

Athlone Institute of Technology

“Play is a child’s work”

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation and the research involved in it are entirely the work of the author. This project is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters in Child and Youth Studies in Athlone Institute of Technology. It has not been submitted to any other University, Institute or college, or for any other academic award in this Institute. I further declare that, where reference is not given in the text, that it is entirely my own work.

Signed: _____

Tanya Costello

Date: _____

27-05-2016

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Section 1

Abstract

Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of play for preschool children through an exploration and comparison of the views and perceptions of childcare practitioners and play therapists. There were three objectives in the study which were investigated and examined. The first objective was to establish the views and perceptions of professionals on the different types of play which can be relevant for children in the preschool setting. The second objective examined the perspectives of play therapists on the benefits which play and play therapy has for children in the preschool years. Then finally, the third objective sought to explore the views of professionals on the Aistear curriculum and Síolta framework in relation to their relevance for play in the preschool setting.

This study was conducted to investigate the benefits of different types of play for children. This, then, was with the hope of furthering the knowledge of professionals on what works well with children, and what can be developed in order to make it an even more holistically beneficial for each child. Comparing the views of childcare practitioners and play therapists proved an insightful mechanism for ascertaining the view of both groups, in terms of working with children. This showed some similarities and differences in the ways they work with children and highlights what changes could be made in order to improve their system. This is the main justification for this research study.

The study was conducted using a qualitative method, in the form of semi-structured interviews. The interviews were held individually in the participant's work places and were audio-recorded, and transcribed. The results were analysed using a thematic analysis identifying four themes; which related to types of play, play and play therapy, the holistic child and then finally Aistear and Síolta. The results indicated that the childcare practitioners and play therapist had the same views about play and the benefits from it. The study proved that there still is plenty of room for advancement, development and progression in the practical work of both childcare practitioners and play therapists. More findings were in relation to the usage of a child-centered approach in the childcare sector as the play therapist only uses this. Free play was another aspect which could be implemented more however from the

study it shows that even in the past year it is being put into more and more practice with the children.

This study opens up an opportunity to further different aspects of play to benefit children's learning through play. By comparing the views of the childcare practitioners and the play therapist it becomes clear to see where there are similarities and then differences. What the play therapist finds most beneficial, sand for example, the childcare practitioners only use it as another tool, or another thing that the children just play with. The same goes for the childcare practitioners using the outdoor environment on a regular basis whereas the play therapist wouldn't use it at all. There could be a learning curve here by comparing their views, you could see if either one could learn from the other by the benefits they find it has on the children.

Section 2

Literature Review

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of current literature on the role of play for preschool children. Through doing this it will establish what play is and the benefits of it alongside different types which have a major impact on the development of preschool aged children. It will then examine the benefits which play and play therapy has for children. This will be completed by finding out what play therapy is, how the therapist interacts with the child and through an exploration into different styles which can be used within the playroom. Parental involvement is analysed and discussed in relation to the benefits it has for children's development. Then there will be a discovery into the Aistear curriculum and the Síolta framework alongside their relevance for play in preschool settings.

2.2 What Is Play?

Singer, Michnick Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2006) explain how the act of play extends far beyond just having fun. It enables children to learn many valuable life skills, including decision making, turn-taking and language skills. VanFleet, Sywulak and Sinscak, (2010) tell us that play unleashes joy and excitement within children alongside releasing stress and reducing self-consciousness.

2.3 Benefits of Play

From rigorous research in the twentieth century as far back as 1932 up to 1998 Reddy, Files-Hall and Schaefer (2005) give a synopsis on the benefits play has for children. They explain how play promotes healthy cognitive development, language, social competence and physical development. Singer, Michnick Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2006) state that there is unmistakable evidence on the importance play has for children's development. This has become more prominent in the previous decade due to research on the topic. Theorists Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1996, 1978)

have many theories on the benefits which play has for children developmentally in relation to social, cognitive and intellectual skills.

Bodrova and Leong (2007) did a study which proved that play has many cognitive developmental benefits. They had a programme called “Tools of the Mind Programme”, this resulted in improved “self-regulation modulation” and it also improved a directive function when children engaged in self-directive dramatic play with pre-determined goals for that particular play. From Drews’ (2009) research, she found that play was also a main contributor for the enhancement of “verbalisation, vocabulary, language, comprehension, attention span, imagination, concentration, impulse control, curiosity, problem-solving strategies, cooperation, empathy and group participation”.

2.4 Child-Centered Approach

VanFleet, Sywulak and Sinscak, (2010) explain the importance of child-centered approaches as they focus in on how the play is incorporated as treatment. This is specifically recognised when it is child-directed play which is used therapeutically for a wide range of problems and situations. Landreth (2012) also states how by having unstructured sessions the child is allowed to pace the exploration whether it be fast or slow to accommodate their level of functioning, in a new environment. In situations like these the child needs to be supported. O’ Connor, Schaefer and Braverman (2016) state the importance of parent’s roles in the development of their children’s physical, social, emotional and cognitive development and by them taking part in their child’s play they have the opportunity to become an audience in the child’s internal world. It also may help the child to open up to the parent and build a stronger relationship. In saying this the parent needs to be cautious and not be over powering by taking ownership of the play and becoming the dominant player.

2.5 Free Play

In the preschool age group, free play has been nearly eliminated from settings. According to Entin (2011) from the American Journal of Play; it’s stated that the

amount of children's time to play freely has declined and now has become much more structured. This has led to major consequences in children. These include aspects such as the effects on their emotional development, leading to the rise of anxiety, depression, and many problems with attention and self-control. Practitioners interacting with children through play and allowing them to lead activities gives children's confidence a boost. Building up relationships with adults also gives children a sense of support which is why parental involvement, practitioner participation and also relatives getting involved in the child's play is vitally important.

Early Childhood Ireland (2007-2013) explains how the outdoors is one of the best learning environments for children as it provides the opportunity to explore and experience "meaning-making" in the natural world. Free play in the outdoor environment enhances free expression and self realisation for many children (Barnardos 2014). The outdoors provides better sensory experiences than the indoors; children learn to take risks and find where their boundaries are. Klein, Cook and Richardson-Gibbs (2001) explain how children with special needs also require outdoor play for their development. Careful planning of the physical environment can make a substantial difference in how children with disabilities can enjoy and adapt to the outdoor environment as it must support everyone's learning. Free play allows the adults to build an emergent curriculum with the children, working from their interests while fostering learning through play and experiences (Klein, Cook and Richardson-Gibbs (2001).

2.6 Sand Play

Sand play is quite popular and is used in most settings. It's a very good way for children to use their senses and explore different textures, it also helps children to express themselves in ways they may not be able to speak about. Sand can be created into what the children want it to be, therefore it can be an excellent way for them to express how they are feeling without having to talk about it. Carey (2008) states how it gives children a place to express and process any pain they may be experiencing or going through. It also helps them developmentally and cognitively according to Tassoni and Hucker, (2005). They continue to elaborate on some of the benefits which sand play has for children, for example it includes language benefits.

Children learn to communicate through sand however by playing with other children or even adults they can pick up on language and develop from it. This then improves their emotional and social skills as they can communicate how they feel to others. It's also therapeutic as it can be used for children to express their feelings and emotions.

Wellhousen and Crowther (2004) explain the importance of sand play for young children. They talk about sand boxes being restricting as they confine the sensory experience to the top half of the body. Sand pits are much more beneficial as children can get into them and explore a full sensory experience. The exploration of adding water to the sand is a learning experience. There is problem solving, self-exploration and joint learning to achieve from sand. Tassoni and Hucker (2005) also agree with Wellhousen and Crowther (2004) about the differences in sand boxes and sand pits.

2.7 What is play therapy?

Play has the ability to aid normal child development and also improve emotional and behavioural difficulties (Association for Play Therapy, 2001). According to Reddy, Files-Hall and Schaefer (2005) the oldest and most popular form of child therapy in clinical practice has been recognised as play therapy.

According to Landreth (2001) play therapy is to children what counselling is to adults. Play is the child's natural form of communication, as talking is to adults. In a playroom setting, toys are used as the child's voice as a form of language. Play therapy is a form of releasing feelings which are trapped inside a child who cannot express themselves. They also explain how showing parents the playrooms can encourage them to ask questions and gather a better understanding so they too can help their children.

