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Title:

How can I support my pupils' oral language skills through socio-dramatic play in 4-6 year olds?

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ABSTRACT

This self-study action research study explores an area of concern in my practice with the hope of making an enhancement in order to improve my pupils' learning experiences in my classroom. Critical reflection and dialogue with my colleagues allowed me to understand the educational values that I claim to hold. Throughout this study I attempted to live up to these values in my practice as I documented and recorded my journey along the way.

In this action research thesis I explored different approaches of how I can support my pupils' oral language skills through socio-dramatic play. The study is set in my place of work with my pupils in Junior Infants and my colleagues who work closely with me in this classroom setting. Data was collected using a variety of qualitative tools and resources including my reflective journal, observations, unstructured and conversational interviews and pre-and-post checklists. This allowed me to capture a real sense of what was happening in my classroom through multiple perspectives and lenses.

From the extensive but rich data that was collected, I then analysed this data to search for certain themes or trends that were evident. From this I was able to extract my findings which showed indications of episodes of where I was living more closely to my values and thus enabling me to make a new claim to knowledge.

Furthermore, this study recommends and extends the understanding that teachers can effectively support and enhance their pupils' oral language development through socio-dramatic play. It also recommends the self-study action research approach with the purpose of enhancing the learning experiences of the researcher but also their pupils, colleagues and the wider educational community alike.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Leanne Scully   19252126

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Socio-dramatic play area

Appendix B: Play rota system

Appendix C: Observation/Reflective notes protocol

Appendix D: Writing table in socio-dramatic area

Appendix E: Pre-and-post language checklists

Appendix G: Informed letter/consent form to B.O.M.

Appendix H: Informed letter/consent form to parents

Appendix I: Sample of child's work (artefact)

Appendix J: Values statement

DECLARATION

Declaration of Authenticity

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Signed: _Leanne Scully_____

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

As a primary school teacher for nine years, I discovered I was getting stuck in the 'routineness' of everyday school-life and teaching. Teaching young children for a number of years meant I was falling into a trap of repeating everyday routines without giving much thought or attention to what I was actually doing. Like Brookfield (2009) I was falling into a false sense of belief that what I was doing was productive. Intuitively I knew some aspects of my current practices were not in keeping with my pedagogical values and standards. Consequently I decided to embark on a professional development journey so as to challenge and seek change in my day-to-day habits within my practices. As McDonagh et al. state "research often begins with a hunch" (2019: 34). Engaging in this Masters of Education course has given me the opportunity to examine my practices and investigate more deeply how I can improve an aspect of my own teaching that lives up to my educational values and beliefs. "It is teachers who in the end will change the world of the school by understanding it" (Stenhouse, 1981: 104).

1.2 Research Questions

This thesis is an account of a self-study action based research approach carried out by a teacher-researcher during the period of August 2019 to August 2020.

The purpose of this research study is to examine ways in which the researcher can support the pupils' oral language skills through socio-dramatic play in 4-6 year olds. The research questions that direct my study include:

1. What activities and strategies can I implement to promote oral language development in my pupils' socio-dramatic play?

2. How can I become involved in my pupils' socio-dramatic play to support their oral language skills?

The research study was carried out in the place of the employment of the researcher. This particular study site is located in a DEIS 2 primary school for girls located in a rural disadvantaged area. The participants included myself as the teacher-researcher, my pupils and my colleagues that work closely with me in my classroom.

1.3. Why action research?

Since my study was based on classroom research to enhance my own practice, I decided to choose a methodology/paradigm that reflected the complexities of real classrooms and teaching. Bassey (1990: 13) states that a paradigm is "a network of coherent ideas about the nature of the world and of the functions of researchers which, adhered to by a group of researchers, conditions the patterns of their thinking and underpins their research actions". Similarly Kivunja and Kuyini (2017: 26) suggest that paradigms "provide beliefs and dictate which, for scholars in a particular discipline, influence what should be studied, how it should be studied, and how the results of the study should be interpreted".

Action research is a "methodology for researchers (often teachers) to understand and generate knowledge about educational practices and their complexities" (McAteer, 2013: 21). Equally Kemmis (2009: 463) notes that action research "seeks to change and transform practitioners' practices, their understandings of their practices and the conditions under which they practice".

Therefore a self-study action research approach appealed to me as it not only allowed the teacher-researcher to be part of the study but allowed others in my research setting to participate including my pupils and colleagues alike. Subsequently, researching in a self-study action research methodology allowed me to investigate an area in my own current practice, to improve on it and to generate a theory from it so as to maximise the learning opportunities for my pupils. Like McNiff (2005) by positioning myself as the object of my enquiry, in relation with the children whose educational experiences I am seeking to improve, I avoid positioning myself as the external knower. In self-study action research, the researcher is at the heart of the action and at the heart of the research and the researcher can draw on their own lived experiences to develop their own theory (Sullivan et al., 2016).

1.4. My values

According to McNiff (2005), action research begins with values –that is the things we believe in and that drive our lives. Action research has challenged me in defining what my own values are within my teaching and educational views. I knew I held values intuitively about what education should look like but I had never questioned or cross-examined them before.

After much dialogue with my work and university colleagues, I was able to articulate and express the values that I held as an educator. Learning through play and active learning are two core values that I claim to uphold in my teaching. Once I became aware of these values, I was then able to look at my own every-day practice and check that I was working and living in the direction of my values.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, action research encourages the researcher to look at an area of concern or of interest within their practice with the intention of improving it. At first as I began looking at my own practice all I could see were countless problems stemming

from it, all of which I wanted to solve there and then. However, with consultation with my supervisor and critical friend, I was able to pin-point an aspect of my practice that needed further exploration. One aspect of my teaching that I became concerned about was how I was teaching and supporting my pupils' oral language needs.

Reflecting critically on this practice I came to the realisation that I was not living to these values that I had claimed to uphold within my teaching. Critical reflection involves "deliberately and purposefully looking at issues and incidents from as many angles as possible, analysing them for their effects on us and others and then using our critical faculties to synthesise, evaluate and make informed decisions about them" (Sullivan et al., 2016: 15). Similarly Alhadeff refers to critical reflection as the "capacity to challenge assumptions through which one gives meaning to one's own experience following a purposeful emancipation" (2003: n/p).

Initially I found the concept of critical reflection difficult to grasp especially after a long busy day at school. Admittedly I was sceptical of the value of this process at the beginning and I found it very challenging to transfer my thoughts, feelings and emotions down on paper. Sometimes I had so many thoughts and questions running through my mind, I did not know where to begin. However with much practice, reflecting critically became part of my every-day routine and I soon began to find my own path.

I began to realise that I was not living out some of my values but rather experiencing myself as a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989). Whitehead (1989) suggests that sometimes we do not live up to the values we claim to hold. Brookfield refers to this concept as "people's capacity for holding assumptions that contradict each other, and that are contradicted by events and experiences, know no bounds" (2009: 294).

I realised that I was letting the workbooks dictate what my pupils were learning which meant my oral language lessons were disconnected from their own experiences and prior knowledge. My oral language lessons did not include an active or a playful element but instead required the pupils to sit in front of the interactive whiteboard and learn from a digitally –programmed resource.

> "My reflections have highlighted how workbook 'learning' has being dictating how I have being teaching and how I have fallen into a cycle of planning my lessons based on what is inside the workbook. My reflections have also allowed me to really think deeply about my values and teaching philosophies and reminded me how these values have always been embedded within me since I began teaching" (Scully, 2020: reflective task 3, 4/2/20).

As a result, I knew I had to significantly change this aspect of my practice if I was going to live up to my values. McDonagh et al. (2012) advices the researcher to perceive the experiencing of oneself as a living contradiction as a positive, as an opportunity for new learning and progression.

The introduction of the New Primary Language (PLC) curriculum in 2015 emphasises language learning through play in the early years. It recommends that socio-dramatic play in particular can lend itself for ample opportunities for language learning (Concannon-Gibney, 2018). Therefore, it was hoped by incorporating an active and play-based approach to my pupils' language learning, I would live more closely to my values as I carried-out this research project. Oral language development is best developed in meaningful contexts that are interesting and enjoyable for the children (French, 2007).

1.5 Summary

In chapter one above I have identified my research questions which have guided this thesis study. My rationale for undertaking a self-study action research approach in keeping with my educational values and beliefs is also briefly explained.

Chapter two examines the current and relevant literature to my research questions. Play in the early-years, socio-dramatic play, oral language development and the role of an adult in play are key features of this study that are explored in more depth.

Chapter three examines my research approach, research design, data collection tools and the ethical considerations taken. This includes a description of a self-study action approach and my justification for using this approach. My research design is discussed including the research tools and their purposes. Ethical issues such as permissions, consent forms, guarantee of anonymity, confidentiality and the right of withdrawal are clarified.

Chapter four includes data analysis which explores the findings and trends of this research study, as well as a brief reflection of the messiness of the data collected. This chapter also discusses the proposed research for cycle 2 based on my current findings and an analysis of my evolving values and practice.

Chapter five concludes my thesis with an explanation of the significance of my research and the implications and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this self-study action based research is to explore the ways in which the researcher can support the pupils' oral language skills through socio-dramatic play in 4-6 year olds. This chapter presents an extensive review of literature related to play, socio-dramatic play, language development in socio-dramatic play and the teacher's role during socio-dramatic play in the infant classroom. The first section defines play and how play is integral to the development of a young child. The second section examines socio-dramatic play in-depth and discusses existing studies on the relationship between socio-dramatic play and oral language development. The last section of this review looks at previous studies considering adult interactions during socio-dramatic play to support language skills and development.

The following research questions below have guided this research study:

1. What activities and strategies can I implement to promote oral language development in my pupils' socio-dramatic play?

2. How can I become involved in my pupils' socio-dramatic play to support their oral language skills?

Recent research supporting the value of play in the early years and the oral language skills gained in an infant classroom setting are vital components of this literature review.

2.2 What is play?

Play has been identified as a vital aspect of child development, in particular in the early years (Hirsh, Paesk et al., 2008). "Play is the highest level of child development. It is the

spontaneous expression of thought and feeling – an expression which his inner life requires. It promotes enjoyment, satisfaction, serenity, and constitutes the source of all that can benefit the child . . . At this age play is never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant" (Froebel, in Lilley 1967: 84). Tovey (2013) draws on Froebel's ideas of play from Froebel's writings in Lilley (1967), play promotes self-activity; helps develop determination, concentration and persistence; helps children to reflect on and understand themselves as well as the world around them; play fosters friendship, fairness, understanding of rules and care for others; play promotes a positive relationship between children and adults. Froebel believed that all aspects of the child's development could be enhanced in play through physical development, social development in children playing together, sensory development in exploring and manipulating things and cognitive development. No one definition of play can capture all the views, insights and knowledge that are associated with it. However, there seems to be a common agreement amongst theorists that play can make a vital contribution to children's' development.

