

THE **PLAI** STUDY

Playful Learning Across Ireland

A Student Teacher Intervention
in Early Years Education

Dr Glenda Walsh & Dr Jacqueline Fallon



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast

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THE STANDING CONFERENCE ON
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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to resolve some of the lingering tensions involved in implementing play as learning in early years classrooms across the island of Ireland, a shared form of professional development known as 'Playful Learning' was delivered together to a group of student teachers in the final years of their degree programme both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The professional development programme was two-fold: it involved a shared programme of study on up-to-date research and practices on playful learning and teaching and a playful learning intervention, where students, both North and South, had the opportunity to plan and implement a series of playful learning experiences in an early years classroom/setting of their choice. This report details the impact of such an intervention on student teachers' beliefs and practices about playful approaches to teaching and learning and will attempt to unpick the underpinning features of a high quality playful learning approach in practice.

Key words: Play, Learning, Teaching, Student Teachers, Professional Development

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INTRODUCTION

Contextualising Play as Learning

Play has long been valued as the medium through which young children learn best, perhaps emanating from the innovative thinking of philanthropists and scholars such as Froebel, Rousseau and Pestalozzi (Walsh, 2017). Many research reports have confirmed the value of play-based learning for children's holistic development, namely social, emotional, linguistic, cognitive and physical development (Whitebread et al, 2012, White, 2012, Goldstein, 2012, Ginsburg, 2013). More recently, evidence has been accruing on the power of play for children's academic learning or content knowledge (Hedges, 2014), in particular literacy (e.g. Roskos and Christie, 2011; Genishi and Haas Dyson, 2014 and Roskos, 2017) and numeracy (e.g. Wager and Parks, 2014; Worthington and van Oers, 2016; Colliver, 2017).

Play, as a result, has attracted political attention across the globe (Pyle et al, 2017), where opportunities for play have become the 'centrepiece' of early childhood curricula in many countries (Ryan and Northey-berg, 2014: 204). The context of Ireland is no exception. Recent policy developments in both Northern Ireland (CCEA, 2007) and the Republic of Ireland (NCCA, 2009) have embraced the value of play-based learning for their youngest children. The Foundation Stage Curriculum, part of the Primary Curriculum in Northern Ireland (CCEA, 2007) focuses directly on children aged 4-6 years i.e. the first two years of compulsory schooling, as young children in NI are obliged to commence primary school in the September after their fourth birthday, the cut-off point being the 1st July in any given year. The introduction of the FS Curriculum marks a seismic shift in thinking within NI. It stands in stark contrast to formal didactic modes of instruction prioritised in previous traditional curricula (Hunter and Walsh, 2014; Walsh et al. 2006), instead focusing on a pedagogical style which privileges the centrality of play in young children's learning and development. The FS Curriculum indicates that children in their first two years of schooling should 'experience much of their learning through well-planned and challenging play' (CCEA, 2007: 9) and that their learning should be supported by EY practitioners who are 'committed, sensitive, enthusiastic and interact effectively to challenge children's thinking and learning' (CCEA 2007, 16).

Aistear (NCCA, 2009a), the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children aged 0-6 in the Republic of Ireland, embraces both the pre-school and primary school contexts (Walsh et al, 2013). Although children are not obliged in the ROI to commence formal schooling until the age of 6, the majority of Irish children begin junior infants in primary/national school at the age of 4/5 years. Like the FS Curriculum, Aistear too endorses the relevance of play and active learning in children's early learning, supported by interactions which are: **respectful, playful, enjoyable, enabling, and rewarding** (NCCA, 2009b:27):

'Much of children's early learning and development takes place through play and hands-on experiences. Through these, children explore social, physical and imaginary worlds. These experiences help them to manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop socially, be creative and imaginative, and lay the foundations for becoming effective communicators and learners' (NCCA, 2009c, p. 11).

Overview

The next section of the report will critique the existing literature on play as learning in practice. It will initially focus on teacher beliefs and practices of the policy-practice interface and the role of the adult and then proceed to consider pre-service teacher beliefs and practices. The subsequent sections then review the existing literature base on resolving the dilemma of play as learning in practice, tuning in particularly to more integrated play-based pedagogies and then appropriate professional development opportunities to ensure more integrated play-based experiences in practice.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Critiquing Play as Learning in Practice

Yet despite the play-learning nexus within the discourse of play scholarship and its growing political endorsement across the globe, it would seem that play as learning in practice in the 21st century has become a much 'contested terrain' (Ryan and Northery-Berg, 2014: 204). Research evidence across a variety of international contexts problematises the place of play in early years practice (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2008, Broadhead, Howard and Wood, 2010; Hedges and Cullen, 2012, Hunter and Walsh, 2014), identifying constraints such as 'policy frameworks, space, time, adults' roles, rules, parents' expectations and the pushdown effects from the primary curriculum' (Wood, 2014: 5) as some of the unresolved tensions that pose challenges to translating play effectively into practice.

Teacher beliefs and practices

Policy-Practice Interface

For example in the USA, Miller and Almon's (2009) extensive review of nine in-depth studies paints a troubling picture of play in practice where several forms of play, in particular child-initiated play, have been principally replaced by teacher-directed literacy and mathematics instruction as a result of recent policy initiatives. With increased demands for accountability and standardized testing, EC teachers claim that they no longer have enough time to include play in their schedules and in more and more preschool and kindergarten classrooms play is being pushed out of the curriculum (Russo, 2012). Likewise Lynch (2015) supports these findings that play is on a steady decline in kindergarten classes in the USA. Drawing on an ethnographic study of seventy-eight kindergarten teachers' message board discussions, she found that despite their own beliefs in the importance of play-based learning, many kindergarten teachers experienced external pressures from other teachers, principals, and school and state policies to focus on academic goals and these pressures led them to limit play in the classroom context. When play does take place in the US, Bodrova (2008) argues that it tends to be immature in style, lacking richness and depth i.e. "they play only with realistic props, their play scenarios are stereotypical and primitive and their repertoire of themes and roles is rather limited" (Bodrova, 2008: 364). In the educational climate of high

stakes testing, play it would seem has been relegated to minor status, being deemed less important for academic achievement (Brown & Vaughn, 2009).

Wood (2014) presents a similar picture of play in the English context where the renewed policy interest in play or what she terms the 'policy capture of play' (Wood, 2014: 151) has resulted in 'technicist' modes of play in practice, where play as learning has been reduced to developmental outcomes and learning goals. In this version of play as learning, Wood (2014) explains that the activities are planned with the practitioners' goals in mind, instead of those of the children. Martlew et al's (2011) small scale-study also raises some concerns about the state of play-based learning in the early years of primary school in Scotland. Although many of the teachers were enthusiastic about the pedagogical shift towards more play-based practice as a result of the Active Learning initiative, many of them found it difficult to reconcile the idea of play-based learning with the practical realities of large numbers of children in the classroom. In addition several of the teachers who were used to a more rigid curricular structure and who had concerns over accountability and attainment targets were challenged by the need to create an appropriate learning context which allowed them to follow children's interests and build upon their prior knowledge.

Indeed a recent BERA/TACTYC Review of Early Childhood Education and Care in the UK, 2003-2017, highlights the policy-practice tensions and challenges that still exist within early childhood education across the United Kingdom as a whole. Drawing on over 40 articles and books reporting empirical research in the field of play and pedagogy, Wood and Chesworth (2017:55) report that, despite versions of educational play having been embedded in the four UK curricular frameworks, much of the research evidence indicates that play continues to hold a 'tenuous position in practice'. They continue that play as a source of curriculum remains highly contentious as practitioners still do not fully understand learning through play and in particular 'how to plan curriculum content in response to children's interests and enquiries' (Wood and Chesworth, 2017:56).

Pyle and Danniels' (2017:12) recent study in the context of Canada, supports these findings emphasising that, despite play being valued, its delivery remains highly contentious.

Drawing on their qualitative study in 15 classrooms, they found that some teachers saw play and learning as completely 'dichotomous constructs', where play was perceived as adult-free activity which positively supports children's social and personal development, with little reference to academic learning. Others saw play however as having the potential to support academic learning, but in these cases, play was more structured in perspective, where the role of the adult was more explicit. Trying to meet the academic requirements of the Canadian curriculum and honouring the children's interests and following their lead through a play-based approach was considered highly challenging in practice and the authors argued the need for a much more expansive definition of play as learning in practice to afford opportunities for both developmental and educational learning benefits.