2.8 How does play therapy work and who is it for?

Play Therapy Ireland (2015) explains the main concepts of play therapy. It tells us that Play Therapy uses a variety of play and creative arts techniques such as the 'Play Therapy Tool-Kit' to alleviate chronic, mild and moderate psychological and

emotional conditions in children which cause behavioural problems. The Play Therapist works interactively using a wide range of play and creative arts techniques, mostly responding to the child's wishes. The greater depth of skills and experiences distinguishes the play therapist from those using therapeutic play skills. Jaycox, Morse, Tanielian and Stein (2006) explain how the tool-kit also works for children who have been through a traumatic experience and it supports positive mental health. The tool-kit can also be intended for school aged children, it's proposed to assist the school administrator in how to promote positive mental health recovery among children following a traumatic occurrence in their lives.

2.9 Role of Play Therapist

There are many therapeutic powers within play therapy which skilled therapists should be able to incorporate into the sessions (Reddy, Files-Hall and Schaefer, 2005). Along with these powers, there are therapeutic factors which need to be acknowledged. Some of these include the communication power, this is in relation to children expressing their conscious and unconscious feelings through play rather than words alone. The therapist needs to be able to provide open opportunities for children within the play room. This is for them to explore different situations and find one which they feel most comfortable with to express themselves freely. This leads onto the teaching power where the child learns better when play is used to instruct the aim of the activity. This is more generally used in directive play therapy where a predetermined theme has been chosen by the therapist (Lynne and Bowers, 2001). The abreaction power follows this where children can relive their past, stressful events or traumatic experiences and release the associated negative emotions in a safe environment of the play world. The final power being discussed is the rapport-building power. Children tend to like therapists who are playful and fun-loving. If the play therapist can portray to the child that they want to have fun, the experience will become more beneficial to the child (Reddy, Files-Hall and Schaefer (2005).

2.10 Effectiveness and Benefits of Play Therapy

The Association of Play Therapy (2001) explains how play therapists use a systematic theoretical model which introduces an interpersonal process. This is where specifically trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to encourage the children to prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties. It's also used to achieve optimal growth and development within themselves. Sometimes the effectiveness of play therapy can be difficult to distinguish at the start as some children show more signs than others. From the meta-analysis Ray, Bratton, Rhine and Jones (2001) give many aspects which influence play therapy sessions and things which can have an influence over the effectiveness of it. These include, the theoretical model which relates to the whether it was directive, non-directive or a mixture of both. The number of sessions is the next relevant factor which notes the child's improvement in relation to how many sessions the child needed a week for example. Generally the more sessions children get the faster and better they improve. Parental involvement follows this, whether the parents get involved in the sessions or not and the effectiveness of this on the child, more than often children respond much better when the parents are involved. Therapist training is a huge aspect which shows the therapists capabilities and whether they are able to get through to the child or not.

2.11 Directive and non-directive approaches

Play Therapy can be directive, non-directive or a mixture of the two. Play Therapy is particularly effective with children who cannot, or do not want to talk about their problems. Wilson, Ryan and Guerney (2005) explain how for any approach to become effective the play therapist needs to create a friendly, trusting and safe environment for every child. Wilson, Ryan and Guerney (2005) continue to talk about how the directive approach is where the child uses direct language by words to communicate, and the non-directive approach is expressed through behaviour and play. The task of the therapist in both approaches then is to listen very carefully, understand and respond to these communications in such a way that the child will continue to feel comfortable and supported if they continue expressing themselves.

Through directive play, the children are pointed in a direction which could be beneficial towards their development and realisation. Through non-directive approaches, the children have full control over what they do and how they go about expressing themselves. By joining the two together; the adult suggests a theme or sympathetically instills an idea in the child's head which they can work from with little direction from the adult once the activity has begun (Rasmussen and Cunningham, 2008).

2.12 Cognitive benefits and development

Drews (2009) explains the benefits play has on the child's cognitive development. She discusses how recent empirical research into play therapy approaches have been compared to CBT's (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy). It is examined on how play and its relationship to cognition has shown major connections. For children who have been through traumatic experiences and are unable to physically express themselves, play therapy is an excellent start for the child as it can influence many aspects and help to find a release (Rasmussen and Cunningham (2008).

2.13 Child-Centered

Landreth (2012) proclaims that child-centered play therapy provides the relationship which children need to develop coping mechanisms on their own terms, and at their own emotional pace. However, not all children are completely able to express themselves so adults can understand them. In situations like these, the therapist needs to step up and help promote the child's best interests. A child-centered approach towards play therapy is needed so the therapist trusts the child's inner direction. They can allow the child to lead in all areas of the relationship and then resist any urge to direct the child's play or conversation (Landreth 2001). Schaefer and Carey (1994) proclaim that bringing the parents into the head space of play therapy and getting them to participate, not merely in the playroom but also at home is very beneficial. This is a positive way of promoting child-centeredness in the home which could instil positivity in the child and influence how they are feeling.

2.14 Parental Involvement

Ohlson (1976, 2012) agrees with Schaefer and Carey (1994) in relation to getting parental involvement to benefit the child in play therapy. It's explained how important the role of the parent is and all too often the parent is the missing piece which the child needs to further help express themselves. There's only so much a therapist can do and seeing as the parent is the primary care giver, they know the child best.

Ohlson (1976, 2012) is agreeing with Landreth (2001) where they say that play is the fortitude of a child's language. In the playroom setting with a therapist the child can act out different emotions and feelings which is positive, however, the therapist needs to make the parents aware of how they need to allow their child to have free expression in the home environment also and not become the dominant figure (Schaefer and Carey, 1994).

From reading Axline (2001) "Dibs in search of self" it's clear to see how the sand-play therapy helped Dibs to express what was happening in his life. It's not hard to imagine that there are many children and families who may not be able to speak about their issues, as what's in the book about Dibs and his family.

2.15 Aistear

The Aistear (2009) curriculum uses four themes; Identity and Belonging, Well-being, Exploring and Thinking, and Communicating. These themes essentially lead to play-based learning. Although not specifically stated, these themes are used within play therapy settings which is very beneficial for young children. The four themes can be very effective and beneficial to children who feel lost or could be experiencing a traumatic event in their lives and may feel confused within themselves. Throughout most, if not all facilities in Ireland, the Aistear (2009) curriculum and the Síolta (2006) framework are highly implemented (Murray and Urban, 2012). The four themes of Aistear play a massive part in children's everyday lives as they are learning and developing through play and exploration.

Aistear/Síolta (2015) give a brief analysis into the importance of each theme from Aistear. Identity and belonging is something everyone looks for no matter what age. The main purpose of this theme is for young children to begin to discover a positive

sense of who they are, and develop a sense of their culture and where they come from. It's mainly so they feel valued and respected but also as part of a family and their wider community. Well-being is looking at the holistic child and providing for all of their needs. This helps them to build up confidence, be happy and healthy in the process. Communicating can be in many different forms, for example, verbal, non-verbal, body language etc. It provides an open door for the children to share their experiences, their ideas and feelings with growing confidence. It also promoted competence in children in a variety of different ways as they develop more. The final theme is exploring and thinking, this allows children to try and make sense of the world which is around them. It opens up their mind to a broader sense of different places to see and a vast race of people to meet and their cultures to discover (Aistear/Síolta, 2015).

2.16 Síolta

The Síolta Framework (2006) has many principles which relate to different aspects of children's development. Standard 6 promotes play. It suggests how with the support of adults building on the child's knowledge, and well-resourced opportunities it enhances the child's learning and development. This includes directive and non-directive play alongside structured and free-play both in the home and in the preschool environments. Partnership with parents is a crucial aspect in order to provide the best experiences and opportunities with the child. Standard 3; Parents and families takes a huge role in children's development. With this standard it requires the parents to take up a proactive role with practitioners, and also vice versa (Síolta, 2006). This proactive role will ensure the child's development is reaching its full potential and the school environment and home environment are both on the same page. Taking a holistic approach towards each child will provide the best individual opportunities for everybody's full potential to be reached.

2.17 Play Based Approach

Singer, Michnick Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2006) explains how play-based learning is squeezed from primary-school curriculums, therefore supporting preschool children

using Aistear (2009) and Síolta (2006) will give them the best start. As O' Kane and Hayes (2006) state, children will need a positive, supportive transition between preschool and primary-school in order to grasp the new way of learning in a different environment. In saying this, from a therapeutic point of view, Landreth (2012) repeatedly exclaims the importance for non-directive play. Some children prefer to have a small bit of direction to start from before they branch out and begin their own exploration. Encouraging children to partake in the choosing of a direction to aim is a productive and effective way to give the child some independence and identity.