2.2.1 Types of play

Krasnor's and Pelpher's (1980) suggest four main 'criteria' for play, these include:

1. "Intrinsic Motivation" is play that is not constrained by outside rules or social demands, but it is done for its own sake

2. "Non-literality" can be referred to the "as if" or pretend element. Behaviours do not have their "literal" meaning

3. "Positive affect" refers to the enjoyment of play indicated with signs of laughter

4. "Flexibility" refers to the variation in form and content (Smith, 2009: 7).

There are many different types of play and children can be involved in more than one type at any time. Therefore it is important that they are given the opportunity to explore a variety of

types to support their development and learning. Smith and Pellegrini (2018) explain the different types of play which include:

1. Loco-motor play includes exercise play such as jumping and running and involves large body activity.

2. Social play involves playful interactions between children and their peers/adults. Typically play interactions up to two years of age involves the child's parent or caregiver; but by three or four years old a play group can involve two or more participants. Within this type of play, it is very evident to recognise the different stages of development of play. Solitary play involves the child playing alone; parallel play occurs when children play next to each other without any interactions; while co-operative play involves collaboration, interaction with others and sharing of materials.

3. Symbolic/Object play includes the playful use of objects such as building blocks, jig-saws, dolls etc. Sometimes an object can represent something else e.g. a remote for a mobile phone.

4. Language play refers to the use of unrehearsed or spontaneous manipulation of sounds and words. Word play, rhyme and humour can be evident in the pre-school and early school years.

5. Pretend play involves pretending an object or action is something else e.g. pretending to sleep; socio-dramatic play can be described as pretend play with others. Socio-dramatic play is common from three years of age and involves sustained role-play and narrative lines with the development of complex story-lines.

2.2.2   Structured play and unstructured play

Free play also known as unstructured play can be defined as "play in which the players themselves decide what and how to play and are free to modify the goals and rules as they go along" (Gray, 2013: 7). According to Gray (2013), during free-play the child initiates and directs play and there is no pre-determined learning goal.

"When play is both adult-initiated and adult-directed, it's really a form of direct instruction where adults are telling children what actions to take" (Weisburg et al., 2015: 9). Direct instruction or structured play is teacher-centred and teacher-paced and more than often involves listening to words rather than working with objects. Such learning is designed for learning through the eyes and ears, not through the hands (Lillard, 2013). Typically in direct instruction the teacher chooses the play activities and directs the child's play with certain learning goals or objectives to meet.

Lying between free play (unstructured) where children explore by themselves, and direct instruction (structured) where the interaction is led by an adult and children take a submissive role, guided play can be seen as a combination of adult initiation and child direction (Fisher et al., 2010). Although, intrinsically motivated free play provides opportunities for the child with true autonomy, guided play is a way in which educators can provide more targeted experiences (White, 2012). Guided play can be defined as "learning that is active and engaged, where the child takes initiative in a playful learning environment and the adult supports, rather than directs, the learning experience" (Yu et al., 2018: 1).   Likewise, it is stated that "guided play is the best way to incorporate play into early curricula without comprising educational goals, while allowing children to enjoy school" (Weisburg et al., 2015: 2). According to Weisburg et al. (2013) the child is more likely to develop an understanding of basic concepts than he/she would through free play or direct instruction and

is more likely to be highly motivated to engage in the play scenario because it is enjoyable and meaningful.

2.3 The importance of play to a child's development

The role of play in supporting and enhancing development has become a major focus for scholars and educational professionals across the board. Play is considered as so important to a child's development that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has established it as every child's right. There is wide spread appreciation that children's play provides a developmental function. For example, play contributes to a child's (1) physical, (2) social and emotional, (3) cognitive development and (4) language development and is an important form of learning (Diamond & Lee, 2011; Singer & Singer, 2009).

1. Physical development – includes fine and gross motor abilities and promotes co-ordination and the development of fundamental skills.

2. Social & emotional development – children have the opportunity to learn about themselves and others, they learn to resolves disputes, negotiate, trust and accept each other.

3. Cognitive development – play allows children to learn about concepts and ideas and helps develop problem-solving skills.

4. Language development – play provides opportunities for the development of language skills in relation to vocabulary knowledge, speaking and listening and sentence construction.

Play provides opportunities for children to explore and have hands-on experiences with their environment (Singer et al., 2006). Play offers chances for children to problem-solve, to use their imagination and creativity and to experience the enjoyment of the world around them (Wasik & Vessels, 2017). Similarly Smidt describes how the importance of play is a way of being able to "use hands-on or real-life situations" to find answers and make sense of their lives, experiences and feelings (2011: 4). Bruce (2012) draws on Frobel's theories and research in which he saw play as the highest form of learning:

1. Children use first-hand experiences that they have had when they play. The richer their experiences, the richer their play can be.

2. When children play, they are in control and make their own rules.

3. Children use props or make their own e.g. making dens. This provides opportunities for the development of imagination and creativity.

4. In their play, children escape from the here and now, they can play-out different situations to transform the past and shape the future to their liking.

5. Play can help children in better knowing themselves, others and the universe.

6. When children play co-operatively, they need to be sensitive to the needs, thoughts and feelings of other players.

7. Play provides children with the opportunity to try out what they have been learning, thinking and feeling.

8. "Play takes children to their highest form of learning, revealing the future inner life" (Bruce, 2012: 14).

In spite of numerous studies and theories supporting the importance and value of play, there are still misunderstandings about the role of play for children's development. These barriers in today's early childhood classrooms include (1) the acceptance of play's educational role

with increasing pressures towards academic readiness and achievement. (2) Even when educators express a belief in the value of play, they are rarely actively involved with it. The studies to prove the above statements include:

1. International evidence highlighted that "practitioners are experiencing a tension between the competing demands of play-based approaches and curriculum demands". In Ireland a study by Moyles (2010) showed that practitioners expressed that a "lack of familiarity with a play-based approach to learning and the availability of training may also undermine teachers' confidence" (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 191).

2. A study done by Gray and Ryan (2016) among Junior and Senior Infant teachers in Ireland found that there was significant vagueness regarding teachers' responses to questions relating to the importance of the adult's role in children's play. They posed the following question –"Who should lead the activity (play), the child or the adult?" The results found 42% believed that play should be child initiated and 35% signified that play should be teacher-led; while 19% were unsure (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 195). Further more alarming evidence from interviews with teachers regarding the role of the teacher during play summoned the view of most "I think it's the only time children have to themselves and it gives them choice. I use it to correct worksheets or admin" (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 197). Although there are many suggestions in literature that adult input in children's play is vital (as discussed later in the review); it is clear there is an uncertainty between what is understood theoretically and what is actually happening in practice.

2.4 The place of play in Irish policy and primary schools

The early 1970's saw the introduction of *An Curaclam na Bunscoile (Primary School Curriculum)* which emphasised the importance of activity and discovery methods within an integrated curriculum. This curriculum also made reference to the importance of play to enhance the child's cognitive, linguistic, social and creative development (NCCA, 2007). When the *Primary School Curriculum* was revised in 1999, only few references to play were made and that play required teacher direction and structure. However, with the publication of *The National Childcare Strategy* in 1999, there was a shift in Irish policy perspective in regarding play as both a need and right of young children (Department of Justice, Equality, and Law reform, 1999).

In 2009, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed a *National Framework for Early Learning* (later renamed as *Aistear*). *Aistear* is the Irish word for 'journey' and comprises of four main themes including well-being, identity and belonging, communicating, exploring and thinking. The *Aistear* framework highlights the importance of play for young children's learning and development and provides suggestions on how to integrate play into other subject areas within the curriculum. However, this *Aistear* framework is not yet compulsory in the primary school Infant Curriculum and it is not been implemented to the same degree in all primary schools. In addition recent studies have found that play-based learning is considerably under developed in Irish classrooms (Gray & Ryan, 2016). Gray and Ryan's (2016) study also exposed a fondness amongst infant teachers for traditional teaching methods and that there was a lack of understanding of the idea of a play-based curriculum (Smyth, 2018).

Their study also revealed a wide range of factors that prevented teachers implementing the *Aistear* curriculum in their classrooms. These factors included "lack of training, parental

expectations, large class sizes and focus on the *Primary School Curriculum (PSC)*" (Gray & Ryan, 2016: 198).

However, it is clear that *Aistear* provides young children many opportunities to develop cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically in their early years in school. In order to ensure that *Aistear* is implemented successfully in infant classrooms, the difficulty of professional development and support to teachers needs to be managed. Specific training and support must be made available to teachers so that there is an understanding of the power of play and how play provides opportunities for learning and development. As play is regarded internationally as an integral part of the early year's classroom, it is vital that Irish policy supports this model in the near future.

Concannon-Gibney (2018) acknowledges with the introduction of the New Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (2015) that there is now for the first time a link or a necessary marriage between the PSC (1999) and Aistear framework (2009). The new PLC (2015) reflects on the principles and guidelines of the Aistear framework highlighting the importance of play and playful experiences for children's language learning in particular. However Concannon-Gibney (2018) reiterates that there is still much work to be done across the curriculum so to implement a more play-based programme in our schools.

2.5 Socio-dramatic play

Socio-Dramatic play is a type of pretend play that involves the children playing with others (peers and/or adults). Moyles (2012) refers to socio-dramatic play as the enactment of roles with a specific scenario, between groups of children for a sustained period of time. Similarly Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) refer to socio-dramatic play as the verbal interaction of two or more children as they engage in imitative and make-believe play. During socio-dramatic

play, children accept and assign roles and then act them out. While this type of play might be dismissed by some educators, it remains a central part of the developmental learning process of young children as outlined by many studies and theories below.

Socio-dramatic play is also known as "social fantasy play", "social imaginative play," social make-believe play" and "social pretend play" (Levy, 1986: 134). Socio-dramatic play provides the opportunities for children to make new friends, to negotiate with others and to develop their communication skills (NCCA, 2009). Socio-dramatic play consists of symbolic representation, role-taking, language, imagination, creativity, enjoyment, and social interaction (Roskos & Christie, 2011).

According to Smith (2009), socio-dramatic play was brought to dominance by Smilansky (1968). Smilansky carried out the first large-scale play training study in Israeli. She used a variety of training practices to teach children from low socio-economic backgrounds how to engage in high quality socio-dramatic play. The results proved that the play training considerably enhanced the quality of the children's socio-dramatic play. Smilansky's Israeli study also established three main conclusions (1) there is a link between socio-dramatic play and academic achievement, (2) children from different socio-economic backgrounds have different abilities in socio-dramatic play, (3) teachers have a supportive role in enhancing socio-dramatic play (especially among children of low socio-economic backgrounds). Smilansky suggested that "socio-dramatic play was generally important for cognitive and language development, role-taking and creativity" (Smith, 2009: 173). As a result, Smilansky devised a set of "play training" schemes. She recommended by using suggestive props, taking the children on visits (e.g. to a farm) and providing adult-input (e.g. initiating play and helping children sustain the narrative) were all helpful in facilitating socio-dramatic play. Smilansky's work on play tutoring has led to further studies of socio-dramatic play since

(Smith, 2009: 159).   Although Smilansky's play group showed a progression in their language skills, statistical analysis was not conducted in this research study.