Beyond the confines of Western culture, a qualitative study in Hong Kong which explored children's and teachers' perceptions of play and non-play (Wong et al, 2011) found that play in classrooms is strongly teacher-directed and that teachers seem to be 'unaware of the fact that they are actually preventing autonomous self-directed play' (Wong et al. 2011:167). In a similar vein, Fung and Cheng (2012) drew on evidence from stakeholders' views of play and learning in the Hong Kong early years context. They suggest that despite the political endorsement of play as a central learning and teaching tenet, play in practice is highly problematic where many teachers are still directing, instructing, lecturing and controlling children's learning in the classroom environment. Similar findings emerge from a South African context. Drawing on interview and observational data collected from 104 teachers in 41 primary schools and early childhood development (ECD) centres in both well-resourced and under-resourced environments, Aronstam and Braund (2016) found that many of the teachers lacked a clear understanding of play as learning in practice. Evidence suggested that the early childhood teachers understood play as something that needs to be controlled and structured so that they can predict the outcome of activities and anticipate desired results. Observations showed that few teachers in the study appeared to regard play through the eyes of the children. Lack of time and resources were identified as some of the challenges faced when attempting to translate more practical, play-based activity into practice.

A recent extensive scoping study conducted by Pyle et al (2017) examining early childhood teacher practices and perspectives on play-based learning in kindergarten classrooms around the world, confirm many of the tensions raised already. Firstly, many teachers appear to view play and learning as two separate constructs and have reported some confusion about how play can lead to learning. Secondly, inconsistencies have been noted between observed classroom practices and teachers' reported beliefs, with teachers being observed to engage in mainly didactic instruction even if they have endorsed the idea that children learn best through a play-based approach. Thirdly, many studies have showcased a number of reported barriers to the effective implementation of play-based learning. These include a lack of professional training, pressure from parents to engage in more didactic instruction, pressure from policy makers to achieve prescribed academic outcomes and prepare children for the academic demands of formal schooling and a lack of materials, time, and/or space in the classroom to support play, all of which hinder the effective translation of play-based learning into practice.

Evidence from the Irish context is no exception. Findings from the longitudinal Early Years Enriched Curriculum evaluation, a play-based intervention in over 100 primary schools in NI, highlight the difficulty that some Northern Ireland Early Years teachers have in achieving an experience for young children that is highly motivating and fun-like but in turn promotes appropriate learning and challenge on the part of the young child. In addition, despite the definite benefits of the more play-based Enriched Curriculum in terms of children's attitudes to learning, emotional well-being and social skills, some of the teachers expressed an underlying concern and unease about the educational value of play, especially regarding enhancing children's literacy and numeracy skills (Walsh et al., 2010). A more recent small-scale study conducted by Hunter and Walsh (2014) in NI supports this thinking. Despite the best intentions of the FS curriculum in NI to embrace the established notions of best practice in EY education, its translation into practice resulted in somewhat impoverished and mundane play-based activity due to pressures imposed by the underpinning standards agenda. The findings from the study suggest that ensuring close alignment between play-based practices and policy frameworks, curricular norms and educational targets has become something of a 'holy grail' (Hunter and Walsh, 2014:15).

In the Republic of Ireland the work of Murphy (2004), Hayes (2007), Dunphy (2008) and Kernan (2007) presents a picture of play in practice which needs much further support and development. Recent research has highlighted teachers' ongoing uncertainty about play in practice in the early years of schooling in the RoI (Fallon, 2015). A recent study by Gray and Ryan (2016) on teachers' experiences of Aistear in practice, indicate that while EC teachers acknowledged the importance of play, there was little evidence that Aistear has actually changed the practice in infant classes. Traditional teaching approaches still appear to remain dominant, with play-based practice remaining on the sidelines.

The role of the adult in playful learning experiences

Further perusal of the evidence-base suggests that a major stumbling block regarding the success of play-based learning in practice, is the underpinning ambiguity surrounding the role of the adult in children's play. Many EC practitioners associate play-based learning with the theoretical ideals of developmental psychology and Piagetian perspectives on child development (Chesworth, 2016, Walsh et al, 2017). Such practices tend to prioritise resource-rich environments, child-initiated experiences and free play opportunities, where the role of the adult remains principally on the periphery as observer and facilitator of children's play (Lobman, 2003, Hatch, 2010). Aras (2016) reports on a study investigating EC teachers' perceptions and implementations on free play and their involvement in children's free play. Despite early childhood teachers in Turkey respecting children's play, they only appear to get involved in their play when children have problems and need help. They use free playtime instead to complete their daily plans and take attendance. Fleer (2015) agrees, arguing that many EC practitioners believe that for something to count as play, then adults should not be involved. Hedges, drawing on data in the New Zealand context (2007), points to the dominance of free play and child-centred notions as responsible for teachers' failure to capitalise on children's learning and make analytical interpretations of children's interests in order to build upon them. Greishaber (2008) supports such thinking, arguing that many play-based experiences have become associated with 'laissez-faire' teaching where there is too much emphasis on the teacher waiting and watching, rather than engaging and participating. Yet others such as Goldstein (2007: 48) argue against "kindergartens changing from a peaceful and pleasant environment helped by the needs of the children and the

professional judgments of the teachers into an educational racetrack on which teachers and students are expected to rush at top speed towards a predetermined finish line". Findings from the longitudinal evaluation of the Early Years Enriched Curriculum emphasise the lingering tensions within this troubled space. Walsh et al (2017) indicate that many of the EC teachers adopted an overly maturistic approach to play in practice where they tended to adopt a passive, hands-off, non-intervening approach in children's play, where play was perceived to be all about the process of discovery and exploration in a free play environment. These teachers valued play for its social, emotional and dispositional benefits but little reference was made to the power of play for children's cognitive and academic skill development. Other teachers, who perhaps were more concerned about meeting academic goals and targets and who were unsure about what their role should be in play, resorted to using more formal methods of teaching in the playful experiences. On these occasions the teachers' actions appeared quite controlling in the play scenarios with little attention given to responding to the needs and interests of the children concerned (Walsh et al, 2017).

Pyle et al's (2017) extensive scoping review of play-based pedagogies in kindergartens across the globe validates these Enriched Curriculum findings. They showcase that research focusing on developmental learning has consistently endorsed the use of free, or child-directed, play in order to foster positive learning, where teachers occupy the passive role of observer or material provider. Conversely, research focused on academic learning has consistently endorsed the use of teacher-directed play to encourage the learning of academic skills, where teachers take a more explicit role in children's play. In short Fisher et al (2011) explain that many EC educators have come to believe that play and academic learning are at polar extremes and fundamentally incompatible, where they must either engage in instructional type activities to ensure intellectual gains or allow children to play freely for their holistic development.

Pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices

Student teachers' beliefs and practices about play as learning also reveal a somewhat inconsistent picture. Sherwood and Reifel (2013) use the word 'paradox' to characterise pre-

service teachers' beliefs about play, reporting that the participants in their study held contradictory views on the role of play in learning. These contradictory views emerged especially when learning through play was being compared with learning through non-play. Play was valued for learning across a range of contexts, but yet it emerged that what the participants primarily conceptualised as learning was '... acquiring academic knowledge during 'not-play' (Sherwood and Reifel, 2013, 274). This study is particularly interesting in revealing the participants' taken-for-granted belief that learning in school is a not-play experience.

Other studies, such as that conducted by Kennewell and Morgan (2006) found a dissonance between student teachers' beliefs and practices. Kennewell and Morgan (2006) investigated students' own playful learning of ICT. The research found that the students valued their playful learning experiences, believing that play with ICT would be important for children. However, observations of the students' practices during their practicum found no incorporation of such practices. The reasons given by the students include time pressures, lack of resources, testing requirement and lack of confidence, similar to the constraints and challenges identified by practising teachers earlier in this review. Similarly Haney and Bissonnette's (2011) participants, pre-service and serving teachers, strongly endorsed a belief in the efficacy of play in building social skills among children, but were less clear about play's contribution to cognitive development. However, despite making strong connections between play and social learning, the participants did not demonstrate correspondingly positive intentions about the possibility of increasing play opportunities to enhance children's cognitive skills. The reasons suggested relate to the strength of the mandate for didactic approaches to teaching consequent on the prevalence of high stakes testing.

An American study by Vera and Geneser (2012) sought to determine pre-service teacher perspectives on classroom play in field-based experiences. The data consisted of responses to a survey that was distributed to 50 student teachers after they had implemented a play-based lesson with elementary children. The research questions focused on the challenges that pre-service teachers faced when they attempted to integrate playful components into

their field based lessons and how the mentor teachers responded to the play based lessons that were taught by the pre-service teachers. Based on the premise that pre-service teachers can bring a fresh perspective to the educational context, the findings from this study revealed that some of the pre-service teachers reintroduced their mentor teachers to the idea of play as an effective strategy to motivate and engage children in practice. Yet in contrast to this positive finding, the study by Vera and Geneser (2012) illuminated the concern of pre-service teachers about managing play in the classroom, where references were made to space, time and curriculum as challenges for their play-based experiences. The findings also revealed that these student teachers did not see adequate examples of play-based learning in their mentors' classrooms from which they could learn, where it became apparent that despite the mentor teachers appearing to espouse the values of play, they seemed to have succumbed to the pressures of everyday schooling where play was eschewed in favour of task-based activities.