2.18 Curriculum

The Aistear/Síolta (2015) practice guide on learning through play gives a broad insight into different ways of implementing play in different curriculums. The learning through play approach commonly comes up when trying to extend a curriculum to suit all age groups of children. Duncan and Lockwood (2008) distinguish that there needs to be more of a development into play based learning through curriculums and pedagogy. They also explain in great detail how the principle of teaching in an early years setting should always begin from the point of 'where the child is'.

The Aistear/Síolta (2015) practice guide on curriculums, foundations and pillars gives a much broader understanding into the individual needs which need to be incorporated into each curriculum. The practitioner needs to acknowledge the fact that every child brings a broad personal experience from home and are constantly learning through play and planned experiences. They also learn from conversations they are engaged in, alongside the actions and interactions throughout each day. It's vital to understand that each child has their own individual abilities, knowledge, needs, interests and challenges. When incorporating a curriculum to suit every child you need to ensure that it will respond to the diversity of each child. After conducting a diverse curriculum, knowing how to support and further extend the learning and development of each child you are providing a positive, interactional, and stimulating curriculum.

2.19 Conclusion

To conclude, it's clear from a vast amount of research that play and play therapy overall is very beneficial for children to help with expressing themselves. From looking at many different aspects we can see that the professionals and the parents both have a huge part to play in relation to providing the most effective experience for the child. From vast research it's clear that the child-centered and play based approaches work very well with most children. By exploring the different types of play we have also acknowledged that it's important for children to be able to explore and use their imagination to develop most beneficially for themselves growing up. The Aistear curriculum and Síolta framework both have given a strong point in implementing change for the better in preschool settings. Overall it has been discovered that play is a very large part of every child's life and it should be nurtured and supported.

Section 3

Methodology

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this section the most appropriate research method considered for gathering data in this study will be discussed. It will begin by justifying the reason for this research study, it will then outline the research design employed. An overview of the participants will be offered followed by some consideration of the ethical issues implied. The procedure followed during the study and then the limitations of the study will be discussed.

3.2 Research Design

When considering a research method to use for this study, much consideration was given. As the aim of the research was to look at the views and perceptions of childcare practitioners and play therapists on the role of play for preschool children, a vast amount of detailed information needed to be gathered. Therefore, a qualitative research method was most beneficial. By using qualitative research, you can gather much more in-depth information in comparison to quantitative research, where the participants are only answering questions on a questionnaire and cannot fully express how they feel. For research like this study, qualitative methods would be much more substantial because more in depth information would be found out. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain how vast information can be gathered through qualitative research once everything has been cleared ethically. As this research was carried out with professionals, getting ethical approval wasn't difficult.

The type of qualitative research chosen was semi-structured interviews. Miles and Gilbert (2005) explain how during semi-structured interviewing you get the chance to talk to people so you can find out what their opinions are and what they have experienced in a field that you are interested in. By conducting a semi-structured interview with somebody who has similar interests and views on the topic you are more likely to get much more information. The interviewee will then be more likely to open up and share their knowledge and experiences with you if they believe you

have some familiarity, understanding and an interest in what they are talking about (Miles and Gilbert, 2005). Because this study is about finding out the perspectives and views of professionals, semi-structured interviews will generate good conversation as it is all about what they think and how they feel about different aspects of play. The questions are open ended so the conversation can take any direction depending on what direction the participant wants it to take. It is the role of the researcher to keep the direction of the conversation roughly in line with the objectives of the study to gather as much relevant information as possible.

Patton (2015) talks about the importance of both verbal and non-verbal communication during an interview. For this research, the semi-structured interviews are audio recorded however Patton (2015) states how the non-verbal language should also be noted. This is because the verbal language is just as important as people's body language, it can also say a lot about what they are verbally explaining. This study was interested in the perceptions of professionals, therefore they had to discuss their own point of view and their feelings towards different aspects of their job. In situations where people have to talk about themselves, their body language sometimes might portray a broader understanding of what they actually mean, in comparison to what they are saying verbally. Throughout the interviews the participants' body language was acknowledged and noted during different questions and parts of the interview. This helped to get a better understanding of what they meant and gained additional information in the process.

There were three parts to the interview. The first part examined what play is and the different types which are made available to preschool children. Within this section it talked about the benefits play also has for children to enhance their development. The second part of the interview dealt with play therapy and discussed how children express how they're feeling and how to deal with their emotions. Then the final part went into detail about the Aistear curriculum and the Síolta framework and their relevance for play in the preschool setting. The three of these sections summarised how play impacts on the different types of play which can be relevant for children in the preschool setting. The children's experiences are enhanced by adults, how they could potentially be furthered into a better learning experience was discussed. The benefits which play and play therapy has for children in the preschool years was then evaluated. Followed by a discussion about the Aistear curriculum and the Síolta

framework. The entire interview came from the view point of the professional, taking their body language on board for some of it was very important as it gave a broader understanding into how they felt. This benefitted the research study.

3.3 Materials

There were many materials used in order for the research to take place. The first material was the information sheet (see appendix 1). This was given to each of the participants so they could read about the research and get a broader understanding of what it was about. The second material was the consent forms (see appendix 2) which each of the participants signed to agree to the interview and also to being recorded. The third then was the researchers consent form (see appendix 3) this stated that the researcher would keep everything confidential. The interview guide was then brought to the interview (see appendix 4) which contained all of the questions for the interview. The final material was the audio recorder which the transcripts were written out from.

3.4 Participants

There were four participants in this study. Three were childcare practitioners and one was a play therapist. To get a broad range of professionals from different areas they were recruited from both Co. Galway and Co. Westmeath. All of the participants were chosen at random, this was to ensure that the study had a broad sample range (Johnson and Christensen, 2013). They were all women within the age bracket from twenty five to forty five. All of the participants are working in their profession, whether it be play therapy or in childcare for a number of years. They all have a vast amount of knowledge about their profession through qualifications and experience which makes them a very important part of the research study. Each participant brought their own unique experience and views to the interview and this benefitted the study immensely.

3.5 Ethical Approval

For this research study to take place, consent was needed from all participants. An ethical form had to be filled out in order to get approval. As all of the participants in this study are professionals, obtaining approval wasn't too difficult. The managers of the facilities were firstly contacted over the phone to get permission and confirmation to do interviews within the facility. Then they received a letter with the information sheet explaining the purposes of the study along with consent forms for participation and audio recording, which they all signed and sent back. The week before the interview, a date and time was set between the researcher and the participants over the phone. Then the interviews took place within the facilities that the participants worked in. Confidentiality and anonymity were also kept by the researcher for each participant.

3.6 Procedure

Gathering a vast amount of information in a research study using semi-structured interviews takes careful planning to ensure that the right information needed is obtained (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). The participants chosen for this study are professionals in the field, who could provide information which may or may-not match the literature review. Once the literature was reviewed, appropriate questions needed to be drawn from it in order to gather as much information about the topic as possible. This is so it could be compared to the literature and a discussion could be made. Silverman (2011) explains the importance of wording questions in the right way so it is clear what you are asking the participants and they can answer the question precisely. Once a list of questions were established for the interview and clearly worded so appropriate information could be obtained they were ordered so the conversation could flow easier.

The four interviews then took place over the course of a week. All interviews ran very smoothly and a broad amount of information was gathered from each interview. None of the interviews came out the same, each brought unique information which was very beneficial to the research. Seidman (2013) explains how during interviews where you are trying to gather information on the participants' views and perceptions

on specific topics, the researcher needs to have a specific skillset. This skillset has one main ability, and that is to listen. The researcher is trying to gather as much information from the participant on the topic, as they are the expert. By acknowledging that they are the expert in this field, the researcher needs to take a step back by allowing them to speak and expand on their knowledge. This will improve the amount and the quality of research gathered for the research study in the long term.

All of the interviews were audio-recorded. They were transcribed so all of the information from the interview could be obtained. The non-verbal communication was noted by the researcher throughout the interview so a much broader understanding was gathered into the depth of knowledge the participant had. The non-verbal communication from participants gave a good indication as to whether they knew a great deal about what they were explaining or whether they felt awkward. On the other hand, when the researcher felt the participant didn't have much knowledge or felt awkward, it was time to move onto the next question. Keegan (2009) agrees with this as people can tell when other people are feeling uncomfortable, signs of this could be when they become fidgety or restless. She continues to say that by a good researcher interpreting body language they can then tell if the participant becomes bored, uninterested or even curious about a specific topic. Then there is an opportunity to explore more about it and gather more information (Keegan, 2009).