Bodrova and Leong (2012) describe six important elements of children's socio-dramatic play which include as follows:

1. Plan – children's capability to think about play in advance of playing

2. Roles – these include the actions, language and emotional expressions that are connected to a particular role

3. Props – the objects children use in play including imaginary, symbolic and real objects.

4. Language – what children say in a play scenario or to manage the actions of other children in different roles?

5. Scenario – what children act out and the interactions between different roles.

This model can support teachers in assessing the maturity of play in their classrooms (Bordrova & Leong, 2012: 29).

Children's socio-dramatic play goes through five stages of play along with the elements mentioned above which are described by Bordrova and Leong, as follows:

1. First-Scripts or object-orientated pretend play which is the earliest stage – a child playing with toy cars while making "vroom vroom" noises.

2. Roles-in-action – a child walking in high heels and labelling her actions playing as 'mommy'.

3. Roles with rules and beginning scenarios – children begin to direct their pretend actions with their play partners keeping in line with their roles. It is also common at this stage to hear them correcting each other's behaviours if the behaviour is not in line with their roles (e.g. a patient playing with the stethoscope).

4. Multiple pretend actions – children are consistent in the roles that they are playing while acting out complex scenarios.

5. Dramatisation - Planning and negotiating pretend actions begins to take more time rather than actually carrying them out. At this stage, it is common for children to act out several roles without having physical partners but rather with stuffed animals or imaginary partners (Bordrova & Leong, 2012: 29).

2.5.1 Vygotsky's theory on socio-dramatic play

Vygotsky (1896-1934) is universally recognised as one of the main theorists in the field of education. In the Vygotsky's definition, play is limited to the dramatic or make-believe play of pre-schoolers. According to Vygotsky, real-play activities include the following components –developing an imaginary situation; taking on and acting out roles; and following a set of rules determined by specific roles (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Vygotsky limited his definition of play to the dramatic or make-believe play of pre-schoolers and primary school-age children. His definition does include activities such as games, movement activities or exploratory play. Vygotsky suggested three components of play which included: children generate an imaginary situation; take on and act-out roles; follow a set of rules decided upon by certain roles. Vygotsky (1967) had a unique view on play that it was not a spontaneous action and that there was a set of rules for participating in play:

"whenever there is an imaginary situation in play, there are rules—not rules that are formulated in advance and change during the course of the game, but rules stemming from the imaginary situation. Therefore, to imagine that a child can behave in an imaginary situation without rules, i.e., as he behaves in a real situation, is simply impossible. If the child is playing the role of a mother, then she has rules of maternal behaviour. The role the child

plays, and her relationship to the object if the object has changed its meaning, will always stem from the rules, i.e., the imaginary situation will always contain rules" (Bordrova & Leong, 2007: 130).

Vygotsky placed immense value on the fact that cognitive development is supported through social interactions with children and adults. This is known as The *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) and it is one of the most famous of Vygotsky's concepts. Vygotsky defines the word 'zone' as a "distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Bordrova & Leong, 2007: 40). Vygotsky described the development of behaviours on two levels:

1. Independent level (low) – where the child knows and can do alone
2. Assisted performance (high) – the maximum the child can reach with support.

Vygotsky explained that these behaviours are always changing - "what a child does with some assistance today is what the child will do independently tomorrow. What requires maximum support and assistance today will be something the child can do with minimal help tomorrow" (Bordrova & Leong, 2007: 40).

Vygotsky believed that the ZPD creates an environment where children can successfully perform a task or understand a concept with the help of others. As the child's learning increases, the ZPD decreases. In the context of the classroom, the teacher observes appropriately and provides support to the child where appropriate which is performed through the means of social interaction i.e. play.

2.5.2 Socio-economic status and socio-dramatic play

Mc Cabe (2017) refers to how factors such as socio-economic background have been established by researchers to have an influence on the level of children's participation in dramatic-play: Smilansky's and Shefatya's development of play training methods developed from research in the 1960's with Israeli pre-schoolers in which they discovered that those in lower socio-economic groupings showed lower levels of socio-dramatic play than middle-class children. They found that children from lower economic groups relied more on imitation for roles and had more limited conception of roles, as well as a reliance on low level use of toys (1990: 56). Corsaro also discussed the differences in play of children in disadvantaged backgrounds compared to middle class children. He found that children from disadvantaged areas use less fantasy and imitate the adversity of their families' lives through play. He discusses that because children play out their reality in socio-dramatic play and because children in lower socio-economic groupings are exposed less to cultural routines, their play is more limited (2003: 26).

Smilansky found in her studies that providing suggestive props and taking children on visits e.g. to a zoo or a farm, initiating the play, suggesting themes and helping children sustain the narrative would contribute to get complex socio-dramatic play going for children who presumably had lacked such scaffolding from parents previously (Smith, 2009).

2.6 Oral language development in the early years

Oral language consists of two components which include expressive language (speaking) and receptive language (understanding). Expressive language involves the use of words and non-verbal expressions to share meaning with others. Receptive language is the method of

understanding what has been expressed. The oral language that the children have gained through interactions with their families and the wider community is built on by teachers who use direct instruction in listening, speaking and vocabulary development as word meanings and sentence structures are expanded through talk.

The development of oral language is vital to a child's literacy development including listening, speaking, reading and writing. Children bring different levels of oral language ability when they begin school therefore teachers face a challenge to meet the individual needs of each language learner. "Conflicting messages regarding methodology in oral language development have resulted in a heavy reliance on programs and 'quick fixes', inhibiting the use of authentic, contextualized language experiences in the classroom" (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005: 391).

Hall (1987) found that oral language occurs when the following circumstances are present: parents, teachers and care-givers act as facilitators of language development; language is surrounded in their daily life; children use language to make sense and meaning of their world; social interaction is a vital component to language development; language is learned in a child-initiated manner (Kirkland & Patterson, 2005). This statement links my review to the following topics which discusses how social interactions and the teacher influence and develop their oral language skills through socio-dramatic play.

2.6.1 Socio-dramatic play and oral language development

There are numerous studies and research relating to the increased development of oral language skills through socio-dramatic play. Socio-dramatic play supports children's language and literacy development and highlights the importance of this for children in their

early years of primary school according to the Aistear Framework (NCCA, 2009). Similarly

Kernan (2007) highlights how socio-dramatic play has been identified as an important

pathway to literacy development. In socio-dramatic play, children imitate conversations and

language that they experience in the wider world for example making appointments in the

doctor's surgery or having a conversation about what foods to buy in the shop. Concannon-

Gibney (2018) outlines the list of oral language learning outcomes from the *Primary*

Language Curriculum (NCCA, 2015) that may be attained through the use of socio-dramatic

play. "There are numerous learning outcomes that relate to general communication skills

which would be practised through role playing various scenarios and in the development of

play narratives" (Concannon-Gibney, 2018: 47).

This view on language development focuses on a different perspective in that language is

attained through real-life settings as children engage in meaningful experiences. For example,

when children are posed or faced with a real-life situation that requires the use of their

language, they are encouraged to use and learn language. Vygotsky (1987) believed that the

foundations of speech were social, even from the beginning of infancy (Bordrova & Leong,

2017). In addition, Vygotsky (1968) deemed language learning takes place through every-day

interactions and shared experiences between adult and child. Therefore research suggests by

using real-life scenarios as a source for the development of themes or topics of socio-

dramatic play, children are provided with the opportunity to enhance their language skills' in

a meaningful way.

Recent research conducted by Stagnitti et al. (2016) investigated the influence of a play-based

curriculum in pretend play and oral language with children attending their first formal year in

school. The researchers set-out to examine the possibility that learning through the medium

of play leads to a greater development in linguistic understanding than learning in a

traditional classroom environment that is more didactic and direct in approach. A total of 54 children completed standardised measures of pretend play and narrative language skills on entry to school and again six months later. The results showed that the children who engaged in pretend play scenarios everyday significantly improved their language skills (narrative, vocabulary and grammar knowledge) whereas the children in the traditional group did not. Although this study sample measured was moderately small, further replication with a larger sample across several school settings would further support the researcher's argument.

Similarly, Baumer et al. (2005) examined the effects of pretend play on the development of language skills specifically narrative competence in 5 to 7 year old children in a Scandinavia country. The researchers compared children under a control intervention that followed a conventional school without pretend play practise and children who participated in daily pretend play scenarios. The results demonstrated that the children who took part in pretend play confirmed considerable improvements in their narrative development.

Overall it is evident that most of the existing research shows socio-dramatic play provides a platform in which children can build upon their language skills.

2.7 The teacher's role in socio-dramatic play

While the teacher can have a positive impact on children's play, Jung and Recchia (2013) advice that teacher's engagement can also have a negative effect on children's play by inappropriate or poorly planned interactions. The adult's role in children's socio-dramatic play has been a matter of controversy through the decades with some perceiving the adult's involvement during play as an intrusion. Often educators see themselves as the 'knower' and the young child as the one who does not yet know. This misconception may lead some

teachers to dominate or take-over children's play with their self-imposed teaching agenda depriving the children of self-motivation, creativity and independence in their play (Canning, 2007). However, many literatures, theories and research studies show how adult engagement in socio-dramatic play can have many advantages for children's development and learning.

Teachers play an important role in enhancing and supporting children's play and interactions with their peers. Leong and Bodrova (2012) believed that when play is not supported by adults it does not achieve the full potential for enhancing young children's cognitive and social development. They argue that play should be deliberate as teaching maths or literacy skills. They also note that is it becoming more obvious that without adult support, the children in their play rarely reach their full potential. Similarly, Concannon-Gibney (2018) discusses the findings from Gray and Ryan (2016) and Walsh et al. (2016) that play in the past was often used as a time to listen to reading or to prepare for lessons by the teacher. But rather that teacher engagement during play has been found to increase children's cognitive development and higher-order thinking skills.

"Teachers play an important role in expanding and supporting children's play and interactions with peers" (Stanton-Chapman, 2015: 99). Stanton-Chapman (2015) suggests strategies or interventions that can be implemented by teachers to promote successful engagement during socio-dramatic play. These include preparing the physical environment for play (e.g. selection of toys and themes); entering and exiting children's play seamlessly; using talk to enhance social interactions and selecting the most appropriate intervention strategies based on direct observation. While the Aistear framework (NCCA, 2009) highlights the need for teacher input during play such as modelling specific language, it also encourages the teacher to take a step back so that the children can use their own initiatives

and creativity during play.   This allows for the teacher to take observation notes of the children's development to inform future learning.

A study by Gmitrova (2013) in Slovakia was carried-out in relation to comparing the efficiency of teachers' direct and indirect intervention into pretend play. Three hundred and sixty-eight Kindergartens and ninety-two qualified Kindergarten teachers were involved in this study. The researcher compared the children's playing behaviours determined by indicators of their playing activity in relation to the presence and absence of a teacher's intervention method (*teacher initiated pretend play role).* To calculate the playing behaviours of the children, the researcher based them on El'konin's theory of children's play development (El'Konin, 1999). These indicators are categorised into three groups: manipulation with things e.g. props or toys; activities associated with being in-role and verbal communication. The results showed that there is huge potential to enhance the children's cognitive, social and language skills with the presence of the teacher during pretend play.