A qualitative study by Rose and Rogers, (2012) of student teachers' experiences of their final teaching practice, confirms these findings. Drawing on the evidence from 100 early childhood student teachers in the final year of their Bachelor of Education programme in two different universities in England, they found a pronounced dissonance between the content of university-based training on the one hand, which tends to promote a play-based approach in early childhood classrooms and the reality of pedagogical practices in early years settings on the other. The following quotation from one of the student teachers clarifies this thinking:

“Each morning and four afternoons a week were heavily structured with only one afternoon allocated to play, timetabled as ‘choosing time’. But the teacher chose what was available each session and these activities did not vary from day to day. There often appeared to be a tension between what the children were compelled to engage with and what they would have liked to engage with. Although the teacher recognised that children needed to play, it was seen as secondary to formal learning. Not once did I see her sit down and play with the children or make any written observation of the children other than when she removed them individually for a specific ‘test’.”

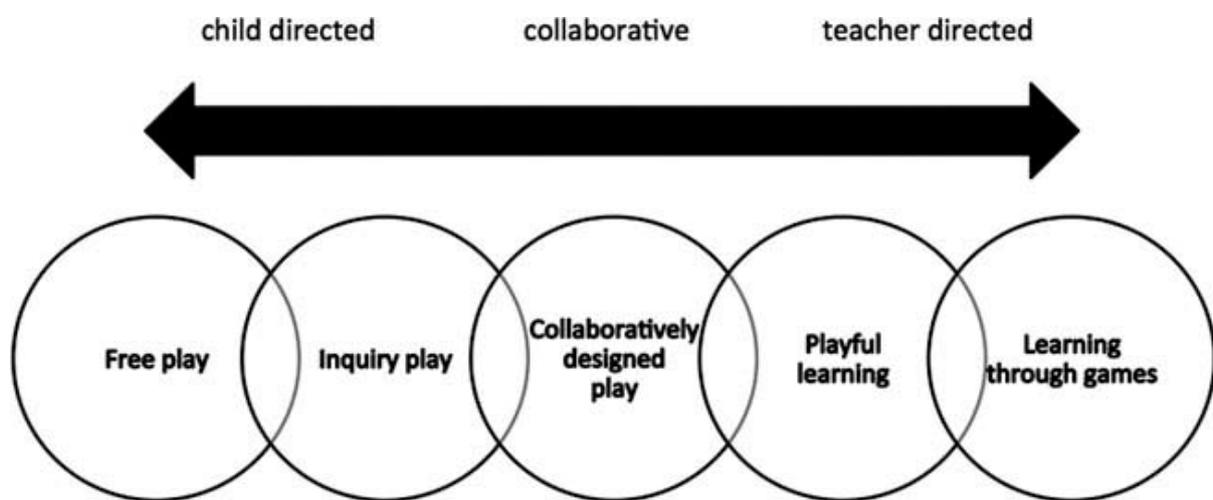
Interestingly Van der Aalsvoort et al. (2010) conducted a comparative study in which the beliefs of practising preschool teachers were compared with those of pre-service preschool teachers. A cross-cultural comparison of these groups was then undertaken between Germany and the Netherlands. Contrary to expectations, the practising teachers' observations were no more detailed or complex than those of the students, particularly the German students. The authors suggest that this may be as a result of changes to the teacher education courses in Germany which were aimed at improving the quality of preschool education there. The article discusses that the differences between countries might be explained in terms of the differences experienced in teacher education sites. It raises questions about the teacher training curriculum with regard to play since it appears to influence theoretical approaches to play as well as classroom practice.

Resolving the Dilemma of Play as Learning in Practice

Towards a more integrated play-based pedagogy

In an effort to resolve the underpinning dilemmas at the heart of early childhood pedagogy, where playing, learning and teaching tend to be viewed in practice as almost distinct and somewhat incompatible, there is a growing body of evidence which supports the pedagogical shift to something that is much more integrated and balanced in perspective, moving beyond the dichotomies of play and work, informal and formal and child-initiated versus teacher-directed (Walsh, 2017). Van Oers and Duikers (2013: 512) explain that many early years educationalists have expressed concern both about the child-centred approach which did not develop all aspects of children's learning and the teacher-driven approach that 'allegedly reduced children to trainable production factors in an economically driven society'. In this way it could be argued that there has been a subtle shift in conceptual boundaries moving beyond those of developmentally appropriate practice and more traditional models of knowledge transmission to more participatory learning theories (Hedges and Cullen, 2012) which makes the role of the teacher more explicit in the play experience (Walsh et al, 2017). It would appear therefore that the way forward in early childhood pedagogy, according to the literature base, is to bring the opposing cultures of play and instruction more closely together to meet children's ever-changing needs and

interests, ensuring a more nuanced understanding of the pedagogical practices of the adult inside of the children’s play experiences (Fleer, 2015). Pyle et al (2017) for example, drawing on their extensive scoping study on play-based pedagogies, recommend a need to move towards an integration or balance between different types of play in the classroom, in order to ensure that all areas of developmental and academic learning can be sustained in a play-based setting. Indeed Pyle and Danniels (2016) advocate a continuum of play-based experiences in the early years classroom which encompasses a range of play types. The following diagram explains this more fully:



(Figure 1: Continuum of play-based learning, Pyle and Danniels, 2016: 9)

By providing opportunities for this more expansive understanding of play as learning in practice, they argue that all aspects of children’s learning - personal, social, and academic - will be fully enhanced. Similarly Wood (2014) has been calling for some time for greater integration and expansion of modes of play to resolve the play-pedagogy interface. She emphasises the need for child-initiated play, adult-guided play and some degree of the more technicist version of play that we discussed earlier to become more fully blended, but with the recognition that children’s and adults’ goals may not always be fully aligned. Hedges (2014: 200) also advocates these more integrated pedagogies which afford opportunities for ‘child-initiated play, teacher-initiated pedagogical strategies and teacher attention into subjects such as literacy and numeracy’, the essence of such experiences being ‘mutually, enjoyable engagement in interesting and absorbing activities’.

Some researchers have gone one step further and have attempted to extrapolate what these integrated pedagogical models of early childhood might look like in practice. Hakkarainen et al. (2013) present an innovative approach to adults and children becoming genuine partners in the play scenario, building on a model known as 'play worlds'. Hakkarainen and her colleagues explain how a playworld is when children and adults role-play together using different narratives such as stories and fairy tales in an effort to create an imaginary world in the classroom context.

Drawing on the findings of their intervention, the researchers concluded how this joint play initiative in the narrative playworld context can be best realised in practice:

- In successful interventions the activity should be characterised as spontaneous, improvisational and creative;
- A coherent storyline should be developed through dialogic interactions with children, taking into account the children's ideas at all times;
- A dramatic tension should then be infused into the storyline to ensure enhanced motivation and challenge;
- Emotional involvement of all participants is an essential feature of the successful play intervention (Hakkarainen et al, 2013: 222).

As Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (2014:249) explain in such narrative scenarios "the joint play of adults and children creates collective higher mental functions".

Developmental pedagogy by Pramling-Samuelsson and Pramling (2014) provides another example of an integrated early childhood pedagogy where play and learning are fused with goal-directed teaching. Developmental pedagogy is understood as 'the conditions created by the teacher for supporting children's understanding of the world, as a question of qualitatively different meanings created in dialogue and interaction with others' (Pramling-Samuelsson and Pramling, 2016).

The key concepts which embrace this pedagogical approach are:

- Variation – Teachers need to provide children with opportunities to ‘develop a finer (i.e., more differentiated) understanding of a phenomenon, on the one hand, and to develop a ‘richer repertoire’ of different ways of understanding a particular phenomenon the other (Pramling-Samuelssoon and Pramling, 2016);
- Metacognition/meta level talk – the teacher and the children not only need to talk during the activity but also about the activity together (Pramling- Samuelsson and Pramling, 2014). The children therefore with the support and guidance of the teacher can come to a richer understanding and reflection of their play experiences;
- Discernment and Integration: while discernment is critical to children’s learning, where an attempt is made to focus children’s attention and make them aware of important aspects of their early learning. Yet Pramling-Samulesson and Pramling (2014: 176) argue that discernment needs to be related to a concept of integration which is about children being given the opportunity to make sense of what has been discerned and ‘reintegrating the features into a new wholeness which is more detailed than what it was initially’.
- The Playing Learning Child: there is no point trying to differentiate when children are playing or learning. Rather it is argued in a Developmental Pedagogy that ‘children ‘learn while playing and play while learning’ (Pramling Samulesson and Pramling (2014: 177). Children’s playing and learning are therefore considered inseparable.