Once all of the interviews were completed the audio tapes were analysed and transcribed. The transcripts included both the verbal and non-verbal communication which enhanced the knowledge and strength of the interviewees' feelings and views for the research (Esposito, Bratanic, Keller and Marinaro, 2007).

3.7 Limitations

Limitations can be defined in many ways throughout research. In qualitative research Marshall and Rossman (2016) explain how when the limitations are stated in research then they are not necessarily a bad thing. One of the limitations in this study is the number of participants. There were only four participants, therefore it

was only a small scale study. Another limitation is that there was only one play therapist and three childcare practitioners. This meant that there was more information about the views and interpretations from childcare practitioners than there was from the play therapist. However in saying this, the information gathered was still very substantial.

As it is also a qualitative piece of research Marshall and Rossman (2016) continue to explain how it can be biased. As it is only the researcher who is conducting the research and writing it up so they may overlook some aspects because they are looking for something else. By acknowledging the limitations of this study it opens up opportunities to further the research again and expand on the literature which is already currently available.

3.8 Conclusion

To conclude, the qualitative research ran well and the participants provided the information needed for the study. This all tied in very well with the other aspects of the qualitative research. It followed the aim and the objectives of the study so the relevant information for the research study was gathered. Limitations of the study were stated and explained so the study could be repeated again with less limitations to provide more information on the topic.

Section 4

Results

Results

4.1 Method of analysis

This research looks at four main themes which arose from the study. These are taken from the three objectives which look at the different types of play, the benefits play and play therapy have for children and then the Aistear curriculum and the Síolta framework. These themes are; types of play, play and pay therapy, the holistic child and finally Aistear and Síolta. This study used semi-structured interviews, and was chosen because it best suited this qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews are usually organised in advance, a place and a time is set to suit both the researcher and the participant. This is exactly what took place in this research. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) explain how the interview is also generally set around predetermined open-ended questions. This leaves an opportunity for conversation to generate between the interviewer and the interviewee so more information can be discovered for the purpose of the research.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the results of this qualitative research. Marks and Yardley (2004) explain how thematic analysis pays great attention to the small details of the results so there can be a large emphasis put onto specific sections, and specific detail to the qualitative aspects of the material which is analysed. Thematic analysis can use different ways of analysing results from qualitative research, some of these can include the roles played by theory and coding.

Marks and Yardley (2004) explain coding as something that can be done in order to separate out the results so they can be labelled into different categories. This is mainly so it will be easier to draw out better information and all of the data you can from it. The different codes are based on whatever the study is about and the main issues which arose in it from all the participants. The codes need to stem from the aims and objectives of the research as a guide of what information needs to be gathered and kept together. Once the codes have been specified you can then set

different themes. These themes can make it clearer as to what the results are and whether they are what you were looking for or not.

As this research looked for a comparison in the views of childcare practitioners and play therapists, by setting different themes and clearly separating them out, it was made much clearer about what the differences or similarities were in the different themes. This made it clearer for a proper analysis of the results. It was also directly observable because not only was there verbal communication, the non-verbal communication and body language was observed. This provided the researcher with a broad understanding of when the participant had more knowledge and interest in a specific topic. Although not vital, it did make the results much better because you can get more information out of how a person really feels about something through their body language.

For clarification throughout the results of this research Participant 1 is the play therapist. Participant 2, 3 and 4 are the childcare practitioners.

4.2 Types of play

Each of the participants were asked what their definition of play is. Each participant gave a different idea of what the definition of play is but in saying this all of the participants' answers could be linked to each other. Although the answers were different, they all had the same idea. This shows that looking at play from a universal view it is seen the same but has the potential for so many other ideas and inputs. It is not just set to one way of thinking or one way of doing. Some participants gave much more detail on the different types of play and went into detail about how they see play for children, whereas other participants gave a brief definition to cover all aspects of what play means to them.

Participant 1: *“Well I suppose you know, it can be structured or un-structured. So you can have play say at home, or in a playground, or in a crèche, children playing with whatever toys or whatever items are provided for them. It can be set up in a kind of set structured way or in a very un-structured way so they can be playing with whatever they want to play with themselves. It could be blocks, art or games, sand or*

puppets. Am, they can use them any way they want to use them in an open free-way”.

Participant 4: *“Play is children doing what they do best. Its children’s imagination leading them to their potential and it is their way of learning”.*

From looking at the results Participant 1 went into broad detail of what play is whereas participant 4 gave a simple direct definition. This does not mean that participant 4 knows any less about what play is, it actually shows that they see play as an overview of everything a child does. Participant 1 goes into specifics of the different aspects of play.

When asked what benefits play has for children, each participant stated that play has a vast amount of benefits for children, on so many levels in a variety of different ways. Between every participant, they spoke about children benefitting from play physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually and it also builds up their confidence.

Participant 1: *“Developmentally and emotionally it is a way for children to release feelings and be able to relax. Physically it is a release of energy to improve coordination and balance and strength. Socially then, they are mixing in with their peers, they’re learning social skills, conflict and negotiation, problem solving, they are learning empathy”.*

Participant 2: *“Well I think that, obviously from play the fine motor, gross motor skills, numeracy and language, I mean, am, I suppose social skills, because sometimes when there is play involved they will come together”.*

Participant 3: *“That’s the way that they view their work, the social skills, imagination and it is actually how they build themselves internally and externally”.*

Participant 4: *“Oh it is the best way they learn, I feel it is the best way they learn. The benefits are that it is educational, emotional and social you know all of them are included in all the different areas which is most important. Physically then as well, the children develop through movement and being active in their environment”.*

Each of these four participants gave different responses, however, they all mentioned something in common also. It is proving that all of these aspects, the

physical, social, emotional and intellectual do have a positive impact on a child's development through play alone.

The participants were then asked if they felt like there could be any changes made in order for the children to further development? This question raised some very valid points. Participant 1 and 4 both stated that the children need more free play to allow bigger discoveries among themselves and not always the adults initiating ideas and knowing what the end result will be. Participant 2 talked about coming up with different ideas and activities to enhance the ones which they already have. Participant 3 had a different view on making changes in the workplace for the children in comparison to the other participants.

Participant 3: *"I think we learn more through working with the children, we always make changes and do some reflective practice as well so we can act some more if the children have an interest in something and also our abilities as childcare practitioners for the children as they are changing".*

This participant looked at further developing themselves first as practitioners so they can then help the children to further develop, while in their care. Reflective practice is very important for all practitioners to ensure they are improving themselves for the children's benefits also.

4.3 Play and Play Therapy

All of the participants were asked what their views on a child-centered approach in the early years were, and each one had the same views on it. They all agreed that it should be implemented more among children.

Participant 1: *"Well that is mainly what I work on in here. It's child-centered and non-directive, so that approach for means that the child leads the play and they lead the play at their pace, they come in here and they safely think about the things they want to think about, that they want to talk about and they play with what they want to play with".*

As for the childcare practitioners, they all stated that the child-centered approach is something that they have begun implementing much more in the past year and have found that the children benefit much more from it.

Participant 3: *“It is great because they can decide and it is all about them. It works from their level, their abilities and their age. It also looks at their interests and that is the most important because for the first few years that is the base for their future learning and experience and how they record this”.*

Participant 4: *“It builds on the children’s confidence and even it is a way for the children to be able to come up with their own ways of coping with different situations in their lives. The children become more confident and they are more confident in what they are choosing to do and choosing to play with, it is all their choice”.*

Relationships was the next topic of discussion. This elicited the same views from all but one of the childcare practitioners (Participant 4), who disagrees from the general consensus of opinions, although still agreeing on some aspects too. The question asked was “do children need different relationships when growing up?” This question was asked because if children have the right type of support from different people their development through play can be more enhanced and developed.

