a new house big enough for the three little pigs to live in.	Images of the three little pigs, clip boards, paper, pencils, hard hats, toy construction tools, Jago blocks.
		Small world/ Water play.	Using toy farm animals, 'mud', water and cloths, the children will be encouraged to wash the 'muddy' animals, dry them and put them back into the farm.	Toy farm animals, 1 large tray with hot chocolate mixed with water for mud, 1 large tray with clear water, nail brushes, scrubbers, paper towels, artificial grass.
		Creative play.	Using playdoh the children can create their own farm animals or make the various animals/ farm items from the play doh mats.	Playdoh, rollers, cutters, play doh mats.
		Art.	Colour in various pictures of farm produce, farmers and equipment found on the farm for our weekly collage.	Colouring sheets, markers, colouring pencils, crayons, scissors, glue, paper.

Appendix B: Copy of pre- and- post- language checklist for children

Pre and Post Language Checklist

Teacher

Topic: At the Farm

Group: Butterflies

Child's name: _____

Date: _____

Farm	Farmer	Seeds	Hay
Animal	Cow	Sheep	Pig
Horse	Hen	Spring	Tractor
Carrots	Onions	Apples	Potatoes
Milk	Butter	Cheese	Butter
Money	Shop		

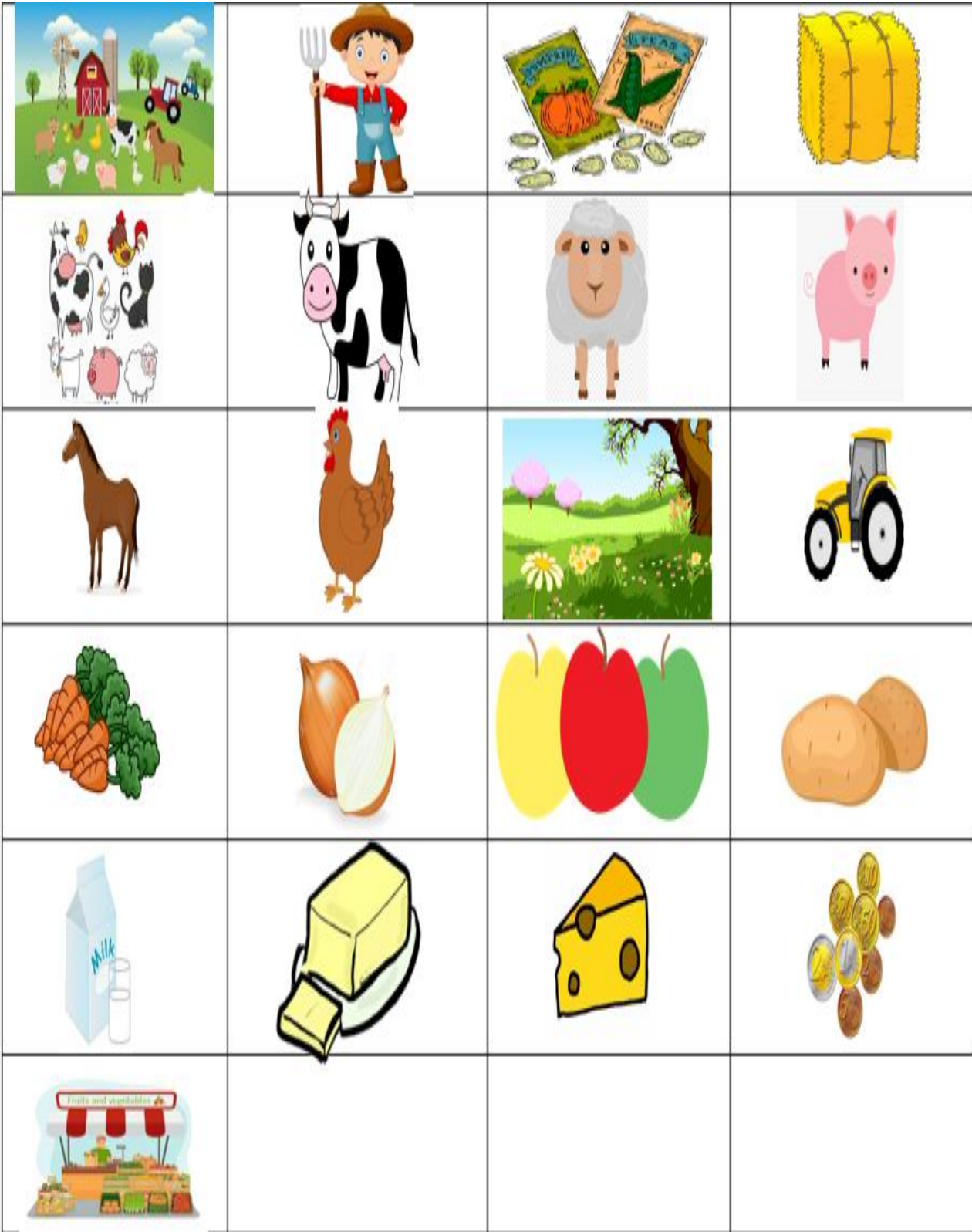
Other

What noise does the _____ make?

Sheep	Pig	Horse
Cow	Hen	

Appendix C: Copy of pre-and-post-language pictures for children





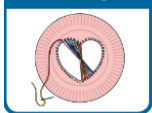


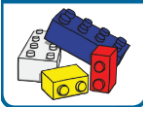



Topic: At the Farm Group: Butterflies



Appendix D: Copy of the structured interview questionnaire for pupils.

Pupil interview- At the hairdressers

Pupil's name:

<p>Did you like the topic of at the hairdressers/ barbers?</p> 					
<p>What was your favourite station?</p> 	<p>threading</p> 	<p>making</p> 	<p>spunobunlg</p> 	<p>blocks</p> 	<p>gals slor</p> 
<p>What was your least favourite station?</p> 					
<p>What would you like to see again?</p> 					

Appendix E: Copy of the semi structured interview questionnaire to validation group.

**Semi Structured Interview
10th March 2022**

Topic: Oral language, Aistear and Puppetry in the Infant Classroom.

Introduction: Reminder that this semi-structured interview is part of my M.Ed. Self-Study Action Research Project on oral language and playful learning experiences in my Junior Infant classroom.

Reminder: Participants can remain anonymous and can withdraw at any stage of the semi structured interview.

Interview guideline/ questions.

1. Identify teachers position on the level of the children's oral language in the infant end of our school.
2. What is the reasoning for this position? DEIS, C-19, Devises?