Van Oers and Duikers (2013) propose another integrated pedagogical model of early years practice within Dutch settings, known as Development Education. In this model, like the others, the importance of the role of the adult in young children’s learning is acknowledged, within a play-based curriculum. Yet the latter is not prescriptive and is developed in close collaboration with the children in accordance with the interests of the children and those of the teacher in terms of his/her ambitions and targets. Learning and playing are deemed inseparable and with particular reference to role play, the participation of the adult within such an experience can lead to goal-directed learning which affords playing rich opportunities for educational learning. The role of the teacher in this play-based experience is principally envisaged as a ‘creative act’ in which the teacher infuses a degree of novelty into the existing playful situations (Van Oers and Duikers, 2013: 516). To ensure learning

within the context of the role play experience, the teacher is perceived to use the following strategies:

- Orienting – teachers explore the play experience and associated activities with the children and focus their attention on specific aspects or actions;
- Structuring and deepening – the teacher tries to set the scene with the children by introducing a problem and considering how it might be solved;
- Broadening – Extending the role play activity into other play areas to afford more extensive learning opportunities;
- Contributing – Responding to the children’s requests and adding in new resources to the play scenarios; and
- Reflecting – Encouragement on the part of the active teacher to rethink the play experience and make suggestions for improvement (Van Oers and Duikers, 2013: 518-519).

Interpreting the lessons learned from Early Years Enriched Curriculum, a play-based intervention in over 100 schools, over a period of almost 10 years, Walsh (2017) argues for a reconceptualisation of play as pedagogy known as Playful Teaching and Learning, informed by a pedagogical concept known as ‘playful structure’ (Walsh, McGuinness and Sproule, 2011) which ‘initiates and maintains a degree of playfulness in the learning experience while maintaining a degree of structure to ensure that effective learning takes place’ (Walsh , 2017: 15). Walsh (2017) maintains that ‘Playful Teaching and Learning’ rests on three key pillars of practice namely:

- Establishing caring yet nurturing relationships – a sensitive rapport is developed with every child and their learning dispositions are fully nurtured to ensure effective learning takes place in practice
- Enjoying playful yet skilful interaction – interactions require a degree of playfulness i.e. being intrinsically motivating, engaging and enjoyable, being light-hearted in tone ... and leaving some room for spontaneity (Walsh, 2017: 41). Yet they also need to be skilful to ensure high level learning takes place.

- Creating enjoyable yet challenging opportunities – experiences provided should be interesting and enjoyable whilst simultaneously highly stimulating and challenging, embedded in Barnett's (2005: 174) notion of hard fun – “fun without hardness is frivolity – hardness without fun is drudgery” (Walsh, 2017:44).

Towards appropriate professional development for a more integrated play-based pedagogy

This shift in thinking towards a more integrated play-based pedagogy in the field of play scholarship has major implications for the early childhood workforce (Hunter and Walsh, 2014, Van Oers and Duikers, 2013), yet researchers such as Ryan and Northey-Berg (2014) have been indicating that few studies have actually attended to what early years educators need to know to be able to enact an effective pedagogy of play in practice. The uncertainty which emerged from the review of research reported above on practising teachers' and pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices raises important questions about the role of teacher education and professional development providers in the process. Lord and McFarland (2010) argue that if the elementary teacher education curriculum fails to include content on play and practical experiences, then early years teachers will continue to have difficulty effectively translating play-based pedagogies into practice.

As noted by Sakelleriou and Rentzou (2011), pre-service teachers bring attitudes and perspectives to their initial teacher education (ITE) experience that have been developed throughout their own childhood experience of being taught. These beliefs are often tacit, have not been subject to reflection by the students and, in Sherwood and Reifel's (2013) assessment, are contradictory. These findings emphasise the importance of the students' ITE experiences in equipping them to support young children's learning through appropriately playful pedagogical approaches.

Existing evidence on teacher education and professional development courses suggest that when play is included in module content some degree of progress can be made. Jung and Jin (2014) investigated whether play-related coursework during ITE experiences predicted pre-service teachers' intention to adopt a play-based pedagogy. Findings indicate that

participating in courses about playful teaching and learning enhanced the pre-service teachers' perceptions of play and increased their intention to make provision for children's play in their practice. In a further study, Jung and Jin (2015) found that students who participated in course work focused on play had more positive perceptions of play than those who did not engage in such course work.

As pre-service teachers progressed from the early years of their degree programme through to the final years, there was a tendency for students' positive perceptions of play to weaken (Jung and Jin, 2015). The authors hypothesise that these students were possibly more aware of the complexities of play because of their deeper grasp of the concept. They also postulate that the senior students' beliefs about the place of play in the classroom are compromised by perceptions of curricular demands and play's incompatibility with standards based education. The senior students may well be taking into account their impending entry into the workforce in a way that students in the early stages of their college careers may not. However, Jung and Jin (2014) also found that this effect was mitigated by attendance at courses specifically focused on play. They suggest that in order to maintain strong beliefs about the importance of play in the ECE classroom among senior students, the students should have sustained access to courses focused on play into the final years of the degree programme.

Looking at the issue of the impact of training related to play more broadly, Hsu-Smith (2009) investigated the impact of a play-therapy training course on participants' beliefs about play and play therapy. The participants were not undergraduates, but were novices in terms of play therapy, defined as being '... concerned with the therapeutic relationship that develops between a child and a therapist through the context of toys and other play materials' (Hsu-Smith, 2009, 38). Initially, the participants' beliefs about play related to enjoyment, expressing feelings, pretend, social skills development, a reward and, to a much lesser extent, learning (Hsu-Smith, 2009). Engagement with the play therapy course had an impact on the participants' beliefs in that those beliefs became aligned with the discourse on play underpinning play therapy, but participants continued to find it difficult to conceptualise

play as a form of communication in itself or as a worthwhile learning context. The play-therapy context involved the teachers in one-to-one interactions with a child and the teachers reported that they believed that they had a better relationship with the focus child having engaged in the play therapy sessions as part of the coursework.

Similarly studies which focus directly on the effects of in-service training on practising teachers' beliefs and practices in children's play also tend to be generally positive in outcome. Although Vu et al (2015) found that educators' beliefs did not change after training as they generally had positive beliefs about the value for play for both young children's social and cognitive skill development, it was on their practice that the training seemed to impact most. After training observations revealed that teachers were more engaged with children during play and these roles were related to children's cognitive and social play categories. Drawing on their evidence, Vu et al (2015) argue that in a time of increasing academization of the early childhood years, it is vital that early childhood professionals engage in professional development opportunities about play in order to remind and inform them of the important role that play can have in the early childhood curriculum.

A joint professional development course in the Republic of Ireland, supporting both early years professionals (pre-school practitioners) and infant teachers (early years teachers in primary schools) in the implementation of the play-based curricular framework known as Aistear, also reported principally positive outcomes. Most of the participants commented on how the course had changed aspects of their daily practice in terms of the room layout, the use of more appropriate pedagogical strategies to ensure effective learning through play, greater engagement in reflective practice and the enhanced status of play in their setting/classroom context in terms of more time and value being ascribed to it (Walsh, McMillan and Doherty, 2013).

Many of the existing training programmes tend to 'instruct' pre-service and practising teachers about the importance of play experiences and how they might be best facilitated in

practice. Yet a very small number of studies, such as that conducted by Hakkarainen et al (2013), have gone one step further by providing an insight into the use of playful learning interventions as active learning sites in the content of teacher education and professional development courses (Ryan and Northery-Berg, 2014). More than 200 (second and third year BA level) Norwegian students from the Department of Teacher Education participated in Hakkarainen et al's seven year study which focused on three main areas of study: Pedagogy of Under Three-Year-Olds, Pedagogy of Play, and Guiding Learning in Early Childhood. Creative drama methods were also studied as a part of the coursework. Approximately 110 children aged between 0 to five years also took part in the voluntary play hub during the seven year period. Children came once a week accompanied by one adult family member and generally stayed for three or four hours. The play hub was located on the university campus and provided a variety of play experiences – construction blocks, home play; storytelling, reading and music; board games; meeting space and arts; handicraft and creative drama. Children were free to move around and move materials wherever they deemed necessary. Every week students attended a four-hour reflection and planning seminar and participated in three to four hours of practical work with children in the hub. Every second week students had a theoretically based lecture for two hours and they could spend one to two hours on planning and preparing for upcoming activities. Most of the students spent three semesters in the experimental site.

Analysis of the students' participation in narrative play interventions provides interesting insights into teacher education. Hakkarainen et al's (2013: 224) findings indicated that, by participating fully in the playful learning interventions, their students acquired a more in-depth understanding of the children's position and point of view and a greater capacity to adjust their educational plans to meet the needs and interests of the children involved. They also learned to use play as 'the source, context and medium for a child's learning and development' and become more adept at interacting purposefully in the children's play experiences.