Participant 1: *“Yeah, yeah, I think it’s very good for them. I think it is good for them to have lots of contact and connections, and you know both immediate within their own family but also in the broader community. And in here the kids I see, you know without a doubt friends are such an important thing and an ongoing thing for them”.*

Participant 4: *“Ah, yeah I think it is good for children to build relationships with different people like grandparents, their peers, parents, other adults in the community, us, neighbours like yeah I think it is good for them to have the opportunity to have different relationships alright. But like I don’t necessarily think that they need to have relationships when growing up, like some people have nobody you know. I don’t think children need to have siblings or anything you know, to form or be able to form a development towards relationships as a child”.*

Following from this the topic of free play was risen. Each participant agreed that the more free play a child had during the day, the more their development was enhanced. They also all agreed that there were many benefits which were all very

similar. For example; the more free play they can get would benefit them more from the play because they are learning what they want to learn. This is where the professional brings in the emergent curriculum to the play. The emergent curriculum is working from the child's interests on any specific topic. On the other hand, regarding challenges of free play one really stood out.

Participant 1: *“Well for like a child who doesn't know how to play, or doesn't have many play skills, or has a disability or a child who comes from a neglectful environment where they haven't been taught how to play, have the opportunity to play, you know that can be trickier for the child. So I suppose in that situation the adult would definitely be needed a bit more and make suggestions”.*

The outdoor environment was then discussed. It revealed that the play therapist doesn't use the outdoor environment at all, all of their work was done within the play room. In saying this they did explain how important the outdoor environment is for children, in general. With regards to the childcare practitioners, they find the outdoor environment most beneficial.

Participant 2: *“We are trying to look at it like more of an extension of the classroom now. They are still learning, and they are getting outside to get some fresh air. I suppose it's a bit more physical outside as well you know sometimes. They are building more of their physical skills, you know that way”.*

Participant 4: *“Well, it helps them develop physically, emotionally, socially, just everything. It is the best learning environment because it is outdoor. And you know yourself it is the best exercise you can give them and even getting them out in the fresh air it just, it is really just the best thing for them”.*

In relation to using sand with the children, the play therapist uses sand play all of the time, however the childcare practitioners use it more as a sensory tool in their setting. For the outdoors, the childcare practitioners use it so much more than the play therapist does.

Participant 1: *“I think it's fantastic. It is another great medium within play therapy to express their feelings and provide great experiences as well as the fact that it is great from a sensory point of view”.*

Participant 4: *“It is just another tool I think. Sand can be very good as well from a social aspect you know, it is very good but I wouldn’t think it’s any more important than any of the rest of the different tools of play you know. I wouldn’t over emphasise sand over any of the rest of them”.*

Regarding choosing which they think is more beneficial, a sand pit or a sand box one of the childcare practitioners couldn’t choose between them. One of the other childcare practitioners chose the sand pit while the last childcare practitioner and the play therapist both chose the sand tray. Therefore there was a mixture of opinions for this question.

4.4 The Holistic Child

Differentiating play and play therapy could have been a difficult process but by looking at the child holistically you are taking a step back to look at what is important. When the participants were asked to differentiate play or play therapy from counselling for children, each participant stated that it is not much different. The results from this question show that once the child is being supported, listened to, given the chance to express themselves and understood then the job of the professional is completed, once the child is content. The play therapist, obviously has much different views than the childcare practitioners about play verses play therapy or counselling because they are more specialised in that area. However in saying this the results are quite similar.

Participant 1: *Well I would count play therapy as counselling. So play therapy vs play, children come to me for play therapy because they need help getting over some kind of emotional trauma or emotional upset. There may be behaviour problems at home and parents don’t know where it’s coming from or can link it to a particular incident or experience that’s happening, to help the child to get beyond it themselves. So they are not actually coming in to play, they are coming in to help process the feelings and upsetting experiences, worries, fears, upsets, sadness’s am or even an accident that may have happened”.*

Participant 4: *“Awh yeah well, absolutely play is a type of counselling for children. I think role play is a great way for the children to learn how to express themselves and how they are feeling you know. It really is an excellent way because it is a way that*

the child can relate to whereas they can't communicate and they can't express how they feel because they don't have the accurate vocabulary, so they don't know what the feelings are a lot of the time. But by doing this they are able to act them out and they can show you how they are feeling then instead of talking about it".

Free expression goes hand in hand with this and all of the participants agreed that all children need to be able to freely express themselves in a way that they want.

Participant 2: *"Well I think that it is crucial because I think it is part of their development, so if you stop them from expressing themselves they aren't going to truly show who they are, or let them experience things for themselves. They need to be able to go freely and learn for themselves and develop in their own way and express how they feel and express through the play or different art or different things like that".*

For all professionals working with children, each participant stated that a high skillset is needed. "Patience" and "a love for children" are two main aspects which stood out among all participants. This was alongside the qualifications of the professional.

Promoting positive mental health among young children was another topic which was discussed. The play therapist emphasised the importance of ensuring young people were aware that they can talk and express their problems instead of bottling them up.

Participant 1: *"Back when I was growing up things were just brushed under the carpet where now young people have more opportunity to talk more".*

All of the childcare practitioners stated that there was no specific mental health awareness system in their facility, however, it is built into their curriculum and activities subconsciously.

Participant 3: *"It is built into the curriculum with the different activities and that with the children. Like we do things like just playing, the table top toys, baking, going for walk, songs and dancing, sometimes we do the yoga. Sometimes if we are all tired from the activities we can have like fifteen minutes quiet time or something on the mats with the relaxing music".*

All participants agreed that parental involvement is vitally important for the children's benefit. By getting the parents to be a part of the child's journey and support them through it, it pushes the child to reach their full potential much more than without parental involvement.

Participant 4: *"Oh, it is totally necessary. It totally is because we can't do it without them you know, they know their children the best so we need their help and support the whole way through the process with each and every child".*

Participant 2: *"They need to be involved and we have scrap books which we send home once every term so the parents can see what their kids have been up to".*

4.5 Aistear and Síolta

All of the participants were asked how their curriculums were informed. The childcare practitioners named out several factors including the Aistear curriculum and the Síolta framework. The play therapist did not specifically implement Aistear or Síolta however she did state that they were built into the system without specifically stating them.

Participant 1: *"Well I would implement all of the four themes in play therapy, communicating, exploring and thinking, identity and belonging and well-being. You know, young children do all of that specifically in a crèche. In here it is probably done a much deeper level, just not specified out you know".*

Participant 2: *"Well I suppose we would use Aistear and we would use that as our way of building our curriculum. So we would use the theme and work on that and build on from it. You know we would have our own themes any way so we would work our curriculum and work on that with Aistear and the themes have".*

When asked how it's included in the curriculum, each participant stated that it is built into the curriculum through different activities, and daily routines. The play therapist again stated that it is not deliberately brought into that setting. When asked if they

thought it could be implemented any other ways, the childcare practitioners stated that it would be good to get the children out on more trips.

Participant 3: *"It would be great if we could get out to go for more day trips or small field trips you know. If there were more opportunities to do more outings it would be fantastic, we try to do as many as we can".*

All of the participants stated that the Aistear curriculum can provide all of the developmental benefits which a child needs on a daily basis, when combined with their own curriculum.

Participant 3: *"I think Aistear is actually a very good way of practically thinking and doing a reflective practice which is very important. Or when you are planning on doing more, this would be beneficial because it guides you and it is always in mind for when you are doing things with the children, how they will benefit in every area".*

When asked about Síolta, the play therapist stated that it is used in that context the same way as Aistear is. The childcare practitioners stated that Síolta is used in their facility however not as much as Aistear is. One of the childcare practitioners stated that lack of training was a reason why it is not implemented as much.

Participant 4: *"It is a lack of training really to be perfectly honest. In an ideal world we would all be trained in both, the Aistear and Síolta"*

The final question was the participant's views on play-based learning, which they all believed was the best type of learning for the children as a whole.

Participant 2: *"Allowing the children to enjoy their childhood playing and they are still concentrating and learning in that environment. They are doing what they are enjoying"*

4.6 Summary of Results

This section demonstrated the analysis method of the qualitative data gathered for the purpose of this research study. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner and many aspects were considered when analysing the results from the qualitative research, this was in order to ensure that they were valid to this research. All participants were in their natural work environment to ensure they were comfortable and free from any control. The researcher also needed to be responsive, adaptive and a good listener so the participant felt like their opinion was listened to and valued. The qualitative research provided the researcher with different vibes through body language and facial expressions to portray further what they fully mean (Snow, Morrill and Anderson, 2003).

4.7 Conclusion

To conclude, the qualitative research method worked well because all of the information needed for the study was gathered in great detail. The thematic analysis worked well to analyse the results in order to gather the views and perceptions of childcare practitioners and play therapists on play. The results show that there are some similarities and also some differences between play therapists and childcare practitioners. These helped improve the study.