3. Overall, how would they summarise the teaching of oral language in our school?
 - Do you think we spend enough time explicitly teaching oral language?
 - If yes, how do we do so?
 - If no, why not? Curriculum time? Enough emphasis on oral language?
4. What is your position with Aistear?
 - What are the pros and cons?
 - Do you do it every day? If no, why not?
 - What are the barriers to it being successful? Curriculum time? Resources? Training?
5. Do you use puppets?
 - Do you find them an easy pedagogy to engage with?
 - Children's reactions?
 - Your own feelings?
6. Finally, are there any comments you would like to add?

Thank you very much for your co-operation

Appendix F: Copy of information provided to teachers about questionnaire

Questionnaire for teachers.

This questionnaire will contribute to the data I am collecting as part of my research for my Master's in Education, Self-Study Action Research project, which I am undertaking in Maynooth University. The Self-Study Action Research project is centred around playful learning experiences and literacy in the infant classroom. All answers are anonymous, and the data gathered will be stored according to Maynooth University's guidelines. If at any time you do not feel comfortable or would like to discontinue the questionnaire, please feel free to exit immediately. If you would like any further information, or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on jade.byrne.2021@mumail.ie. Thank you kindly for your participation Jade-Louise Byrne

Appendix G: Copy of questionnaire for teachers

Do you explicitly teach oral language lessons in your class? *

Yes

No

Do you think the explicit teaching of vocabulary and oral language is important?

Yes

No

Do you use a pre made oral language scheme- starlight, rainbows etc? *

Yes

What oral language activities do you do with your class? example news, nursery rhymes etc *

Long-answer text

Do you encourage playful learning experiences in your classroom? *

Yes

No

If you answered yes to the above question, could you give some examples of the playful pedagogies you use? *

Long-answer text

Have you ever used a puppet during lessons? *

Yes

No

If you answered yes, could you describe how you used your puppet?

Long-answer text

If you answered no, why not?

Long-answer text

Have you ever been trained in Aistear? *

Yes

No

Do you integrate your subjects around a specific theme, i.e. Aistear/SESE theme? *

yes

no

Do you engage in Aistear with your class? *

Yes

If you answered yes, is there a specific time that you engage in Aistear each day?

Long-answer text

If you answered no, why don't you engage in Aistear?