A study by Vera and Geneser (2012) has also showcased, amongst the challenges pre-service teachers met in the process, the associated benefits they experienced from being obliged to incorporate play as part of their field-based assessments. The sample used for this study consisted of 50 teacher education students in a university in South Western USA. In the field-based course, the professors emphasised the importance of teaching lessons that contained playful components. Playful lessons were modelled and student teachers participated in playful activities during class time. For the purposes of their assessment, students were required to create, implement and reflect upon a lesson that integrated a playful activity into a particular content area. The researchers argue that as a result of playful learning being a requirement of their assessment task, the majority of the students learned greatly from the experience and reported mainly positive outcomes as a result of being obliged to implement play as learning in practice. Drawing on their findings, Vera and Geneser (2012: 11) anticipate that these pre-service teachers will recall the value of playful interactions as part of their field study assessment when they begin their teaching career and that they in turn will ensure a classroom context where 'learning and play are deemed synonymous'.

Having reviewed the existing yet sparse research base on teacher education and play as pedagogy, Ryan and Northery-Berg (2014:212) maintain that the time is ripe for teacher educators and professional development providers to be 'key actors' in the reconceptualisation of play as pedagogy, where playing, teaching and learning can fully come together in practice. In order for this to be realised in practice, they argue for the following to take place:

- 1) A coherent research agenda on teaching and play that fully examines what teachers understand about play, how they approach play in practice as well as the relationships between what teachers do in their classrooms and the associated child outcomes.

- 2) A coming together of play researchers, teacher educators, professional development providers and early childhood associations to consider and discuss what is needed 'to foreground teachers and teaching in play'.
- 3) Those whose job it is to educate the early childhood workforce must begin to rethink play as pedagogy within their own 'local sites of practice' (Ryan and Northery-Berg, 2014: 212).

Summary of Existing Literature Base

- Play as learning in practice is a problem space, accentuated by the present policy-practice interface and the lack of knowledge about what high quality play as learning looks like in practice;
- Pre-service and practising EC teachers' beliefs and practices about play as learning are somewhat concerning. Although play is perceived to be of value for children's social and emotional learning in particular, uncertainty about how to effectively translate play into practice to guarantee educational learning is very apparent;
- A shift in thinking towards a more integrated concept of playing, learning and teaching in practice has emerged within the evidence base to ensure a higher quality early learning experience in practice;
- A need to prepare both student and practising teachers to embrace these more integrated models of play as learning and teaching are required; and
- Professional development which immerses the 'student' into the playful learning experience appears to impact more positively on practice.

METHODOLOGY

Aims and Research Questions

It is against these theoretical issues and debates that the present small-scale research study was undertaken. Its overarching purpose was to attempt to resolve some of the lingering tensions involved in implementing play as learning in the context of Ireland by providing a form of professional development on a more integrated approach to playing, teaching and learning in the early years known as 'Playful Learning' to a group of student teachers in the final years of their degree programme both in Northern Ireland (Stranmillis University College, Belfast – SUC) and the Republic of Ireland (The Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin – CICE). The intention of the study was therefore to unpick the impact of such an intervention on the students' beliefs and practices about 'Playful Learning' in action. In essence therefore the overarching research question for the purposes of this study is: **Can student teachers' beliefs and practices about play be changed for the better by engaging in a series of intense master classes and a PL intervention and if so, in what ways?**

The focus of the research was guided by the following questions:

- *Pre-Intervention:*
 - What did student teachers consider important in the early years of education?
 - What did they understand by playful learning experiences in practice?
 - How did they perceive the role of the adult during the playful learning experiences?
- *Post Intervention*
 - What did the playful learning scenarios look like in practice?
 - What lessons did the student teachers learn from the PL experiences?
 - What, if any, were the challenges student teachers faced during the PL interventions?
 - Did the student teachers' perceptions about play as learning change in any way post-intervention?
 - What can Irish EY teacher educators in NI and ROI learn from this experience?

Data Collection Methods

The overarching aim and objectives for the study demanded not only qualitatively rich and illuminative data in the form of detailed reflective diaries, but also quantitative data in the form of questionnaire surveys pre- and post-intervention. In this way the study gathered an inclusive set of '*meta inferences*', drawn from the separate analyses of the multiple research methods, all unravelled through the researchers' interpretive lens. To address the above research questions three main stages of enquiry were conducted:

Stage 1: Pre-Intervention Phase:

The project began with the students completing a pre-intervention questionnaire survey (total number of students = 107 i.e. 76 in SUC and 31 in CICE) in an effort to evaluate baseline attitudes/approaches/ practices in regard to playful learning experiences (see appendix A for pre-intervention questionnaire).

Stage 2: Intervention Phase:

Students then attended two intense collaborative master classes on 'Playful Learning' – one at Stranmillis University College, Belfast and the other at Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin City University, Dublin. The focus of Master Class 1 at SUC was on infusing playfulness into the learning experience. Three interactive sessions took place across the day addressing the rationale for playful learning in practice, designing and implementing playful learning experiences and establishing playful and meaningful interactions. Master Class 2 at CICE focused more specifically on maximising the learning opportunities within the playful experience. The role of the adult in supporting and scaffolding the learning opportunities was addressed as well as the place of observation and assessment. Managing progression was also considered to enable appropriate challenge in practice. With the help of tutors and class teachers, students then planned a playful learning intervention for their chosen early years classroom which took place one morning per week for 6 weeks in total or at least twice a morning for a period of three weeks.

Stage 3: Post-Intervention Phase

To meet with the requirements of the research questions, an independent evaluation was undertaken during this phase, focusing in particular on five settings in NI and five in the ROI which were randomly chosen for further scrutiny. All students in these settings completed Reflective Practice Diaries (see appendix B for RPD template) to document and reflect on their Playful Learning Intervention. A post-intervention questionnaire (almost identical to the pre-intervention questionnaire) was completed by all students (n=107) (see appendix C) who participated in the Playful Learning intervention to gauge changes, if any, in attitudes and understanding.

Data Analysis

Reflective Practice Diaries, one-to one interviews and focus group discussions were subjected to thematic analysis. The questionnaire surveys were analysed descriptively and inferentially by means of SPSS and suitable statistical tests.

Ethics

Approval was sought for the project activities and research methods from the research and ethics committees in both institutions. In line with the ethical guidelines of both Universities, all participants (students and principals, class teachers, parents and children as part of the intervention) were informed in advance of the overarching purposes of the study, all had the right to act as voluntary participants, and they all were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were made aware of the right to withdraw at any stage of the study. There were no withdrawals throughout the study. As young children were involved as active participants in the intervention phase of this study, all efforts were made to explain to them the focus and purpose of the research and the role and requirements of the participants. In this study, child participants were facilitated to give their own fully informed consent and consent was also accessed from their legal guardian. Permission for students to take photographs was requested in writing from the legal guardians and verbally from the children.

PRE-INTERVENTION QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

A questionnaire survey was distributed prior to the intervention phase in an effort to audit students' knowledge, understandings and perceptions of playful learning. The findings are detailed within this chapter.

Background Context: Biographical Data

Table 1: Number of students per College					
		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	CICE	31	29.0	29.0	29.0
	SUC	76	71.0	71.0	100.0
	Total	107	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Gender Data in total					
		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Male	2	1.9	1.9	1.9
	Female	105	98.1	98.1	100.0
	Total	107	100.0	100.0	