Assessment of the children's experiences in socio-dramatic play is also a crucial aspect of the teacher's role. While most of the teacher's time should be assigned to interacting with the children, it is also helpful to spend some time observing, taking notes, reflecting on his/her own interactions with the children, to inform future curriculum planning (Moyles, 2004). Aistear (NCCA, 2009) suggest that the use of conversations (e.g. conversation station) can also be used as a means of assessment which can reveal whether the language goals have been achieved and if a child has fulfilled a planned learning objective for that play activity.

2.7.1 Play interventions in socio-dramatic play

Christie (1982) outlines how play interventions by teachers can enhance the quality of children's socio-dramatic play. Before play training can be utilized the teacher must first systemically observe children's play behaviour to find out which elements or components are present and/or missing in a child's play. Smilansky (1968) developed a template in the form of a checklist with the various play behaviours of socio-dramatic play listed along the side. These brief anecdotes provide information about what elements occur in a child's play and which types of interventions are successful with particular children. Christie (1982) offers the reader guidelines to support teachers in using this template:

1. Observations should be made during a time when the children have the opportunity to explore the socio-dramatic materials.

2. Observe the children one-at-a-time or in small groups. The observation should last at least more than ten minutes in order to assess persistence.

3. Place a check beside the relevant element that is observed in the child's play.

4. Observations of a child should be over a number of play sessions as it is premature to conclude that on the basis of one observation that a child does not show a particular element.

Smilansky (1968) developed two types of socio-dramatic play training: outside intervention and inside intervention. Outside intervention involves the teacher making comments to the children who are engaged with the play to encourage a child to use a particular socio-dramatic behaviour. This type of intervention can be seen as less intrusive and allows the children to take control of their play. Inside intervention is also referred to as 'participation in play' and requires the teacher to take a role and join in with the play. While in-role, Smilansky encourages the teacher to model socio-dramatic play behaviours that have been

missing in the children's play. In contrast, this type of intervention is a more direct method of teaching certain play elements. If these strategies are used correctly, play training can improve the quality of children's play and can enhance their cognitive and social development (Christie, 1982: 25-31).

In contrast, Lillard et al. (2013) conducted an evidence-based study entitled '*The impact of Pretend Play on Children's Development*'. The researchers set out to examine the existing evidence and to determine whether there was a convincing case in support of pretend play's importance to a child's development. From their findings, the researchers established two possibilities: that pretending is one of the many ways to development or that pretending is something that sometimes goes along with developments, but does not cause them. They conclude by suggesting better research is needed to show pretend play's role in children's development.

"existing evidence does not support strong causal claims about the unique importance of pretend play for development and that much more and better research is essential for clarifying its possible role" (Lillard et al., 2013: 1)

However, Ageliki and Hande (2013) respond specifically to the article's critical review of research on pretend play and narrative development (the ability to tell and comprehend stories). They argue that the version of this research carried-out by Lillard and her colleagues was incomplete and misleading and that a number of their criticisms were misjudged.

With regards the existing evidence that socio-dramatic play enhances the young child's development, it is clear that there is substantially more research supporting socio-dramatic play and development in young children.

2.7.2 Teachers' role in supporting language development in socio-dramatic play

According to Weisberg et al. (2013) language increases when children are interacting with adults and peers in a playful way. The Primary Language Curriculum recognises "adult-child interactions as essential for language teaching and learning" (NCCA, 2015: 20). In addition, Weitzman and Greenberg (2002, 2012) acknowledge that teachers have an important role in interacting with children that support and enhance children's oral language skills.

A study by Enz and Christie (1993) investigated '*Teacher Play Interaction Styles and their impact on children's Oral Language and Literacy Play'.* The teacher play interactions used by the researchers comprised of the following:

1. stage-manager – responding to children's requests, making suggestions to extend their play but remain outside the children's play frame.
2. co-player – teacher accepts an invitation to play and takes on a minor role e.g. a customer in a shop, while letting the children take the lead.
3. Director – teacher takes control of the play and assigns roles and directs the children's actions and dialogue but remain on the side-lines by giving orders.
4. Uninvolved – teacher did not interact with the children's play

The researchers established a number of results, some included that (1) the "stage-manager", the "co-player" and the "play leader" styles had a significant influence on the children's oral language skills (2) the children did not sustain dramatic play when the teacher was uninvolved. Their findings proved that teacher involvement can enhance children's oral language skills in pretend play however the teacher's play style is a vital element.

A more recent research study in 2017 was undertaken by a speech-language pathologist and a former primary school teacher to successfully show how teachers can support children's

language in a socio-dramatic play context. The action-based research study was carried-out in a Kindergarten classroom with twenty-two pupils in a northern Canadian primary school. During the research study three main principles were used by the class teacher to scaffold the children's language development. The principles arise from the researchers work as a speech and language pathologist and she has found them very useful in her work with teachers and children.

The three underlying principles used to support and enhance children's oral language skills in the context of socio-dramatic play during this research study included:

1. Observation - Observe what the children are interested in, give the children the chance to share their ideas and then follow the children's lead.

2. Keeping the conversation going - which involves making comments and asking questions that contribute ideas and vocabulary and to encourage them to make connections with prior knowledge or experience

3. Posing a problem - or add ideas to challenge children's thinking as they talk and think about the problem and suggest possible ways to resolve the problem.

In conclusion of the research, Peterson and Greenberg (2017) hoped that teachers and speech-language pathologists alike would be inspired to use this framework in their own classroom to scaffold and support their own children's language development (Peterson & Greenberg, 2017: 10-20).

2.8 Conclusion

In this literature review I provided a better understanding associated with the teacher's role and the development of oral language skills of children through the use of socio-dramatic play in an infant class setting. Although it is evident from the literature reviewed that teacher's interventions in play and socio-dramatic play in particular contributes to a child's

cognitive development; more research is needed to understand the connection between socio-dramatic play and language skills in young children (Lillard et al., 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2011).

The following chapter sets forth the research methodology for this qualitative self-study action-based research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research study was to examine ways in which the researcher can support the pupils' oral language skills through socio-dramatic play in 4-6 year olds. Research questions include the following:

1. What activities and strategies can I implement to promote oral language development in my pupils' socio-dramatic play?
2. How can I become involved in my pupils' socio-dramatic play to support their oral language skills?

This chapter includes a description of the research paradigms, the research design, the data collection tools that were used, data analysis and the ethical considerations of my research study.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Kuhn (1962) describes how "a paradigm is a way of looking at or researching phenomena, a world view, a view of what counts as accepted……a shared belief system or a set of principles, the identity of a research community…." (Cited in Cohen et al., 2018: 8). Similarly a paradigm can be defined as a "comprehensive belief system, world view, or framework that guides research and practice in a field" (Willis, 2007: 8). According to Taylor and Medina (2013) there are several major paradigms for educational researchers that turn their studies into educational practices and policies. They also acknowledge that more recently educational researchers (including teacher-researchers) in schools and universities

are being empowered to envisage new policies and practices that better meet the educational needs of their changing societies.

For the purpose of this research study, a self-study action-based qualitative model was chosen in which the researcher's values and views are central to the research as outlined in the following paragraphs.

3.2.1 *The nature of qualitative research*

According to Hickcock and Hughes (1995) there has been a shift in research techniques in school-based research over recent decades. In the past there has been an over-reliance on quantitative measures such as statistics and numerical-based research. Quantitative methods are mostly involved with 'scientific' research paradigms which strives to investigate and confirm law-like patterns of behaviour (Taylor and Medina, 2013). Robson (2011) argues that the objectivity that is needed to carry-out such research is challenging to attain outside of a laboratory and as a consequence quantitative research might not reveal the social nature of humans and or the active construction of their own worlds.

Instead the focus is now becoming on teaching and learning itself through the means of qualitative research.   Qualitative research can be defined by "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: 17). Patton (2001) defines qualitative research as "research that produces findings arrived from real-life settings (primary school) where the phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally" (cited in Golafshani, 2003: 600).
Creswell (2013) suggests that "qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive or theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this

problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes" (Creswell, 2013: 43).

3.2.2 *The nature of action research*

Action research is often known as practitioner research. Action Research is defined by Reason and Bradbury (2001) as "a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities" (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003: 10). Likewise McNiff (2005) defines action research as "a common-sense approach to personal and professional development that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work and to create their own theories of practice" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005: 1). In addition, Kemmis suggests action research as "a critical and self-critical process aimed at animating these transformations through individual and collective self-transformation: transformation of our practices, transformation of the way we understand our practices, and transformation of the conditions that enable and constrain our practice" (Kemmis, 2009: 463).

Action research involves a cyclical process, this can be seen in Griffiths and Davies (1993) research which included the identification of a problem, collecting information, analysing, planning action/intervention and implementing/monitoring the outcomes (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995).

McNiff and Whitehead (2005) provide two main reasons why teachers should do action research - to improve their own practice and to generate new theory from it. Action research not only highlights an area of practice that can be enhanced, it also provides the opportunity to develop a justification for why you do what you do (McDonagh et al., 2019).

However, it is important to be mindful of the criticisms towards action research. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) highlight how collaboration is a vital part of action research, however the authors remind us how emerging literature demonstrates the potential problems of collaboration. Waters-Adams (1994) argues that although action research requires collaboration for validation purposes, there is often very little indication among research of how collaboration might be encouraged. Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014) highlight how problems may arise from the emphasis collaboration in action research places on the relationships between people and the challenges that may arise from the differing roles of these collaborators.

Koshy (2005) argues against the claim that action research is the 'soft choice' and that it is lacking rigour. She disputes that there is rigour in collecting data by using a variety of research methods to guarantee validity and reliability. The reflection process is also another aspect of action research that can often be criticised. To engage in the reflection process, the researcher must have the ability to be able to reflect in a meaningful way (Kember, McKay, Sinclair & Wong, 2008). For example, a newly qualified teacher and an experienced head of department teacher may be differentially placed to reflect.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The following research design section outlines a description of my research site, my research participants and a description and a proposed time-frame of my intervention.

3.3.1 *Research site*

The research study was carried out in the place of the employment of the researcher. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative researchers often gather data where participants experience the issue or problem under study and where data is collected by talking directly to the participants and their behaviour is observed within their context. Qualitative research is conducted in natural settings and ordinary events and behaviours are studied in their everyday contexts (Given, 2008).

This particular study site was located in a DEIS primary school for girls located in a rural disadvantaged area. The school consists of eight mainstream classes with two ASD classes. There are currently eight mainstream class teachers, with seven SEN (special educational needs) teachers and eight SNA's (Special Needs Assistants). The research study was carried-out in the junior infant classroom in which the researcher is the mainstream class teacher. The classroom itself is a large open-spaced room with a clearly defined section for a socio-dramatic play area (Appendix A). This area consists of a permanent writing table, table and chairs and an indoor play panel that can be used for a variety of purposes depending on the particular theme e.g. shop stall, receptionist area etc.