Section 5

Discussion

Discussion

5.1 Summary of Findings

The findings of this research study and the literature available are both quite similar. The results from the participants are mostly agreeing with what the extensive literature has provided. The participants gave a variety of opinions on different topics which gave a broad result to compare with. This showed that different professionals also had different views and perceptions, which is a positive thing.

5.2 Introduction

The significance of the results found from the qualitative research will be discussed here. It looks at the role of play for preschool children through an exploration and comparison of the views and perceptions of childcare practitioners and play therapists. It will highlight the importance of the results from this research by taking the four themes out of the results and discussing them separately. These themes are taken from the objectives and relate to the full complexity of the study. It will then be compared and related to the findings of others which were discussed in the literature review. This is to gather a broad understanding of the results from the participants which came out of the study. The four themes which came from the objectives of the study are; types of play, play and play therapy, the holistic child and then Aistear and Síolta.

5.3 Types of Play

The question of what play is was the first thing that needed to be explored. As there can be very different views and ideas as to what it can be, every person and professional can view it very differently. This was proven in the research study when the participants were asked to define what play is, however each answer was still very similar and it also related to the theory of Singer, Michnick Golinkoff and Hirsh-Paskek (2006). They stated that the act of play extends beyond just having fun and it

enables children to learn many different valuable life skills. The qualitative research showed that the play therapist and the childcare practitioners also had a different view of what play is.

The play therapist went into broad detail of what play is regarding structured, unstructured and the different places where play can occur, such as a playground or at home. One of the childcare practitioners just gave a brief succinct description of what play does for children, looking at it from the perspective of fun and learning.

Following on from this question then the benefits of play were analysed. Both theory and research in this study prove that play has many different benefits for children growing up.

There was much research conducted over many years to evaluate the benefits of play for children. Reddy, Files-Hall and Schaefer (2005) outlined this as they explain how play promotes healthy cognitive development, language, social competence and physical development. Theorists Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1996, 1978) have many theories on the benefits which play has for children developmentally in relation to social, cognitive and intellectual skills. Drews (2009) explains the benefits play has on the child's cognitive development. From the research study every participant spoke about children benefitting from play physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually and it also builds up their confidence. It is evident to see that from both research and theory, children benefit immensely from different types of play.

Drews' (2009) research found that play was also a main contributor for the enhancement of different aspects such as verbalisation, vocabulary, language, attention span, imagination, concentration, impulse control and different types of problem-solving strategies. From this research study the participants came up with some of the same aspects which are improved by play for children. They stated that children can improve coordination, mix more with their peers, learn social skills, and manage conflict and negotiation. It also develops their fine and gross motor skills, numeracy and language. Another participant stated that "*it is the best way they learn*".

The participants were then asked if they felt any changes could be made in order for further development of children through play. This raised some very valid points. One of the participants took a total different view than the rest of the participants. It

was a total different approach which wasn't discovered in the literature review but is a very interesting theory. The participant explained that working with the children collaboratively is very important however reflective practice is something that needs to be looked at more. By the practitioner reflecting on their own practice they can further improve the children's development through play. By the practitioner improving their abilities and moving with the children in their development it helps their experience to become much more beneficial.

This participant looked at further developing themselves first as a practitioner so they can then help the children to further develop, while in their care. This was not stated in the literature review, so there is an opening there for further research to see if there is more reflective practice among practitioners would it benefit the children's development more.

5.4 Play and Play Therapy

All of the participants were asked what their views on a child-centered approach in the early years were, and each one had generally the same views on it. They all agreed that it should be implemented more among children. Both the childcare practitioners and play therapists had the same views on it and agreed that the child-centered approach is a very good way for focusing on each individual child. The play therapist explained that the approach means that the child leads the play, and then that they lead the play at their pace, *"they come in here and they safely think about the things they want to think about"*. As for the childcare practitioners, they all stated that the child-centered approach is something that they have found that the children benefit much more from.

From research VanFleet, Sywulak and Sinscak, (2010) explain the importance of child-centered approaches. They explain how the child-centered approach focuses in on how the play is incorporated to benefit each individual child. This is specifically recognised when it is child-directed play which is used therapeutically for a wide range of problems and situations. The play therapist also agreed with this statement *"Well that is mainly what I work on in here. It's child-centered and non-directive"* Landreth (2012) also states how by having unstructured sessions, the child is

allowed to pace the exploration whether it be fast or slow to accommodate their level of functioning in a new environment. In situations like these the child also needs to be supported. From looking at the different approaches and theories, directive and non-directive play proved to be the most popular.

Using a directive approach the children are given a focus, which could be beneficial for development and realisation. However, the children have full control over what they do and how they go about expressing themselves using the non-directive approach. Rasmussen and Cunningham (2008) explain that by joining the two together the adult can make a suggestion to the child which they can work from with little direction from the adult once the activity has begun. Schaefer and Carey (1994) explain that bringing the parents into the head space of play therapy can promote child-centeredness and could help to get their children thinking more positively. This can influence how they are feeling if the parents are participating more with the child, not just in the play room but at home as well because that is promoting child-centeredness at home and in the setting.

When the question of relationships was brought up regarding different people, there were mainly the same views across the board in the research study. They all agreed that building relationships around them with “*different people like grandparents, their peers, parents, other adults in the community, us, neighbours*”. One participant didn’t see it necessary for them to build lots of different relationships in order to fully develop, just have a good relationship with their parents.

From the literature O’ Connor, Schaefer and Braverman (2016) state how important the parent’s roles are in the development of their children’s physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. It also may help the child to open up to the parent and build up a stronger relationship. By having a strong relationship with their parents it can give them the trust and openness to start building relationships with other people then as well. In saying this, the parent needs to be cautious and not be over powering so they don’t overprotect the child from developing all relationships.

Free play was an aspect which all participants agreed was incorporated into their settings. The literature has shown that in the preschool age group, free play has been nearly eliminated from settings according to Entin (2011). It stated that the amount of children’s time to play freely has declined and now has become much

more structured. This contrasted with what the participants from this study said. Each participant agreed that children were now having more free play during the day than they used to have in previous years. They also all agreed that there were many benefits for the children, for example, the children are learning what they want to learn, therefore they are enjoying the experience and it will stick with them for longer. Entin (2011) stated that the lack of free play has serious effects on children such as anxiety, depression, effects on their emotional development and they could develop problems with attention and self-control. In this present study it was found that through free play, the professional can bring in more of an emergent curriculum.

Early Childhood Ireland (2007-2013) explains how the outdoors is one of the best learning environments for children of all ages. Barnardos (2014) stated that free play in the outdoor environment enhances free expression and self realisation for many children. The outdoors provides better sensory experiences than the indoors; children learn to take risks and find where their boundaries are. The childcare practitioners all stated that they use the outdoors a lot, they explained that there are so many benefits from the children playing in the outdoors and exploring through play outside as much as they do inside, if not more. One of the practitioners stated that *"We are trying to look at it like more of an extension of the classroom now"*. The play therapist explained that she doesn't use the outdoor environment in her work but she can see how it is very beneficial to children regarding many aspects of their lives. The literature agreed with this as it never stated that play therapists use the outdoor environment. Building better physical skills is something that came up in both theory and research throughout the study. One participant stated that *"Well, it helps them develop physically, emotionally, socially, just everything. It is the best learning environment because it is outdoor"*.

Sand play was discussed among all participants. According to theory it is quite popular and is used in most settings because it's a very good way for children to use their senses and explore different textures, it also helps children to express themselves in ways they may not be able to speak about. From this research study the participants agree with this and explain that they do use sand regularly in their setting. The play therapist stated that she uses it much more than other materials at times, *"I think it's fantastic. It is another great medium within play therapy to express their feelings and provide great experiences as well as the fact that it is great from a*

sensory point of view". Carey (2008) states how it gives children a place to express and process any pain they may be experiencing or going through. Tassoni and Hucker (2005) state that it also helps them developmentally and cognitively as well. The childcare practitioner agreed with this in the study however she stated that *"It is just another tool I think"*.

Wellhousen and Crowther (2004) talk about the differences in sand boxes and sand pits. They explained the sand boxes as being restricting as they confine the sensory experience to the top half of the body. They then said that sand pits are much more beneficial as children can get into them and explore a full sensory experience. From this research there was very mixed opinions about the two. One of the childcare practitioners couldn't choose between the two, another childcare practitioner chose the sand pit while the last childcare practitioner and the play therapist both chose the sand tray. Therefore in regards to the theory, the professionals in this study had a very mixed opinion on which they preferred or thought was more beneficial for the children.