		College		Total
		CICE	SUC	
Gender	Male	1	1	2
	Female	30	75	105
Total		31	76	107

Figure 2: Age of Participants

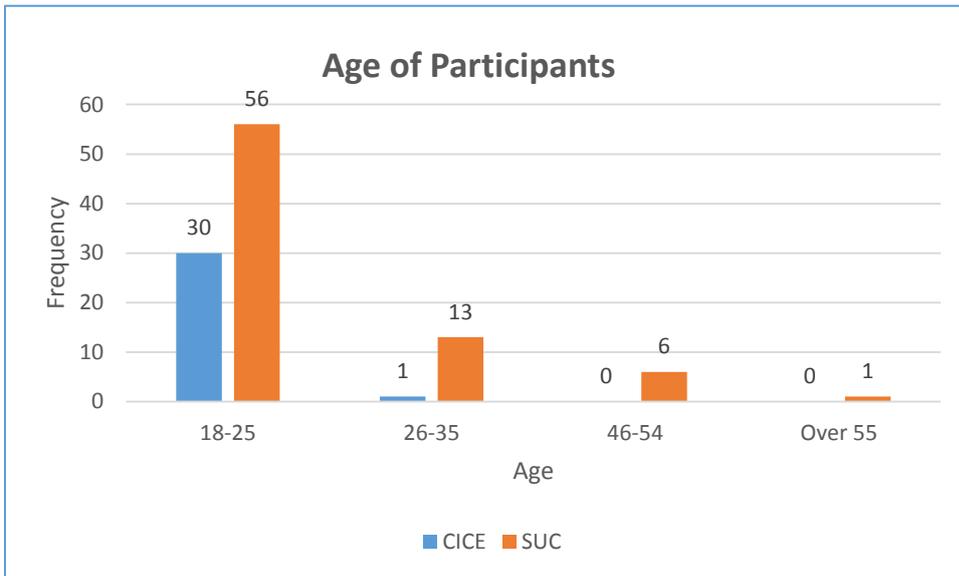
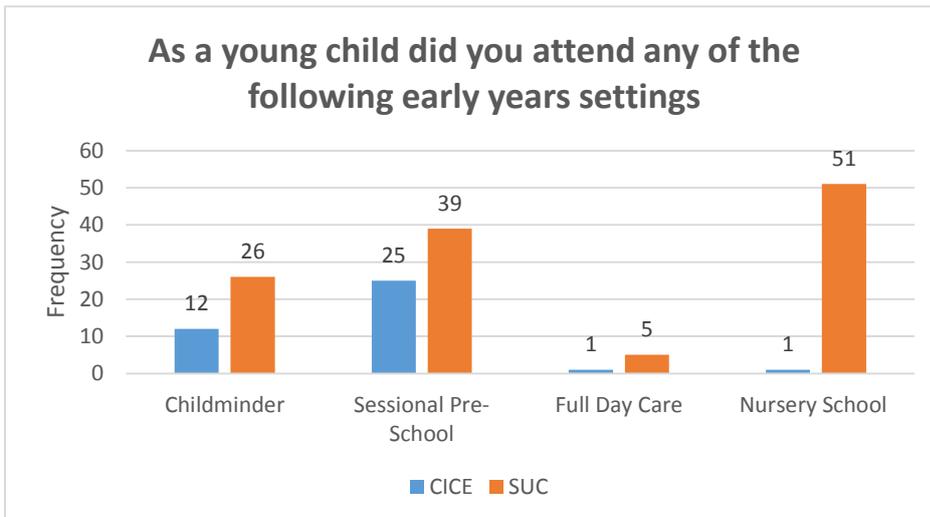


Figure 3: Early Years Setting attended as young child



Section One: What is Important in the Early Years Setting?

In an effort to determine what students deemed most important in the early years setting, the data were analysed and presented in the following ways:

- 80% or more of student population who deemed the item very important/essential
- 60% or more of student body who deemed the item very important/essential
- Less than 60% of the student body who deemed the item very important/essential and a sizeable proportion of students who considered the item only to have some importance or no importance at all.

The descriptive analysis highlights a number of items which had majority responses of approximately 80% or greater in the very important/essential grouping, indicating what students perceived to be of most importance in the early years setting. These items can be classified into two distinct but inter-related categories namely – ‘play’ and ‘soft curricular experiences’.

The items in the ‘play opportunities’ category and the associated student responses are detailed in Table 4, highlighting the high level of importance the students as a whole attribute to play type activities both indoors and out within the early years setting, affording young children opportunities to play freely and learn accordingly:

Item	% (Very Imp/ Ess. grouping)	Count	Total Response
Use play as a learning tool	98%	105	107
Encourage children to play outdoors	95%	101	106
Encourage children to participate in imaginative play	95%	100	106
Provide sand tray with a range of items e.g. spades, funnels, cups etc.	80%	85	107
Provide water play with a range of items (cups, floating and sinking items, dye)	82%	87	107

Provide small manipulable items e.g. beads to string, small lego	86%	91	106
Provide play materials(different types of papers, large card boxes, pots and pans etc.)	88%	95	107
Make space for children to move and play freely	95%	102	107
Provide materials for construction	87%	93	107

Table 4: Items and student response for the 'Play Opportunities' Category

The 'Soft Curricular Experiences' category, consisted of items associated with the more light-hearted aspects of the curriculum such as music, books, stories and rhymes, physical activities and sensory experiences. Table 5 indicates that the students as a group also placed much importance on these items for an early years setting/classroom.

Item	% (very impt/ essential grouping)	Count	Total Response
Plan for children to do sensory activities	95%	102	107
Engage in songs and rhymes playfully	86%	91	106
Provide music and opportunities for dance	82%	87	106
Use books and pictures to tell stories	90%	95	106
Encourage children to engage with books	89%	95	107
Use props to encourage physical movement	87%	93	107

Table 5: Items and student response for the 'Soft Curricular Experiences' category

The next grouping still reveals a majority response on the part of the students (60%-80%) in terms of the individual item's importance being very high or essential for an early year setting but overall the majority is slightly less pronounced and the frequency of responses within other groupings such as 'important' and 'some to no importance' are also slightly more sizeable. Many of the items in this grouping tend to be associated with more formal teaching type experiences in the early years and so for this reason, this collection of items has been classified as 'Formal Teaching' as detailed in Table 6:

Item	Very Imp/ Ess	Imp	Some/no Imp	Total Response
Teach children to write letters	60% n= 63	19% n=20	22% n=23	106
Teach early number concepts	74% n=78	22% n=23	5% n=5	106
Teach children to write numbers	66% n= 70	18% n= 19	16% n=17	106
Teach children to read	74% n=77	19% n=20	8% n= 8	105

Table 6: Items and student response for the 'Formal Teaching' category

Therefore despite the high level of emphasis placed by the students on play-related activities, a majority still considered the more formal instruction tasks of literacy and numeracy to play an important role in an early years classroom also. Other items in this grouping are more associated with literacy and numeracy type experiences within play and for this reason the grouping is known as 'Lang, Lit and Num in play'. As above a majority of the students saw these items of major importance in the early years classroom, but sizeable minorities only rated the items as important or having only some to no importance as detailed in Table 7.

Item	Very Imp/ Ess	Imp	Some/no Imp	Total Response
Encourage children to use books as props during their play	71% n=74	20% n=21	10% n=19	105
Sing number songs and play number games	76% n=80	24% n=25	1% n=1	106
Encourage children to make marks on surface (paper, easel, board) with various writing implements e.g. chalk, crayon, paint brush	66% n=70	24% n=25	11% n= 12	107
Provide small world toys e.g. garage, farm sets vehicle small people	78% n= 83	18% n=19	5% n=5	107

Table 7: Items and student response for the 'Lang, Lit and Num in Play' category

The remaining items present a less clear picture where the overall level of agreement between students was much less in evidence (less than 60% of a majority and sizeable numbers of minorities). These items tend to be associated with the completion of worksheets, formal written type, sedentary tasks and for this reason the grouping is known as ‘sedentary tasks’ and details of items and student responses are included in Table 8:

Item	Very Imp/Ess	Imp	Some/no Imp	Total Response
Encourage children to complete worksheets to enhance lit. and num.	19% n= 20	39% n=41`	43% n=45	106
Provide opportunities for colouring in pictures	28% n=30	29% n=31	43% n=47	107
Set homework for children	16% n= 17	30% n= 32	54% n=57	106
Encourage children to remain at their own table and chair	10% n=11	34% n=35	54% n= 58	104

Table 8: Items and student response for the ‘Sedentary Tasks’ category

With regard to the use of technology in the early years classrooms, the student body as a whole appeared quite uncertain. Although 28% of the students (n= 29) considered the use of iPads, computers and interactive whiteboards to be very important or essential in an early years classroom, 42% (n=44) considered them only to be important and a sizeable minority of students (31%, n= 33) viewed them as having only some or no importance at all.

Section 2: Perceptions on Play and Playful Learning Experiences

The descriptive information highlights a number of items which had majority responses of approximately 70% or greater. These items can be categorised into key areas which represent definite positions being taken by the students as a group, although in some instances the majorities were mitigated by small but significant minorities of about 25% or

less who were undecided or opposed to this point of view. The key areas into which these items fall are:

- Learning potential and children's play
- The development of the whole child
- Opportunities afforded within the play experience
- Play, curriculum, challenge and educational value
- Child-initiation versus teacher-direction in play-like experiences
- Confidence to translate play effectively into practice

Learning potential and children's play

There was definite agreement amongst the student body both North and South that there is learning potential within play. All students strongly agreed that children can have significant learning experiences during play and almost all of the students (99%, n=106) were of the opinion that play should have a central place in children's learning. It was no surprise therefore that 96% of the students (n=102) rejected the view that play is about settling the children into the school day and that children only learn when the works begins. A large majority of respondents (94%, n=100) was also negatively disposed to the idea that play is all about fun and not about learning. Approximately 94% rejected the notion that children only learn from formal, adult-led activities and 86% (n=92) of the students disagreed that children learn more effectively by direct teaching than through play.