3.3.2 *Research Participants*

Cohen et al., (2018) acknowledge that in a qualitative research study, the emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of the group or individuals in question. In other words they only represent themselves and nothing or nobody else. Marshall and Rossman (2016) highlight that there are no clear rules on the size of the sample or group in a qualitative research, rather size is informed by research setting or the research purpose. The participants in this study included:

1. The researcher who is the mainstream class teacher in Junior Infants

2. Twenty-five pupils between the ages of 4-6 years old in Junior Infants

3. The support teacher to Junior Infants and the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) to a child with special needs in Junior Infants. The support teacher also acted as my critical friend throughout my research journey. A critical friend or learning partner is someone who can give advice and work with teacher-researchers during action research (Mc Niff, 2002).

3.3.3 *Description of the intervention*

1.	The socio-dramatic corner in my classroom was set-up for a new play topic at the beginning of each month. Relevant props and resources were gathered by the researcher.
2.	Socio-dramatic play sessions took place each day which lasted between 30-40 minutes long. This stage included a variety of 'teacher intervention' strategies whereby the teacher-researcher used a variety of approaches to support the pupils' oral language skills during their socio-dramatic play sessions. Smilansky's (1968) play training procedures were used which included 'outside' and 'inside' interventions (both explained in figure 4.2.3). At the end of each lesson, 5-10 minutes were dedicated to the review stage of the play sessions whereby the pupils got the opportunity to give feedback about their play to the whole class or in pairs.
3.	Independent lessons and/or discrete oral language lessons also took place concurrently to the socio-dramatic play theme or topic. This gave the pupils the opportunity to practise the desired target language and to plan for and review their

socio-dramatic play sessions along with the teacher. Used a topic-based-approach, the topic dictated what the children were learning across most of the curriculum subjects for that month (gave opportunities to make meaningful-connections)

3.3.4   Proposed time-frame of intervention

Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Jan –March 2020	*March – April 2020*

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

A variety of data collection tools were used in this research study. Qualitative researchers generally gather numerous forms of data rather than rely on a sole data source (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) explains how typically qualitative researchers then organise and review the data gathered into themes or categories to try make sense of it. Likewise, qualitative methodologies and techniques are most commonly used in action research according to Hitchcock and Hughes (1995). The qualitative methodologies that were used in this research process are explained in the following paragraphs.

3.4.1 *Observations*

"Observation is more than looking. It is looking and noting systemically people, behaviours, events, settings, artefacts, routines".… (Cohen et al., 2018: 542). According to Wellington (2015) observations as a research process gives the researcher the opportunity to collect first-hand data from naturally occurring social situations.

I became a participant observer during the pupils' socio-dramatic play sessions. Participant observation can be defined as the "most subtly intrusive" form of observation as it involves the researcher to be an empathetic, sympathetic member of the group, in order to achieve access to insiders' behaviours and activities while still acting as a researcher with a degree of objectivity (Simpson & Tuson, 2003: 14). Similarly Watts (2011) believes that participant observation can be non-intrusive and since the researcher stays in the situation for a long time, he/she becomes as familiar and unnoticed as everyday objects. However it is vital for the researcher to balance "participation" with "observation" as too much of the former comprises the latter and vice versa (Watts, 2011: 303).

Observations of my pupils in the socio-dramatic play area were carried-out during 'Aistear time' where different groups were invited to participate in various activities each day relating to a particular topic for that month (Appendix B). A simple play-rotation system was followed whereby a different group of five to six children were observed in the dramatic play area each day. The remainder of the groups engaged with independent activities that were related to the same topic in other spaces and work stations within the classroom. A total of thirty-two play sessions were observed over an eight-week period with each play session between 30-40 minutes in duration. Observations were taken of the children talking, interacting with each other or/and with the researcher and interacting with the props and resources. In a separate column beside my observations my reflective thoughts were jotted down as it was happening or completed later that evening (Appendix C). The children were coded by number to ensure confidentiality and the data was stored in a locked file cabinet.

At this specific time each day, the support teacher was time-tabled to my classroom whereby she was available to attend to the other children or/and groups in the classroom as well as observing what was happening in the dramatic play area. In order to avoid bias in the results, my observations were analysed by my critical friend (support teacher).

3.4.2 *Unstructured Interviews*

In a qualitative research study, unstructured interviews involve asking moderately open-ended questions of research participants in order to learn their own opinions on the topic of interest (Given, 2008). Cohen et al. (2018) acknowledges that it is an open situation where the interviewer has more flexibility and freedom while the respondent can express themselves as fully or as spontaneously as chooses. However, Patton (2002) recognises some challenges that researchers face when using unstructured interviews such as time, exerting the right amount of control over the conversation and analysing the extensive data from it.

Unstructured interviews took place between my critical friend (support teacher) and my SNA on an on-going basis throughout the data collection process. These conversations and discussions were based upon what was working well and what could be done differently in relation to my intervention in the classroom. Their opinions, ideas and observations were noted at that time and more detailed notes were written-up immediately after each conversation/interview.

3.4.3 *Conversational Interviews*

Conversational interviews are used as a way to "generate verbal data through talking about specified topics with research participants in an informal and conversational way" (Given, 2008: 2). Conversational interviews took place between the teacher-researcher and the pupils in Junior Infants. It mostly occurred during the review stage at the end of the pupils' socio-dramatic play sessions (5-10 minutes each day). The review stage gave the group of children in the socio-dramatic play area an opportunity to share their feedback and stories about their play. The teacher-researcher guided the feedback further by providing prompts to the children e.g. what went well in your play? What would have been better? Children have been

considered as "the best sources of information about themselves" (Docherty and Sandelowski, 1999: 177).

However, Cohen et al. (2018) remind us that when interviewing children, it is important to engage them in a safe context and not to interrogate them or pressure them for information. They also highlight the importance of having the 'interview' as part of a routine or everyday activity e.g. show and tell, circle time etc.

Sometimes photographs of the children's experience in the socio-dramatic area were uploaded onto the interactive whiteboard to provide as an aide memoire for the children when they were giving their feedback. The children's responses and comments were noted by the researcher. Leeson (2014) recommends using a projection technique as a strategy for interviewing children. Here, instead of asking direct questions, the interviewer can show a set of pictures and ask the children for their responses to them. This strategy can help the children overcome being easily distracted, avoid the researcher being seen as an authority figure, helps keep the interview relevant etc.

3.4.4 *Artefacts*

According to Given (2008) artefacts are things that people have created; they provide material evidence of a person's ideas, knowledge and opinions. Greig and Taylor (1999) advocate the use of familiar artefacts (drawings) –as not only does it make them feel at ease but it helps to make their ideas concrete.

During socio-dramatic play time, some of the pupils utilised the writing table that was situated within the socio- dramatic play area. The purpose of the writing table (Appendix D) allowed for my pupils to practise their language and literacy skills relating to the theme. For example, before going shopping in the market, the customers were encouraged to make or

write a simple shopping list with the tools provided on the writing table (markers, shopping list templates, flashcard cues, pieces of paper etc.). After each play session, sample artefacts of the children's work were collected.

Samples of the children's work also included their pictorial responses to their play or experiences in the socio-dramatic play area. At the end of each month (play topic), time was dedicated for the children to draw their favourite play area. I collected some samples of children's work where they had chosen the socio-dramatic area as their favourite play-area and their explanations were noted.

3.4.5 *Pre-and-Post Language Checklists*

According to Johnson (2012), a checklist is a list that identifies particular attributes including behaviours, traits, assignments or skills. They can also be designed by teachers and used to show what skills have been grasped and provides evidence that these skills have been covered. Given (2008) adds that checklists might be used as a precautionary backup during the data collection stage so that they reliably take note of a certain phenomenon.

Pre-and-post oral language/vocabulary checklists (Appendix E) designed by the teacher-researcher were administered based on the particular theme that was explored for each month (January, February and March). Three target children were identified and represented three ability groups –average high, average middle and average low. At the beginning of the month, the three target children were tested prior to the immersion of the theme or topic for that month. The same three target children were tested again at the end of the month. The support teacher took on the role of this task as it consumed a great deal of time and the tests were carried out in her classroom where there was less distractions and noise for the target children. These pre-and-post checklists were analysed in a qualitative manner which is explained in more depth in my findings chapter.

3.4.6 *Reflective journal entries*

My reflective journal entries were used as a means of data with excerpts of critical reflections on my practices and events during the research process. According to McDonagh et al. (2018) reflection on practice and critical reflection are central components of the self-study action research process. It involves recording your thoughts on your practice in a methodological way and then taking time to reflect on them. Mc.Donagh et al. (2018) refers to Schön's (1995) work and how he explains through reflection, a practitioner can make sense of the uncertainties. Reflection can be done by having a reflective journal at hand and can be used to jot down events that happen during the day, almost as they occur. However, the researcher must be aware of reflecting on a particular event or situation rather than just describing it. Brookefield (2017) encourages the researcher to critically reflect which helps avoid a narrative script of reflections. He suggests by using the four sets of lenses drawing not only on our own autobiographical lens when reflecting on our practice, but also looking to the lenses of colleagues, students and literature.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of "preparing and organising the data (transcripts) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes…and finally representing the data in figures, tables or a discussion" (Creswell, 2013: 180). Taylor and Gibbs describe data analysis in qualitative research as "moving from the data to understanding, explaining and interpreting the phenomena in question (2010: 1). After the data was collected, the next stage involved identifying themes or categories and then representing the data in a table form.

3.5.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis can be defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clark, 2006: 6). Although Braun and Clark (2006) admit that thematic analysis can often be seen as a poorly 'branded method' because it does not appear to be named in the same regard as other methods e.g. narrative analysis; they still state it is a widely used method and that most analysis done is thematic – but can be named as something else e.g. disclosure or content analysis. Analysis is not a linear process rather a process where you move back and forth as needed throughout the phases and develops over time (Ely et al., 1997). Braun and Clark (2006) suggest a-step-by-step-guide to carrying out the analysis process. These stages include:

1. Familiarising yourself with the data – involves repeated reading of the data and reading the data in an active way e.g. searching for possible meaning and patterns.

2. Generating initial codes – involves the production of initial codes from data. Identify data that is of interest to the analyst. Coding can be done manually by writing notes on the texts by using highlighters or coloured pens or post-it notes to indicate potential patterns

3. Searching for themes – phase 3 begins when all data has been initially coded & collated. This phase involves sorting the various codes into possible themes. Visual representations can be used at this stage to help sort the codes into various themes e.g. tables, mind-maps.

4. Reviewing themes – this stage involves reviewing and refining themes e.g. Checking if the themes work with regards to the coded extracts and the complete data set.

5. Defining and naming themes – defining and refining the themes and writing a detailed analysis (telling a story) for each individual theme.

6. Producing the report – this involves the final analysis and write-up of the report which includes a concise, logical and interesting account of the story the data tells.

These steps were used as a guideline in completing the analysis of data gathered.