5.5 The Holistic Child

Looking at play therapy as a source of children being able to express themselves in ways they didn't know they could is vital. From this study it is evident that the play therapist knows the full extent of its importance. Surprisingly, all of the childcare practitioners also knew quite a lot about it. Differentiating play and play therapy could have been a difficult process for the play therapist and childcare practitioners but by looking at the child holistically, you are looking at what is most important for the child. According to Landreth (2001) play therapy is to children what counselling is to adults. One participant from the study stated that *"Well I would count play therapy as counselling"*. Generally adults like to express their feelings verbally however children use play as their natural form of communication.

From the research study the participants were asked to differentiate play or play therapy from counselling for children. While each participant couldn't give a distinctive differentiation, they all stated that they are not much different. The participants in the study basically explained that once the child is being supported, listened to, given the chance to express themselves and understood then the play is

working with them and the adult is supporting this. Siolta (2006) works on the same standards as this. One of the childcare practitioners in the study had very clear views on how play works as a source of counselling for the children. *“Play is a type of counselling for children. It really is an excellent way because it is a way that the child can relate to whereas they can’t communicate and they can’t express how they feel because they don’t have the accurate vocabulary, so they don’t know what the feelings are a lot of the time”*.

Each participant in this study stated that a high skillset among professionals working with children is needed. “Patience” and “a love for children” were two main aspects which stood out among all of the participants. Qualifications held by the professionals was also talked about quite a lot in the study. Jaycox, Morse, Tanielian and Stein (2006) explain one of their powers, which is the rapport-building power. This is where children tend to like adults who are playful and fun-loving. If the play therapist or childcare practitioner can portray to the child that they want to have fun, the experience will become more beneficial to the child. This is how they can get the children to open up to them more and that will enhance the learning and free expression environment.

Jaycox, Morse, Tanielian and Stein (2006) explain how children who have been through a traumatic experience need to be supported, especially regarding positive mental health. They talk about a tool-kit which can be intended for school aged children as well as preschool children. It’s proposed to assist professionals in how to promote positive mental health recovery among the children. This can be just in general or following on from a traumatic occurrence in their lives. From this research study all of the childcare practitioners stated that there was no specific mental health awareness system in their facility. In saying this however, they did state that it is built into their curriculum and activities subconsciously so they are promoting positive mental health. *“It is built into the curriculum with the different activities and that with the children”*.

Parental involvement for children means a great deal. This is because the child feels that when the parent has an interest in their work, then they feel even more proud of themselves. Whether the parents get involved in the sessions or not once the parent is showing an interest in the work, the effectiveness of this on the child is

very beneficial. Therapist training is a huge aspect, and is the same as childcare practitioners needing training. It shows the therapist's capabilities and whether they are able to get through to the child or not (Ray, Bratton, Rhine and Jones (2001). It is also very important that there is good communication with the parents and the professional. This means that the professional has to be able to open up this line for the parents. All participants in this study agreed that parental involvement is vitally important for the children's benefit. *"Oh, it is totally necessary. It totally is because we can't do it without them" "the parents can see what their kids have been up to"*. This is important for not only the children, but also the parents as well as they are the children's primary care giver (Ohlson, 1976, 2012).

5.6 Aistear and Síolta

The Aistear curriculum and the Síolta framework are widely known in the youth sector (Aistear, 2009, Síolta, 2006). All of the participants in this study were asked how their curriculum is informed. The childcare practitioners gave several different factors which informed their curriculum which included the Aistear curriculum and the Síolta framework. *"Well I suppose we would use Aistear and we would use that as our way of building our curriculum. We would have our own themes any way so we would work our curriculum and work on that with Aistear and the themes have"*. In the play therapist's setting, there is not any specific curriculum, but she did explain that it was built into the system without specifically stating it. *"Young children do all of that specifically in a crèche. In here it is probably done a much deeper level, just not specified out you know"*.

All of the participants specifically explained that the Aistear curriculum has the potential to provide all of the developmental benefits which a child needs on a daily basis. This was explained through all of the different types of activities they could do with the children. Murray and Urban (2012) explained that the Aistear curriculum is built into nearly every childcare facility around Ireland. The participants in this study stated that the Aistear curriculum is not a set curriculum on its own, it is built in and combined with their own curriculum. This gives the children the best learning outcomes because they are getting the four themes of Aistear in the activities they partake in within the childcare facility or the play therapy setting. *"So we would use*

the theme and work on that and build on from it". When asked how it's included in the curriculum, each participant stated that it is built into the curriculum through different activities, and daily routines.

The Aistear/Síolta (2015) practice guide on curriculums, foundations and pillars gives a much broader understanding into the individual needs which need to be incorporated into each curriculum. The participants in this study all spoke about bringing the emergent curriculum into the learning environment with the children when something arises within a group and the children all have an interest in it. In situations like this, the practitioner needs to be aware of the fact that every child brings a broad personal experience from their lives, from home, and the fact that these children are constantly learning through play and planned experiences.

"I think Aistear is actually a very good way of practically thinking and doing a reflective practice which is very important. Or when you are planning on doing more, this would be beneficial because it guides you and it is always in mind for when you are doing things with the children, how they will benefit in every area".

Although the participants stated that they do build from an emergent curriculum, Duncan and Lockwood (2008) state that there needs to be more development in the early years on play based learning through curriculums and pedagogy. They also proceed to explain in great detail how the principle of teaching children in an early years setting should always begin from the point of 'where the child is'. The participants have stated that they have started doing this much more now in the past year than they used to.

The participants were asked how they could implement the Aistear curriculum differently or more in their facility, if possible. From looking at Aistear/Síolta (2015) they give a broad description of the four themes, Identity and belonging, exploring and thinking, communicating and wellbeing. The participants in this study took all of these into consideration when deciding on different ways to include the Aistear curriculum. Nearly all of the participants stated that going out on trips, taking the children out of the facility and being an active participant in the community would be an excellent way to enhance the Aistear programme in their facility. *"It would be*

great if we could get out to go for more day trips or small field trips you know. If there were more opportunities to do more outings it would be fantastic, we try to do as many as we can”.

From looking at what Murray and Urban (2012) have stated, the Aistear curriculum is being used much more in Ireland nowadays than it used to be. Comparing that to this research study, it doesn't seem to match up completely. The participants were then asked about the Síolta framework. Surprisingly not all of the participants knew much about it, not to the same extent as Aistear anyway. One of the practitioners explained that *“It is a lack of training really to be perfectly honest. In an ideal world we would all be trained in both, the Aistear and Síolta”*. The play therapist also explained that she didn't know as much about it, however, from what she did know she saw it in the same way as Aistear. Because she works from a play-based approach, the children are implementing the play, therefore she doesn't see it as using a framework. The childcare practitioners also stated that Síolta is used in their facility, however, not as extensively as Aistear is.

As standard 6 from the Síolta framework promotes play, it is a vital aspect for professionals to consider when working with children. It suggests how, with the support of adults building on the child's knowledge, and well-resourced opportunities, it enhances the child's learning and development. This is where the Aistear curriculum (2009) could also be brought into the Síolta framework (2006). A partnership with the parents is also in the Síolta framework which professionals deal with on a daily basis. The professionals need to rely on the parents to partake in a proactive role in their child's learning and development. All or most, of the Síolta framework standards, are implemented in the settings of the participants in this study, however, they just don't specifically state that they are using the Síolta framework.

The final question in the study was the participant's views on play-based learning. All of the participants stated and believed that the play-based learning approach is the best type of learning for the children as a whole. Singer, Michnick Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2006) stated that the play based approach is taken out of primary

school learning therefore it needs to be supported more in preschool settings for children. Using Aistear (2009) and Síolta (2006) will give them the best start at building from an emergent curriculum and learning from a play-based approach. *“Allowing the children to enjoy their childhood playing and they are still concentrating and learning in that environment. They are doing what they are enjoying”*. Looking at the play-based approach from a therapeutic point of view, the play therapist in this study explained a number of times that the play-based approach is what is used in a play therapy session.

5.7 Limitations

The limitations of this study are that it is a small scale study as there were only four participants. If the study was larger and more people were interviewed, more information would be gathered in relation to the topic. Another limitation is that all of the participants were female, so the study did not have respondents from both genders. The questions in the interviews could also have been made more generalised. From looking at the results it was clear to see where the questions really suited the childcare participants and where they suited the play therapist more. This then limited the amount of information on both professionals, therefore generalising the questions more could prevent this.