The whole child and children's play

Almost all of the respondents (99%, n= 105) also seemed to be of the opinion that with young children, it is important to consider physical, emotional, social and cognitive learning together. Many of the students (95%) agreed that play contributes to children's holistic development, as indicated by their overarching negative response to the statements 'play has little impact on children's intellectual development' (94%) and 'early years experience should focus directly on literacy and numeracy' (86%). Although still a majority response, there was slightly less agreement by the students (68%, n= 71) on the statement: 'the early years is all about the development of children's learning dispositions and social and

emotional well-being'. A sizeable minority of students (22%, n=23) expressed their uncertainty in these instance, perhaps showing some degree of concern with the lack of reference to cognitive development within the statement.

Opportunities afforded within the play experience

The frequencies of responses also indicated that students (96%, n=87) were strongly in agreement that a variety of experiences can be afforded throughout play, indicated by their large majority response to the statement: 'playful experiences can be more than just sand and water' (item 70). Many students also seemed to be of the opinion that other opportunities were afforded to the teacher during play-type experiences. For example 93% (n=99) of the students agreed that 'play provides an opportunity for adults to assess children's development' (item 75); whilst a large majority (93%, n=99) was also in agreement that 'during play it is important to record observations about the children's learning' (item 79).

Play, curriculum, challenge and educational value

There seemed to be agreement amongst the students (90%) that the 'curriculum could be delivered through the medium of play' (item 83), where a majority of students (74%) disagreed with the viewpoint that 'subject knowledge has no place in an early years setting' (item 80). Similarly there was a perception amongst the student body (71%) that 'all play has educational value' (item 67), with the majority of students (71%) disagreeing with the notion that 'adult-led activities are more stimulating and challenging than play activities' (item 68). Likewise a large majority of respondents (96%) disagreed with the idea that the curriculum is busy enough without adding play. However there was less agreement in evidence when students commented on the statement 'there is too little time spent on play'. Although a small majority agreed with this viewpoint (52%, n=55), 25% (n= 26) disagreed and a further 24% of students (n=25) were unsure. Similar uncertainty was in evidence when students responded to the statement 'children can get bored in play' – 44% (n=47) agreed, 32% (n=34) disagreed and a further 24% (n=25) were unsure. This appeared also to be the case for item 59: 'children always challenge themselves within play', with 39%

(n=41) of students agreeing, 30% (n=32) disagreeing and 31% (n=33) expressing uncertainty. There was also disparity in their views when commenting on item 77: 'Play does not underpin future educational success'. Although a slight majority disagreed with the statement (48%, n=51), 26% agreed (n=29) and 25% (n=26) of students stated that they were unsure how to respond.

Child-initiation and teacher direction in play-like experiences

The students tended to favour more child-led practice as opposed to teacher-direction in the play space, yet there was a sizeable degree of ambiguity within these responses, in the main. The majority of respondents (74%, n=77) disagreed with the view that play activities should be adult-directed (item 64) and although the majority was less pronounced, 64% of students (n= 68) agreed that play should be child-led/child-initiated (item 58), with sizeable minorities who were either unsure (23%, n=24) or who were opposed to this viewpoint (13%, n=14). This was also the case for item 53: 'during play, the teacher should always be interacting with the children'. Whilst the majority of responses (64%, n=69) disagreed with this statement, highlighting students' tendency to favour more child-initiated practice, a sizeable minority agreed (22%, n= 24) and 13% (n=14) expressed uncertainty. Likewise even less agreement was in evidence when students were asked to respond to the statement: 'all adult intervention in children's play enhances learning' (item 55). 48% (n=72) of the students disagreed with the statement, 28% agreed (n=29) and 26% (n=27) stated that they were unsure. It could be argued therefore that these responses are somewhat suggestive of the notion that students are tentatively in favour of greater integration between child-led and teacher-led activity for young children. 80% of the students (n=85) agreed with the idea that there should be an equal mix of child –initiated and adult-initiated activities (item 69) within the early years experience and a large majority (90%, n=95) expressed agreement with the idea that playing, learning and teaching should be fully synchronised (item 82).

Confidence to translate play effectively into practice

Regarding the students' own level of confidence in translating play into practice, a large majority (95%, n= 101) responded positively to the statement: 'I enjoy play-based learning'

(item 46) and 72% (n=76) disagreed with the statement 'play is good in theory but difficult to put into practice' (item 63). A sizeable minority of the students (21%, n=22) expressed uncertainty about this latter statement however, suggesting some insecurities in implementing play into practice on some students' part.

Disagreement between the Respondents

In contrast to this high level of agreement in the main, some of the items revealed a split in opinion among the respondents (10% or less of a difference between those who are positively and negatively disposed to an item) or sizeable 'undecided' groupings of 30% or more of the sample. These items tended to fall into two key areas:

- Choice in children's learning; and
- The impact of play on children's learning.

Choice in children's learning

There was a high degree of dissonance in students' responses when commenting on the level of choice and independence children should experience in the early years environment. In response to the item 'too much choice in children's play hinders learning' (item 60), 46% of the sample (n= 49) were unsure with the remaining responses being almost equally divided between those agreeing (23%, n=24) and disagreeing (31%, n=33). Item 61 also attracted quite an ambiguous response, 37% (n=40) expressing uncertainty with the statement that 'children are best left to play by themselves' with 52% (n=55) disagreeing and a further 11% (n=12) agreeing. This was also the case for item 73: 'children should be asked to complete specific tasks during play' – with 45% (n=48) of students disagreeing, 23% (n=25) agreeing 32% (n=34) expressing uncertainty. Again this was the case for item 72, 52% (n=53) agreed with the statement 'following children's interests results in a haphazard approach to both planning and play', 34% (n= 35) were unsure with 14% (n=15) agreeing with the statement.

The impact of play on children's learning

Although earlier analysis showcased how students as a group seemed to associate children's play with learning, the distribution of responses relating to the specific impact play has on learning generated more ambiguous responses. For example when confronted with the statement: 'in school, children always learn when they play' (item 51), 48% (n= 51) of the sample agreed, 16% (n=15) disagreed and 36%, (n=38) were unsure. An almost identical response was given to item 71: 'children may not always learn when they play', 47% (n=50) of the students agreeing, 23% (n=25) disagreeing and 30% (n=32) unsure. Item 62 also attracted an ambiguous response, a slim majority (59%, n=62) disagreeing with the statement 'play impacts more on children's social rather than cognitive development', 33% (n=35) undecided and 9% (n=10) in agreement. This ambiguity was also reflected in the frequency of response given to item 66 'it is difficult to know what children are learning as they play' a slim majority (56%, n=59) disagreeing, compared with 18% (n=19) who agreed and a further 26% (n=28) who were undecided.

Section 3: Perceptions of the Role of the Adult during Playful Experiences

Similar classifications were used as for the previous sections to group the overarching frequency of responses. All those items with 70% or more agreement were categorised into the following key areas, but as before, in some instances the majorities were mitigated by small but significant minorities of about 25% or less who were undecided or opposed to this point of view. The key areas into which these items fall are:

- The importance of the role of the adult during playful experiences
- The differing roles that can be adopted by the adult during playful experiences

The importance of the role of the adult during playful experiences

There appeared to be a general consensus across the body of students that the adult had an important role in the children's play experiences as evidenced by their responses to the following items:

Table 9: Perceptions on the importance of the role of the adult during play

Item No.	Definition	%			
		A	U	D	M
88	Play is the child's world and there is no place for adults	3	5	93	1
89	Adults always interrupt the flow of play	2	18	81	1
90	When teachers engage skilfully in children's play the quality of the learning experience is enhanced	91	14	6	2
96	Practitioners can challenge thinking when playing with children	80	17	3	3

Yet there appeared to be less consensus amongst the student body when considering whether all adult intervention in children's play is of importance as evidenced in their response to item 97: 'adult intervention in play always promotes learning'. 53% (n=55) of the sample disagreed, 23% (n=24) were unsure and a quarter of the sample (25%, n=26) actually agreed, showing a lack of awareness about the importance of quality in teachers' interactions.