3.5.2 Validity

Validity can be defined as "the extent to which interpretations of data are warranted by the theories and evidence used" (Ary et al., 2002: 267). According to Maxwell (2005) there are several ways to ensure validity in qualitative research including long term involvement, rich data, respondent validation, intervention and triangulation to name a few.

A variety of measures were taken to ensure validity of my research study. Triangulation was ensured by using a variety of different data collection tools and multiple perspectives were sought. Patton (2002) defines triangulation as the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop an in-depth understanding of phenomena. For example, a number of methods were used to collect the data including observations, interviews and checklists. Observation notes were viewed and read by the support teacher to ensure the researcher had made appropriate interpretations and valid conclusions of the data were made.

 To further strengthen the validity of the research, feedback from multiple perspectives were collected which included the pupils, the support teacher and the SNA in Junior Infants. They were encouraged to give their opinions and views throughout the research process to help avoid inconsistencies and bias. Validity was also ensured during unstructured interviews by giving the participants the time to answer the questions, using clear and concise terminology and using active listening (Kvale, 1996).

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In accordance to the ethics guidelines in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education and to the ethics guidelines in Maynooth University, a research ethical application was submitted and subsequently approved by the relevant ethics committee members from both colleges.

3.6.1 Principle of informed consent

Informed consent can be defined as " those procedures for individuals who chose whether or not to participate in the research, once they have been told what it is about and what it requires" (Diener & Crandall, 1978: 57). However, Cohen et al. (2018) cautions how researchers who seek informed consent must ensure that participants really understand what the research entails and may need time before making their decision.

Initially consent from the Board of Management allowing me to undertake this study in my place of work was granted on the 2/12/2019 (Appendix G). Once permission from my school authorities was granted, informed consent slips were given to the parents of my pupils. The consent form (Appendix H) invited the parents of my twenty-five pupils to allow their permission for their children to be participants in my research study. The consent form contained a brief description of the purpose of the study, what the study entailed and the voluntary nature of the study and the risks/benefits of their child's participation in the study. All of the parents of my twenty-five pupils voluntarily gave their permission for their child to participate in my study. These forms outlined the purpose of the study, procedures and the protection of confidentiality. The right to withdraw their children from the study at any time

for any reason was highlighted (Creswell, 2013). The plain language statements also assured

confidentiality and anonymity and that all data gathered would be stored securely.

Informed consent was also granted from the support teacher and SNA in Junior Infants. On

the 6th of January 2020 I was officially allowed to begin the data collection process in my

classroom. As the researcher (teacher) is working closely with the participants (colleagues),

an option to meet face-to face to find out more information or ask questions about the study

was provided to avoid the risk of an unbalanced relationship. To further deemphasise a power

relationship, participants were encouraged to collaborate directly with the researcher by

having them involved during the data analysis and the interpretation stages of the research.

3.6.2 Child assent

In accordance with the UN convention on the Rights of the child and the Maynooth

University policy for Child Welfare, the best interests of the child were central to the research

conducted. Oral permission was also sought from my pupils by simply explaining to them

that I was going to listen to them speak and play in the socio-dramatic play area. The right to

withdraw was also explained as simply as possible and that they could decide not to be

involved in any stage of the research process. Rudduck and McIntyre (2009) argue that

students should be consulted about the research, as this creates a more empowering role than

that of participation in the research. They describe consultation as talking with pupils about

things that matter to them in the classroom and in school, and that affect their learning.

Furthermore, Graham et al. (2013) recommends that even though very young children might

not understand what research is, children should be given some explanation as this provides a

measure of informed consent in line with the children's understanding.

3.6.3 Data storage

Data storage and retention 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 for all participants involved.

3.7 CONCLUSIONS

In summary this chapter has explained information on the research paradigms and research design for this study. Data collection tools, data analysis descriptions and ethical considerations have all been discussed. The following chapter outlines the data results and findings of this study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS CHAPTER

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of my self-study action-based research project. The results are based upon many forms of qualitative data sources that were collected during an eight-week period from January to mid-March. These included observations, field-notes, reflective journal notes, unstructured interviews with my critical friend/support teacher and the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in Junior Infants; conversational interviews with my pupils in Junior Infants, samples of children's work (artefacts) and oral language checklists (post and pre-tests). The data was analysed to further develop an understanding of how the researcher can help support their pupils' oral language skills through participation in socio-dramatic play. The research questions below guided my study:

1. What activities and strategies can I implement to promote oral language development in my pupils' socio-dramatic play?
2. How can I become involved in my pupils' socio-dramatic play to support their oral language skills?

This chapter describes an in-depth analysis of data collected, a reflection about the messiness of the data collection method, a brief outline of the next steps of the proposed research, the implications for cycle two, an outline of the data collection methods used for future practice and an analysis of my evolving values and current practice.

4.2. Data analysis of findings

In this section the data thoroughly examines the qualitative data that I collected which adheres to action research methodology.

Through the analysing process, obvious themes emerged. I used the following five steps in helping me to analyse the data which included (Braun & Clark, 2013: 87):

1. Familiarisation with the data

2. Generation of initial codes

3. Looking for themes

4. Review of themes

5. Definition and naming of themes

6. Production of the findings

I analysed the data to seek evidence of any improvements that I may have achieved in my practice or examples of living more closely to my values. McDonagh et al. (2020) describe the process of analysing the data as sifting through the various pieces of data to identify where you may have achieved an enhancement in your practice. By reviewing the data collected and by reflecting on what I had recorded; I was finally able to identify four main themes about my practice. The main trends identified that were evident throughout all the sources of data included the use of props and resources, the pupils' engagement, teacher interactions and the pupils' confidence in using the desired language.

4.2.1 The use of props and resources (environment)

Props and resources were used throughout all the socio-dramatic play sessions. From my observations and field-notes it was evident that the props and resources stimulated oral

language development as well as creating a realistic scenario for them in which they could sustain their make-believe roles. For example, I noted how the writing table within the socio-dramatic area was utilised on many occasions to support and enhance the pupils' language skills during the play sessions. Visual cues, word mats with pictures and flashcards were placed on the writing table to help the pupils with vocabulary knowledge and also with the writing process (Appendix I).

> child 11: "let's go shopping!"
>
> child 21: "yeah but let's make a shopping list first"

On another occasion I note how a particular child is referring to the visual shopping list as she puts fruit and vegetables from the stalls into her trolley while using the target language.

> child 3: "ok I need apples, oranges and some mangos" *as she looks at her shopping list each time.*

During my observations I learned that telephone play was a valuable tool in my pupil's development of oral language skills. It was clear that the pupil's wanted to consistently interact with this prop and often led to little arguments about who had the telephone first. *While cradling the phone to her ear with her shoulder while holding her baby doll*, I noted one particular pupil's use of language in the context of the play scenario in the Home corner.

> Child 10: "I am just looking after my baby and giving her a bottle. What are you doing today? Yes I am very busy she keeps crying, she is very hungry".

Props and resources also aided the children's oral language development when introducing the play topic to the whole class during a discrete oral language lesson. These independent lessons are important language preparation for the pupil's socio-dramatic play later (NCCA, 2015). The researcher used a poster of a scene from a Vet's surgery to stimulate a discussion while the children's answers were recorded on a flipchart. The researcher used a simple

sensory exploration activity with the poster to elicit the children's prior language knowledge of this theme.

> child 16: "I can see a dog sitting in a cage. I can hear the parrot talking. I can touch the furry cat. I can smell the smelly dog".

Subsequently the effective use of props and resources was also identified by my critical friend recorded in one of our unstructured interviews.

> "the area was appropriately resourced with props linked to each theme and there were lots of visuals in the area reminding the children of the target language/ vocabulary".

4.2.2 Engagement/Fun

Engagement was another apparent theme that was identified during the data analysis process.

Taken from an unstructured interview with my critical friend, her comment was noted in relation to the theme of engagement.

> "One of the biggest observations I made is that the children were always having fun in the socio-dramatic play area. The level of language learning which taking place was invaluable but the pupils did not even realise that element- they just knew that they were having fun".

The theme of engagement was also highlighted in a pupil's response to her experience in the socio-dramatic play area during the review stage of play-time. The review stage (5-10 minutes) consisted of each group sharing their story of play with the whole class at the end of every play session. Sometimes the teacher guided this process by giving prompts e.g. *what went well in your play today?* The pupils usually gave feedback to each other initially and then some children were invited to report to the whole class.

child 14: "I had fun today been a vet in the vet's surgery. I had fun caring for the sick

animals and making them feel better again".

Similarly on another occasion I recorded a pupil's response which highlighted the element of

engagement and enjoyment.

child 23: "I really liked the way I could play with my friends and pretend to be a real

mammy. It was fun!"

4.2.3 Appropriate Teacher Interventions

Appropriate teacher interactions/interventions were identified as another significant theme

that was embedded in most of my data sources. For example, my data highlighted how

teacher interactions played an important role in supporting my pupils' oral language skills.

Modelling, scaffolding, asking questions, making suggestions and posing problems were

categorised as different forms of teacher interactions during the analysis stage.

I used Smilansky's (1968) play training procedures to support me as I observed the children

playing in the socio-dramatic play area. This included 'outside interventions' and 'inside

interventions', both were initially developed by Smilansky (1968) for use in her play training

study. 'Outside intervention' was used by the researcher when asking questions "what are

you buying at the market today?", giving suggestions "maybe you should write a shopping

list before you go shopping?" or using straightforward directions "use the trolley to put your

fruit and vegetables into".

Smilansky (1968) refers to 'inside intervention' as participation in the play which requires the

teacher to take a role (Teacher in Role) and actually join in in the children's play. The

researcher used inside intervention on occasions when it was felt the pupils were becoming

distracted or did not know what to do in their particular role e.g.

Child 5 is playing with the mobile phone as she continues to press the buttons and has

not got involved in the play yet. I feel this is a good opportunity to intervene and

become TIR to engage her in the play.

TIR: "Hello I am your Vet today! Welcome to my surgery. How can I help your pet?"

Child 5 immediately takes on the role of the customer and gets involved in the play.

Child 5: "Hello, my dog has a sore paw".

TIR: "I think she might need an x-ray, put her on the examination table and I will

have a look at her".

However I was very conscious of not interrupting the play or take on the starring role but

only to intervene at times when I could enhance their play and language skills (Bruckman,

1999).

4.2.4 Confidence

Confidence in using the language became another essential theme that emerged in my

findings from the intervention process. In the context of the school setting, most of the pupils

starting in our school would have quite poor language skills i.e. cannot speak in full sentences

and have a very limited range of vocabulary. As the intervention progressed it became

apparent in my data that there was a clear improvement in both these areas. The pre-and- post

language assessments (Appendix E) clearly highlighted this accomplishment.

From an unstructured interview with my critical friend, I noted how she made reference to the

pupils' confidence in using the target language in their play.