Long-answer text

Do you explicitly teach oral language and vocabulary related to your Aistear topic/ theme? *

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable

Do you allow the children to move around freely during Aistear? *

- Yes
- No
- Not applicable
- Other...

If you answered yes, why do you?

Long-answer text

If you answered no, why not?

Appendix H: Copy of consent letter for Board of Management



Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Chairperson of [REDACTED]

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study in my Junior Infant class here. I am a student on the Master of Education programme at Maynooth University and am in the process of writing my master's thesis. The study is entitled "Scaffolding oral language through playful learning experiences in Junior Infants"

I intend to carry out research in the classroom by teaching my oral language lessons using role play, picture books, drama, and puppets as techniques as my primary methodologies and the research will be carried out during their designated daily Aistear slot. The data will be collected using observations, a daily teacher journal, voice recordings and the pupils test scores.

The child's name and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research. The participants will be allowed 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 Maynooth University guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until ethical approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. If you have any queries on any part of this research project, feel free to contact me by email at jade.byrne.2021@mumail.ie or 0851521395

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the signed form.

Yours faithfully,

Approved by:

Print your name and title here Signature Date

Appendix I: Copy of information PowerPoint shown to pupils.



1



2



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17



18

Appendix J: Copy of information sheet for pupils.

Child's name

I am doing a project in my new school.



My project is about how we speak to each other and how we play together in our classroom. I would like to find out more about this.



I would like to watch you and listen to you when you are in school and to write down some notes about you.



Would you be ok with that? Please pick a bubble.

I have asked your Mammy or Daddy 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 sign the form that I have sent home?



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



Appendix K: Information sheet for parents and guardians



**Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early
Childhood Education**

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun-
agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.**

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

What are the research questions?

- How can I bring more playful oral language experiences into my Junior Infant classroom?

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Observation of the children
- My personal reflective journal
- Questionnaires for children, parents, and other teachers
- Children's drawings
- Voice recordings of children's experiences.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by me Jade-Louise Byrne 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: jade.byrne.2021@mumail.ie or 01-6263556

Appendix L: Copy of consent forms for parents



Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education

Roinn Froebel Don Bhun- agus Luath- Oideachas Ollscoil Mhá Nuad.

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 an oral language and playful experiences in the Junior Infant classroom.

I intend to carry out research. I will be examining the ways in which I can bring more playful leaning experiences for the benefit of oral language development in the classroom, i.e., through role play, storytelling, use of puppets, language games and picture books etc.

The data will be collected using observations, student grade's, a daily teacher journal, drawings of the children's experiences, voice recordings and questionnaires. The children will be asked their opinions reflecting on their play experiences, stories, and lessons they have experienced throughout the process.

The child's name and the name of the school will not be included in the thesis that I will write at the end of the research, process. Your child will be allowed 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, as per Maynooth University, 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 like to invite you and your child to give permission for him/her to take part in this project.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project, feel free to contact me by email at jade.byrne.2021@mumail.ie or on 016263556

Yours faithfully,

Jade-Louise Byrne



**Maynooth University Froebel Department of
Primary and Early
Childhood Education**

**Roinn Froebel Don Bhun-
agus Luath- Oideachas
Ollscoil Mhá Nuad**

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

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

Parent / Guardian Signature:
Parent / Guardian Signature:
Date:

Name of Child:
Child's signature:
Date:

Appendix M: Copy of pupil's assent to participate

My parent/guardian has read the information sheet with me, and I agree to take part in this research.

Name of child (in block capitals):

Signature: _____

Date: _____



Appendix N: Copy of colour coding analysis

Modelling, engagement, fun

Gaeilge lessons, say and recall, to illicit vocabulary, discuss emotions etc

Got used to doing this for Irish lessons using treo jus years ago and have used in English lessons since, children like responding to the puppets

Reading stories for e.g. the gruffalo

I use Bert and Ernie puppets in Irish. The puppet will be asleep and the children call out "Dúisigh" the puppet will ask questions as Gaeilge and sometimes high fives , hugs or even tries to kiss some of the children. Often the children with special needs respond extremely well to the puppets and there is great excitement in the class waiting to see what the puppet will do.

When completing circle time activities, during 1 to 1 news/ topic of conversation time some children found it easier to concentrate/ talk to the puppet, during play time to model/ get the children to correct the puppet and model play skills.

Attention grabber, model answer and response, model think out loud,