5.8 Evaluation of Method

The qualitative research method using semi-structured interviews was very effective as an information gathering tool. It allowed for the collection of a vast amount of information relating to the views and perceptions of childcare practitioners and play therapists on the different types of play which can be relevant for preschool children. The benefits which play and play therapy has for children in the preschool setting and the professionals views on the Aistear curriculum and Síolta framework alongside their relevance for play. This satisfied the objectives of the study. Interviews also gave a good indication of the knowledge of childcare practitioners and play therapists on the topic of play. It was a cost-effective method which was an

advantage to the study. A vast amount of information was gathered from the qualitative research method.

5.9 Recommendations

A recommendation would be to further the study and gather more information on the topic of play. By furthering the study it would be much clearer to see where improvements could be made in order to provide an even better environment for the professionals and the children.

5.10 Summary

In summary, from the results in the interviews and the findings from the literature review, a vast majority of the information gathered from both of them are quite similar. The childcare practitioner's knowledge is quite vast on the different aspects of play. Even in regards to the play therapy aspect of play, they stated that it was not far different to what they do with the children. It is the same thing for the play therapist who also had a lot of knowledge about different aspects of play the same way a childcare practitioner would even though they are just working one to one with each child. From both the childcare practitioners and the play therapist, there is a lot of room for improvement regarding the Aistear curriculum and the Síolta framework.

5.11 Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that both childcare practitioners and play therapists have a broad knowledge on play and the benefits of different types of play. There is still plenty of room for improvement and space for progression which is also a positive aspect.

Section 6

Conclusion

Conclusion

To conclude, this research study proved that the literature reviewed and the research found are quite similar. There are some differences where there could be more research on and also could be more implementation of theory into practice. The study went very well and all of the participants provided valid information for this piece of research. The qualitative method using interviews was very beneficial because a vast amount of information was gathered to meet the needs of the research project. Overall it ran well, the results prove that most of the theory is put into practice.

Section 7

Recommendations

Recommendations

Although this study proves that a lot of the theory is put into practice within childcare settings and play therapy settings, it is evident that there is still a lot of room for improvement. An example of this is the Aistear curriculum and the Síolta framework. Although they are implemented in the childcare settings there is a lot of potential for them to become used more profoundly for the benefits of the children in these facilities. In relation to the play therapist, there seems to be huge room for improvement on the Aistear curriculum and the Síolta framework. Although play therapy is mostly unstructured and non-directive, by the children developing in that environment they could be encouraged subtly by the professional to further their potential.

The limitations in the study could also be improved for further research. Having a bigger sample size and a larger scale study could have proven more on the facts which were found in this small scale study. By making this study larger it would give a more accurate account for childcare practitioners and play therapists in Ireland. The fact that all of the participants in this study were all female also could be changed if the study was made bigger as there are much less men in the childcare sector anyway. This study only used one play therapist and three childcare practitioners, although there was no bias from the researcher for the study, a recommendation to improve this would be to have more play therapists views.

It would be very interesting also to bring this study outside Ireland, to do research somewhere else, the UK for example, just to see if their childcare system would be much different from the childcare system here in Ireland and also look at it from a play therapist point of view as well and see if the way they work somewhere else is much different to the way that it is run in Ireland. This could also be made a larger scale study and even compare it to the way things are done in Ireland.

Overall there are not that many major recommendations for this study other than trying to improve the research and make it much more accurate. Although the information in this study is very valid information it would still be very interesting to find out more.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Information Sheet

Dear Participant,

My name is Tanya Costello. I am doing a Masters in Child and Youth Care Studies at Athlone Institute of Technology. This interview is part of my research project which I must complete as part of my course. My research project aims to investigate the role of play for preschool children through an exploration and comparison of the views and perceptions of childcare practitioners and play therapists.

I would be grateful if you would consider participating in this research study however, your participation is completely voluntary. You **do not** have to answer all of the questions if you don't want to, and you **do not** need to sign your name on it, as your responses are anonymous. It should take no more than an hour for the interview. If you want to stop the interview at any time that will be respected.

Your responses to the questions will remain anonymous and confidential as no names will appear in the final dissertation. For the sole purpose of obtaining all the information from the interview I would really like to audio record it, however if you do not want me to that is no problem. If you do agree to being taped, the interview will be transcribed. The audio tape will be retained in a locked cabinet, and will be destroyed on the 30th of September 2016. The transcripts will be kept personally for three years for the purpose of further possible research.

If you have any questions please feel free to ask me and I will gladly answer them.

If you do choose to participate in the interview, *thank you ever so much, I appreciate the time you are giving me.*

Yours Sincerely.

Tanya Costello.

Appendix 2

Consent and Confirmation Form

Confirmation and consent

I confirm that I willingly agree to participate in the research project of Tanya Costello. I also agree to the use of the findings in this Masters Research project and possible further research using the transcripts. I am aware that audio tapes will be destroyed on the 30th of September 2016 and that the information attained in the interview is to be used for establishing the role of play for preschool children.

Participant:

Signature _____

Date _____

Name (Print) _____

Date _____

Audio recording

I consent to being recorded in the interview for the dissertation by Tanya Costello. I am aware that the information will be attained through an audio tape however will be destroyed on the 30th of September 2016.

Participant:

Signature _____

Date _____

Name (Print) _____

Date _____

Appendix 3

Researchers consent

Researcher's consent

I confirm that I will keep the information in this interview confidential in accordance with the ethical guidelines and requirements. The information attained will be used for the purposes of this research project and possible future projects to further the research.

Researcher:

Signature _____

Date _____

Name (Print) _____

Date _____

Appendix 4

Interview Guide

Interview Questions

Objective 1:

- How would you define play?

- In your opinion what benefits does play have for children?

- Do you believe children develop from play?
 - Intellectually
 - Emotionally
 - Physically
 - Socially

- In your opinion are there any changes you feel could be made in order for them to further develop?

- What are your views on a child-centered approach in the early years?
 - Coping Mechanisms
 - Positive thinking

- From your point of view, do children need different relationships when growing up?
 - Other children
 - Cousins
 - Parents
 - Childcare Practitioners
 - Families
 - Neighbours

- In your facility, do you use free play?

- What benefits and/or challenges does free play impose on the children? If any?
 - Personalities
 - Problem Solving
 - Independent
 - Curiosity

- Social
- Language
- Group Participation
- Self Regulation
- Do you engage children in the outdoors?
- From your experience is the outdoors a learning environment? How?
 - Physically
 - Socially
 - Emotionally
 - Cognitively
 - Behaviourally
- What are your views on sand play?
 - Benefits
 - Intellectual abilities
 - Age
 - Challenges
 - Attention Span
 - Learning experience
- Which in your opinion are more beneficial, sand boxes or sand pits?

Objective 2:

- From your knowledge on play, differentiate play or play therapy from counselling for children?
 - Less structured
 - More open to expression
 - Less intense
- From your point of view, how important is it for children to be able to freely express themselves? Why?

- From your experience how do children generally express themselves, excluding verbally.
 - Feelings
 - Emotions
 - Acting
 - Actions
 - Dance
 - Singing

- Do you have any opinions on the type of skillset a professional should have when working collaboratively with a child?
 - Fun loving
 - Enthusiastic

- Has your facility a way for promoting positive mental health among children?
 - Pictures
 - Posters
 - Games
 - Videos
 - Exercises

- In your opinion, are there any other ways of promoting positive mental health among young children?

- What are your views on parental involvement within the learning environment?

Objective 3:

- What assists or informs you when building a curriculum?
 - Age
 - Cultures
 - Learning
 - Abilities
 - Fun
 - Development

- Is the Aistear curriculum implemented in your facility?

- If so, in what ways do you include it?
 - Separating four themes
 - Activities

- Do you think you could implement it in any other ways?
 - Day trips

- In your opinion, are there any developmental benefits from the Aistear curriculum?
 - Physically
 - Socially
 - Emotionally
 - Cognitively

- Do you use the Síolta framework in your facility?

- If so, in what ways do you include it?
 - Art
 - Story telling

- Do you think you could implement it in any other ways?
 - Nature walks

- In your opinion, is there any way of syncing Aistear and Síolta together?
 - Principles and themes
 - Standards and policies

- From your point of view, would it be beneficial or not? Why?

- What are your views on play-based learning?