"It was lovely to see how much more confident the children became in using the

target vocabulary throughout the process. Throughout the time the researcher-teacher

was completing this research a pattern emerged where the children were familiar with

some of the more basic vocabulary and after explicit teaching of each theme through socio-dramatic play they were both familiar with and confident in using much more complex vocabulary. I also noted their ability to put this more complex vocabulary into sentences which was a real achievement for the children. Because the children were totally immersed in the theme from playing in the socio-dramatic play area and other structured play activities linked to the theme throughout each month they became so familiar with the language, which was lovely to observe".

The theme of confidence is also strengthened by a conversation I had with my SNA with regards the child she worked with in Junior Infants. This particular child had very poor social and expressive language skills and rarely interacted or played with her peers and depended heavily on adult interactions. However, through gradual immersion in socio-dramatic play this child was taking on pretend roles and interacting with her peers like we had never witnessed before. Not only was she interacting with others but she was using the basic target language to communicate in this imaginary world. This conversation is reflected-on in my journal which I logged later that evening.

> *I had a brief conversation with my SNA after the children went home about how she felt my intervention was going. I was so amazed that I hadn't noticed it before. A sense of excitement came over me as we discussed how child 23's confidence had grown as a result of make-believe play (Scully, 5/3/20).*

To further reinforce this concept, my critical friend had also noticed this trend as indicated in her response in an unstructured interview with me.

> "Another observation that really stands out to me was the impact of this intervention on some of the more shy and reserved pupils. In the initial phases of the intervention these children were content to play alone in the area and reluctant to interact with

others. However as the research progressed these pupils were joining in and collaborating with both the other children and their teacher during their play".

4.3 Reflection on the messiness of data collection method during research work

Cook argues that the purpose of mess in action research is "to facilitate a turn towards new constructions of knowing that lead to transformation in practice" (2009: 277).

In the initial stages of my research journey, I thought the process would be straight forward with a clear beginning and a clear end result. However, as my research study developed, I began to lose perspective of my purpose with managing my values, practices and reflections. Like Cook I found myself "being in a mess" in that my research journey was constantly "shifting" and "branching off" which often led me to feel unsure of where to go next (2009: 278). Schön refers to this mess as "a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution... in the swamp are the problems of greatest human concern" (1983: 42).

With taking a qualitative approach, I found myself with mountains of observations, field-notes, reflective journal entries and many more written forms of data that seemed to be building and building as my research journey progressed. Similarly to Mellor (1999), I found myself becoming "overwhelmed" with all the data that I had to sift through (Cook, 2009: 279). I was so determined to seek neat patterns and themes from my data that I almost had not seen this as part of my investigation.

Cook (2009) encourages a collaborative approach with multiple views to analysing the data which is an important way of finding new ways of seeing. Throughout the data analysis

process of my research I used my critical friend to help me make sense of the 'mess' and to get her point of view on the information that was collected. There were instances where she would point out interesting new conclusions or outcomes that I had previously missed.

As the research study progressed I had to constantly remind myself of my research question to keep me focused as it was very easy to lose track of my purpose as lots of avenues of potential exploration made way for new ideas. This was a daunting task for me as I was stepping out of my comfort zone of never questioning or thinking about my practices before.

> "After so many years teaching infants I had become use to doing the same thing every-day that the 'routineness' had almost eaten me up" (reflective journal, 20/11/19).

I had now become the opposite – with continually asking questions about my research and using critical reflection and self-evaluation as a way of understanding my practices. Sometimes I found myself questioning what I was doing so much that I could only see the negatives in my teaching. However, with frequent dialogues with my critical friend and university colleagues, I was able to find new ways of seeing and thinking within my practices. Eventually it was through this 'mess' that I finally began to make sense of it all and that is when my new learning and revelations came to light (see 4.8).

"I know I have a goal, which is that I want to look at my job but I don't know what the questions are to ask but I will know when I get there... It is only by getting stuck in and... being confused and asking questions: What am I doing? Why am I doing it? that it becomes clear" (Mellor, 1998: 454).

4.4 Brief outline of the next steps of the proposed research

The next steps of my proposed research would be the implementation of cycle two. Cycle two was time-tabled to begin in mid-March and conclude in mid-April (Easter holidays). The interventions planned in cycle two included the following based on my findings from cycle 1. During the review stage of play, I invited the children to give feedback on their socio-dramatic experiences and opinions by providing prompts.

> Teacher: "what would have been better"?
>
> Child 8: "the thing that would have been better is if I could go to the role-play area instead of having to do the blocks".

This particular comment changed the direction of my action research which would inform the foundation for cycle 2. This alarming finding made me question my original values and beliefs and look at how I was denying my pupils choice in their play.

Please see the table outline below of how I had planned for cycle 2 of my intervention with pupil choice:

Findings from Cycle 1 (Jan –March)	Cycle 2 (mid-March – mid April)
Environment (use of props, print-rich environment)	Ask the pupils to bring in their own props and resources from home to add to the socio-dramatic play area based on the play-topic. Make their own props and resources Make their own signage linked to the topic including signs, directions, labels and flashcards as part of their play.
Engagement	Give the pupils the opportunity to choose what play area they

	want to be in each day rather than following a group rota system. Give the pupils the opportunity to come-up with their own play-topics for the coming months e.g. April –brainstorm their interests and decide as a whole class on one topic they would like to learn more about.
Teacher Interventions	Allowing the children to make-up their own story-lines or narratives.

4.5 The implications of the work for Cycle Two

The sudden closure of schools on March 13th 2020 due to the world-wide pandemic of Covid-19 dictated that I could not complete my research study. As a result, I was unable to implement my proposed interventions for cycle two (see 4.4 above). This also meant I was unable to collect all the data that I had initially set-out to gather. Although my findings had many positive influences as a result of my interventions in cycle one, I still found I had faced some challenges that ultimately I would need to change in cycle two.

On reflection of my findings from cycle one; I learned that I was not giving my pupils the opportunity to make choices over their play. The use of a play rotation system meant I still had the 'control' over making the decision of what play activity they had to engage with.
My intervention in cycle one also highlighted that the teacher had control in selecting the play topic. Although the children seemed to be really engaged with the play topics that were chosen in cycle one as outlined in my findings section above – the teacher still had control over choosing the topic the children would learn about rather than asking the pupils for their own suggestions based on their own interests and experiences (NCCA, 2009). Therefore it

was imperative that certain aspects of my interventions needed to be changed to give that choice and autonomy to my pupils over their own learning in cycle two.

The findings of my data from cycle one suggest that my interventions had also a positive influence of my pupils' oral language development using socio-dramatic play scenarios. This study also contributes to the existing literature and researches that implementing socio-dramatic play in the early years can have a significant impact on young children's oral language development (Bordrova & Leong, 2017; Enz & Christie, 1993). The findings of my study provide a range of activities and strategies that could lead to other early year educators feeling assured in using socio-dramatic play in their own settings to support their children's oral language skills.

4. 6 Outline of the data collection methods and teaching methods you would use for future practice

For the purpose of research study, I used a qualitative approach to capture the teaching and learning that was happening in my classroom. I wanted to capsulate a broader sense of my research which would include perspectives from a variety of sources. The views of myself, my pupils, my colleagues /critical friend and my supervisor helped me to critique and/or confirm what I had done.

During my data analysis it was very easy to get 'distracted' with looking at my pupils for evidence of improvement. However, I had to remind myself that the focus was on my own teaching and learning as well. I found the use of my reflective journal helped me to track and show progression in my learning as the study unfolded. "Reflective journals offer ways of showing how we collect data in terms of our reflections on our teaching and thinking, as well as ongoing evaluation of what is happening" (Sullivan et al., 2016: 79). Loughran states how

our reflective journals can "become a window into our own pedagogical thoughts and actions" (2006: 85).

With regards to collecting data from my pupils, I had to think creatively about how I would capture their views and opinions. Carrying-out my research with junior infants meant that I had to rely on note-taking, observations and other written forms (conversational interviews/questioning) to collect the data that I needed. I also had to collect this data in a natural way that made my pupils feel comfortable and to not make them feel they were being 'tested'. Luckily the children were familiar with me taking notes/observations for assessment purposes on a regular basis prior to this research project. As a result my pupils saw this as a 'normal' thing for teacher to do.   Initially I had planned on using a voice-recorder to record the pupil's playing in the socio-dramatic corner but due to the noise-level in the classroom during play time it was very difficult to make-out what was been said.

My pupils' comments and views aided me in providing learning for further practices in my research. Just one comment from a pupil meant I took a different path for cycle two of my intervention. Her comment made me question how I was approaching my intervention which informed my practice for the future (outlined in figure 4.4).

The views and opinions of my critical friends and colleagues also were a valuable data tool in my research as outlined in my findings. This not only added validity to my study but it also gave me a sense of ascertainment about what I was doing.

4. 7 Analysis of evolving of values and your current practice

According to Johnson (2012) a value is anything you find to be of importance or worth. It can also be related to the things you find significant in a teaching and learning situation. "For action research projects the focus will be on personal traits and educational experiences that

you value" (Johnson, 2012: 1). McNiff (2002) states that action research begins with values. She advices the researcher to spend some time clarifying the kinds of values you hold and to be clear about what you are doing and why you are doing it.

Action research has challenged me in thinking about my values and educational beliefs. As a teacher of nine years, I never stopped to think about my practices before and what positive and/or negative effects it was having on my pupils' learning. In the initial stages of this course we were asked to complete a values statement, I found this task quite challenging. Even-though I instinctively knew what my values in my practice supported, I found it very difficult to articulate them or write them down on paper. With much reflection on my practices I began to think about what was important to me in my teaching and I used the opinions of my close colleagues to help me understand my values more deeply.

McDonagh et al. (2020) encourages the researcher to enlist the support of a critical teaching colleague as you begin your research which may provide invaluable corroborative data as you pursue evidence to establish your claim to knowledge. Through critical reflection moments and conversations with my colleagues/critical friend, I was able to develop my theory from practice. The extract below is taken from a comment in an unstructured interview with my critical friend who highlights the importance of having a supportive work relationship with a colleague.

> "I have worked in Leanne's classroom as a support teacher for the last two years and during that time we have developed a very positive and honest working relationship with each other. Because of this I felt I could be open with Leanne about what aspects I felt were working well and other areas that could be tweaked and improved".

As referred to in my values statement (Appendix J) I placed "active and play-based learning" to the fore within my teaching pedagogical views (value statement, 12/9/19). However when I took a deeper look at my practices, I found that I was not upholding these values in the way that I taught. Prior to my intervention, I depended on the workbooks and digital resources to help me teach my oral language lessons. However since the implementation of my intervention, it has become evident from the data that there has been a positive change in my practice. This can be seen in my pupils' engagement and confidence in developing their language through play and active learning. Going forward, I plan to scrap the workbooks and digital resources and teach true to my values by supporting my pupils' language learning through playful and active means.

There is also evidence from the data that my values have evolved and grown as a direct result of this intervention. By asking my pupils' opinions and thoughts about their experiences of their play, I discovered that I was denying them choice in their play.

As a result I decided to build-on some aspects of my practices and to ensure it was in keeping with my evolving values for cycle 2 of my intervention. I hoped by giving my pupils the opportunity to bring in their own resources from home or to make their own props for the socio-dramatic area that this would give them 'ownership' and 'choice' over the environment of their play. I also hoped to give more choice to my pupils in the planning stages of choosing their own play topic that would be relevant to their own interests and experiences.

Finally I had hoped to give more choice and autonomy to my pupils by allowing them to choose which play centre they could engage with rather than following a group/play rotation system. Further discussions and conclusions will be discussed in chapter five of this thesis.

4.8 Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present the findings and results of the data collected from my observations, reflective journal, unstructured interviews, conversational interviews, artefacts and pre-and-post language checklists. From the data collected I was able to identify themes and patterns that showed an improvement and new learning in my practice. The findings from my intervention also cement and confirm my educational beliefs and values that play and active learning can enhance a young child's development. In relation to new learning, I came to the realisation that I needed to give my pupils choice. Through asking my pupils' opinions about their own learning, this was able to inform my future practices. It was hoped I could live up to these values in cycle two of my intervention. However, I look forward to abiding by my current and evolving values within my practices in the future. The discussion in chapter five will interpret these findings in relation to my values. I also provide recommendations for future practice and discuss the significance of my research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 New learning

In a self-study approach to action research standards of judgement based on the researcher's values are used to appraise the research (McDonagh et al., 2020). Similarly Whitehead and McNiff (2006) claim that the standards of judgement we make are rooted in the values that we hold.

To validate and prove that such new knowledge has occurred in my practice, I used a variety of perspectives to help me do so. This included the perspectives of myself as the researcher, my pupils and colleagues and my critical friend. The information in my reflective journal helped me to see instances of change that were not evident to me initially. My colleagues' and pupils' opinions and observations in my classroom were also utilised to help me look for evidence of change in my teaching (as outlined in chapter 4). Having a critical friend also helped me in identifying changes in my practice, as she challenged and supported me in my own thinking in relation to what I was doing and why I was doing it.

By demonstrating that I have attempted to live to my values of play and active learning, I believe I have provided evidence of my claim to have created new knowledge or learning. As a result of my intervention, I now know that active and play-based learning can contribute to a child's oral language development. The extensive data I have collected proves and validates that this is the case. My practice of supporting my pupils' oral language skills have transformed from depending on workbooks and digital resources to a more pupil-centred approach where they get an opportunity to develop these skills in a playful and active way.

Ghaye (2011: 158) states that, "Creating the text is one thing; interpreting it and then using it to move thinking and practice forward is something else". Part of my learning from

undertaking research in my practice was in the unexpected realisation or surprise that I was not giving my pupils choice in their learning. Through the views and opinions of my young pupils I discovered that even though I had always valued pupil autonomy and choice, I was clearly denying them this concept in my practice. This change of direction in my pedagogical stance has shown improvement within my teaching that I now hope to implement in my future practices. Sullivan et al. (2016) reiterates that this unplanned or unintended finding can contribute to your own learning and can add to the personal and professional development of your practice.

Through carrying-out this research I also unearthed new learning in the realisation to the importance of my pupils as co-researchers. Receiving feedback from my pupils through conversational interviews highlighted how important it is to include your pupils in the research. This process has made me realise that young children can provide authentic and truthful information that maybe I as the researcher never would have discovered by myself. Hopkins (2014) approves that students can provide exceptionally open and honest feedback.

5.2 Significance of my research

The significance of my research can not only have an influence on my own personal practice, but it can also have an influence on the pupils and colleagues in my school and on the wider educational community.

In terms of my own personal practice, improvement in my teaching has come about as a result of undertaking this research study. My practice has changed from passive ready-made workbook-style learning to a style where my pupils become agents in their own learning through an active and playful means.

Prior to my research I was accustomed to working by myself and never considered sharing my learning experiences with the people I worked with. However, since undertaking this study, I have become aware of the importance of sharing information and having professional conversations with my colleagues.

The significance of my research can also be influential on behalf of my colleagues. By sharing my research journey with other teachers in my school, I hope this will inspire them to begin the process of taking action to improve their practice also. Sharing my ideas with the wider educational community can also bring significance to my research. I agree with Somekh & Zeichner (2009: 10) in that "All educators who conduct action research are interested in improving their own practice. In addition, some of them are also interested in sharing their learning with others and/or in contribution to social reconstruction".

5.3 Recommendations

The recommendations are based my findings and results of this qualitative research project. My findings support the implementation of socio-dramatic play as a means for oral language development among 4-6 year olds. It is recommended that I share my experiences and journey of self-study action research with my colleagues with the hope of providing them with a better understanding of the value of such an approach. Dissemination of this study in educational journals or presentations could provide early year or infant teachers with a better understanding of the importance of socio-dramatic play to support oral language development. A replication of this study could also be carried-out in other areas of play including the construction and art area during 'Aistear time'.

5.4 Conclusion

This self-study action research study displays the changing nature of my practice in school and my role as a teacher researcher. Self-study action research has allowed me to identify and bring my educational values to life in my classroom. It has enhanced my practice and the experiences of my pupils' learning through play and active learning. It shows how I have worked with pupils, colleagues and a critical friend to improve my teaching of oral language development in my classroom. With the support of these people I can make a claim to knowledge that an improvement in my practice has taken place.

I believe my journey of professional enquiry has not come to an end but it is only the beginning. Consequently from undertaking this self-study action research project, new questions have arisen that I would like to investigate in the future. Due to the world wide pandemic of Covid-19, I was unable to complete cycle two of my intervention. However, as soon as we can resume to normal school life, I hope to live up to my values and continue to implement change in my practice so as to improve my pupils' experiences and learning in their educational lives.

I feel obliged to continue this journey as not only has it proved to be of great benefit to me as an educator; but to my pupils' learning and experiences. I believe my passion for teaching and always striving to improve makes me want to continue action research in the near future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: socio-dramatic area in my classroom – *The Market*

The Vets Surgery

Appendix B: Visual play rota

Appendix C: Observation protocol

Observations	Reflective notes

Appendix D: Writing table in socio-dramatic area

Appendix D: Writing table in socio-dramatic area

Appendix E: Blank pre-and-post language checklists

Basic	Average Low (a)		Average Middle (b)		Average High (c)	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Africa						
Market						
Money						
Fruit						
Vegetables						
Basket						
Jewellery						
paintings						
orange						
apple						
pear						
bread						
Core						
Stalls						
crafts						
Canopy						
Seller						
Customer						
Price						
Avocado						
mango						
passion fruit						
lemon						
Stretch						
Delicious						
Heavy						
Full						
healthy						

Appendix I: Artefact – sample of child's shopping list in the socio-dramatic area

Appendix G: Letter to the BOM seeking permission to undertake my research

Plain Language Statement: Board of Management

Dear Board of Management,

My name is Leanne Scully. I have been teaching at Scoil ███████ ████████ ████████ Scho ███████████ ████ 2013. I am currently teaching Junior Infants ██ █ ███████ team class setting. At present, I am undertaking a part-time Master's of Education degree at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing a self-study action based research project. The focus of my research is based on how I can help to improve an aspect of my teaching to enhance the learning of my pupils. My chosen research topic is entitled 'How do I encourage and support the development of my pupil's oral language skills through socio-dramatic play'? The purpose of this study is to examine how teachers can enhance oral language development in children during socio-dramatic play.

The key stakeholders include my pupils, the parents of my pupils and my colleagues including the special needs assistant in my classroom and the resource teacher to Junior Infants. The data will be collected by using methods such as observations, voice recordings, audio transcripts, structured and unstructured interviews, lesson plans, a daily teacher journal, pupil's checklists, teacher-designed tasks and samples of the children's work. The data will be gathered from January to March 2020, once relevant permissions and ethical approvals are in place.

Written permissions from the pupil's parents and relevant staff members will be obtained before my research can commence. Verbal permission from my pupils will also be gained and the participants will be made aware that they can withdraw from the research process at any stage. Participants' identity, school identity, or other personal information will not be revealed, published or used in any written account of my findings. The participants involved will not be identified and no real names will be used in the report.

All data gathered will be stored securely and will be destroyed in a stated time-frame in accordance with the University guidelines. The correct guidelines will be complied with when carrying out this research. The research will not be carried out until approval is granted by the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education. On completion of my Masters programme I may seek to disseminate my research findings in academic journal articles or seminar talks. As mentioned above, strict confidentiality procedures will be maintained at all times.

If you have any queries on any part of this research project or if you would like to require more information, please feel free to contact me by email at leanne.scully.2020@mumail.ie or leanne.scully@sbclara.ie

Yours Sincerely,
Leanne Scully (Researcher)

Appendix H: Informed information letter and Consent form to parents

Plain language form

Maynooth University
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

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 part-time student on the Master's of Education programme at Maynooth University. As part of my degree I am doing a research project. The focus of my research is based on how I can support and develop your child's oral language skills during play.

In order to do this, I intend to carry out research in the classroom by watching and listening to your child speak and interacting with their peers during play-time.

The data will be collected using observations, voice recordings, audio transcripts, unstructured interviews with the children, samples of the children's work, teacher-designed tasks, checklists, pupil profiles, lesson-plans and daily teacher reflections.

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. 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 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 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 leanne.scully.2020@mumail.ie

Yours faithfully,

Leanne Scully

Maynooth University
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

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 completing a Masters 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 teacher. This project will involve an analysis of the teacher's own practice. The teacher is then required to produce a thesis documenting this action research project.

What are the research questions?

- Q 1. What are the types of activities that teachers can use to promote the development of children's oral language skills during socio-dramatic play?
- Q2. What is the role and responsibility of the teacher in supporting children's socio-dramatic play to enhance their oral language skills?

What sorts of methods will be used?

- Observations, audio-transcripts, voice recordings, teacher's reflective journal, unstructured interviews, sample of the children's work and checklists.

Who else will be involved?

The study will be carried out by me Leanne Scully 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: leanne.scully.2020@mumail.ie

Appendix J: Values statement

Values Statement
Name: Leanne Scully
Date: 12/9/19

Right now I value .....

I value equity for my pupil's regardless of their socio-economic or family background – I understand that every child has their own set of experiences and life-stories. Therefore I try to base my lessons on their own prior knowledge, interests, backgrounds and experiences so that their learning is relatable and relevant. I feel the classroom environment itself should give my pupil's a sense of who they are and where they come from.

I try to provide hands-on and active opportunities for my pupil's so that their learning is fun and enjoyable for them. As a former Froebel graduate, I believe play is vital for a child's learning in the early years. In my classroom I give plenty of time for my pupil's to develop a range of skills through their play each day. By providing my pupils with a range of objects, toys, props and everyday materials, I hope to encourage them to explore their imaginations freely and curiously. The children look forward to this time and enjoy sharing what they have learned or made with each other.

I value my pupil's happiness and try to provide a safe and secure environment where my pupil's can express themselves freely. I believe communication is the heart of early learning and development. Learning to communicate effectively is important so therefore I try to talk and listen to my pupil's each day, providing a classroom where every child gets to share their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others.