The Differing Roles that can be adopted by the Adult during Playful Experiences

Whilst the students tended to be in agreement that the adult could have an important role to play in children's play, they always appeared to have quite strong beliefs about the type of roles teachers should adopt when interacting with children. A large majority of students (92%, n=103) were of the opinion that 'teachers can be players too in children's imaginary play' (item 87) and many students (84%, n=90) disagreed with the notion that 'the role of the adult in play is always managerial' (item 95). Instead the majority (81%, n=85) were of the opinion that 'adult intervention in play needs to be skilful if children's understanding is to be enhanced' (item 98) and almost all students (95%, n=101) believe 'skilful interactions during play can bring children's experiences to new heights'. Skilful in their opinion did not however mean to simply take over or direct the children's play as evidenced in their majority negative response (82%, n=86) to item 99: 'play only results in learning when the adult directs the play experience', nor did it simply mean asking questions of the children as evidenced by the students' overall majority negative response (62%, n=77) to item 94 'adults challenge the children's learning only when asking the children questions during play'. Indeed students' level of disagreement (73%, n=77) with the statement: 'during play

teachers need to focus solely on children's cognitive learning' (item 100), suggests that in the main, students believe that skilful interactions in play need to encourage all types of learning and development. There was no surprise therefore that most of the students (88%, n=93) were of the opinion that 'children should be free to make their own choices during play' (item 105) but with the support of an adept playful teacher as indicated by their majority response (89%, n=94) to item 103 'an early years teacher must know how to play'. There was slightly less agreement however, when students were asked to respond to item 102: 'teachers must structure the play experience to ensure learning takes place', 67% (n=69) agreeing, 22% (n=23) disagreeing and 12% (n=12) expressing a degree of indecision. Yet the students appeared less secure in their responses when they were asked to comment on item 85: 'to ensure effective learning the teacher must always follow the children's lead', 50% (n=52) of the sample agreeing with this statement, 30% (n=32) disagreeing and 21% (n=22) of the students expressing uncertainty. Similarly when they were confronted with item 86: 'the role of the teacher in children's play is all about affording children appropriate resources', 49% (n=52) of students disagreed, 33% (n=35) agreed and 19% (n=20) appeared unsure. This seemed also to be the case when students responded to item 93: 'play provides teachers with the opportunity to listen to children read', with 44% (n=47) agreeing, 32% (n=34) disagreeing and almost one quarter (24%, n=26) of the students expressing uncertainty. A similar ambiguous response was given to the statement: 'during play the role of the adult is to observe and assess children's learning' (item 92). Despite a slim majority (52%, n= 55) agreeing, 23% (n=24) disagreed and a sizeable proportion of the sample (26%, n= 27) were unsure.

There were only three items that fell into the final classification with 10% or less of a difference between those who are positively and negatively disposed to an item or sizeable 'undecided' groupings of 30% or more of the sample. The frequency of responses to item 91: 'to ensure effective playful interactions, the teacher's and children's intentions must be similar' revealed a high level of uncertainty amongst the student body. 33% (n=35) stated that they were unsure, 45% (n=47) agreed and 23% (n=24) disagreed. This level of uncertainty was also reiterated in item 101: children can be provided with too much choice

in children's play'. A slim majority agreed with the statement, 19% disagreed (n=20) and sizeable groupings (32%, n=34) were unsure.

In fact there was a complete split in opinion amongst the students when confronted with the statement: 'to deliver a play-based pedagogy effectively, you must be highly educated', 34% agreeing (n=37), 33% (n=35) disagreeing and 33% (n=35) stating that they were unsure. Yet this response was in sharp contrast to a related item associated with play and teacher status: 'a play-based curriculum de-professionalises the role of the teacher' with a large majority (86%, n=90) of the students disagreeing with this statement.

Summary

- A large majority of the sample of students who completed the pre-intervention questionnaire appeared to highly value play and soft curricular learning experiences such as books, stories and rhymes for the early years setting;
- Although the majority was slightly less pronounced, formal instruction in the form of teaching aspects of literacy and numeracy was also deemed to be of much importance in an early years setting, as was some degree of infusing aspects of language, literacy and numeracy in children's play;
- There was less agreement about the place of sedentary tasks and the use of technology in the early years setting;
- A large majority of the students perceived play to be highly valuable for children's learning and saw play and the curriculum as closely linked.
- There was less consensus around the importance of challenge in play and the need for educational value within play;
- Although in the main they seemed to be in favour of greater integration between child-led and teacher-led activities, some insecurities were expressed regarding their own confidence to put quality play into practice;
- Less consensus was in evidence around offering children choice in their playful learning experiences, the role of the adult in children's play and the actual impact of play on children's learning.

INTERVENTION PHASE: PLAYFUL LEARNING IN PRACTICE FINDINGS

Focus of the Intervention

As aforementioned the overarching aim of the professional development experience was to attempt to resolve the dilemma of play as learning in practice by developing students' competence and confidence in their ability to guarantee educational value within their playful activities in an early years context, while still maintaining a high level of children's interest, confidence and overall well-being. It also aimed to provide students with the opportunity to examine and reflect on their role as teachers supporting young children's learning and development within playful experiences. As part of the professional development experience, students were obliged to spend an allocated period of time i.e. at least one morning per week for a period of 6 weeks or similarly two mornings per week for a period of three weeks in a suitable early years setting to undertake their 'Playful Learning' intervention. The purpose of the intervention is for the student to plan in association with their class teacher/EY practitioner and carry out a series of playful learning experiences in line with the children's needs and interests as well as the curricular content. This intervention could focus on one or more play areas such as the imaginative play area, construction, outdoors or a particular learning experience such as story time, music and drama, mathematics etc. It was emphasised that before a student would embark upon their playful learning intervention, they spend time observing and conversing with the teacher/practitioner about an area/areas of play or a learning experience that the children have not been as motivated to take part in and which could be developed to enhance the overall quality in practice.

A sample of the PL interventions that were put into practice are detailed below:

Case Study 1: People Who Help Us!

This Playful Learning (PL) Intervention took place in a Year 2 class with a large number of low-achieving children, aged 5-6 years. The focus of the intervention was the development of knowledge, skills and understanding in the areas of Numeracy, Literacy and the World Around Us as part of the thematic unit, 'People Who Help Us'. This was done through

planning for a five session progression of socio-dramatic play in the 'Doctor's Surgery', in conjunction with other play areas. Each play session began with a video message from Jane the Puppet, with whom the children were familiar, to act as a stimulus for the playful learning experience. In their first encounter with Jane on video, she had gone to her local doctor's surgery (the practice that many of the school children attended) as she was feeling poorly and met with her local GP. The children then had the opportunity to play in their own Doctor's Surgery, using uniforms to dress up, and real medical instruments such as a stethoscope, blood pressure monitor and syringes. Jane, the puppet, went on a series of different medical adventures such as meeting a paramedic after her granny, (another puppet) fell down the stairs, going on a visit with her mother to the local pharmacy and then being interviewed by a BBC news reporter as the NHS had just announced that their local doctor's surgery was going to be closed. Such experiences were all re-enacted in the playful learning space. For example, the water tray was filled with a variety of medicine bottles and marbles for tablets, acting as the pharmacy and an ambulance and simple stretchers were created in the Junk Art area. Bandages and an X-Ray machine were added to the doctor's surgery along with a reception area which facilitated the writing of prescriptions.

During each playful learning session, the student was involved in the experience in several ways acting as a resource-maker, questioner, player, observer, assessor and co-player which culminated in her acting as the news reporter and interviewing the children about the possible closure of their local doctor's surgery.

Case Study 2: I'm an Elf, Help Me Out Here!

The topic for this playful learning intervention was the theme of Christmas with a focus on helping the Elves to resolve a series of problems, hence the title: I'm an Elf, help me out here! This intervention was based on sensory experiences with aspects of numeracy for a small group of children in a primary 1 and 2 (4-6 year olds) severe learning disability setting. The PL intervention focused on two Elves - Dash and Berry - who needed the children's help to ensure that all the toys are ready for Christmas Eve. The initial activity involved the children getting the opportunity to make their own 'Very Important Elf' medal to allow them to access Santa's workshop, using salt dough. This experience afforded the children the

opportunity to engage in diligent measuring using a number of cups when making the dough as well as all the different texture and tactile experiences. Each PL session began with a similar narrative about the two Elves which resulted in them posing a series of problems for the children to attempt to solve e.g. mending a sack full of toys which got broken when Dash and Berry fell into an ice crater full of slimy slushy snow. The children were then presented with a water tray full of slush and the broken toys were hidden within, which they had to try and find and put together. On another occasion Dash and Berry sent the children a box full of different Christmas decorations and the children had to explore them using their senses. Dash and Berry then sent the children a letter which led into a sensory story. The letter explained that Dash and Berry had got lost in the snow and they were hoping that the children could make some music to help them find their way back. Jangling bells were used to represent the reindeer and Santa's sleigh, a feather duster was used for the wind, flour and glitter represented the snow and chimes represented the magic coming from Santa's workshop. Final experiences were associated with a celebration requested by the elves for the children's help with making the toys and saving Christmas. As part of the celebration children explored Santa's candy cave, made up of trays of red, green and white dyed rice smelling of peppermint with some crushed candy canes and some wrapped candy canes. They also made gingerbread men together and really enjoyed the eating afterwards. A wonderful experience for all involved including the student!

Case Study 3: On the Farm

This student focused on the topic of the Farm for her Playful Learning intervention with a Junior Infants class (4-5 year old children). She provided five different play areas based around different resource types, but for the purposes of her reflections, she focused on three of those play areas: the farm shop for socio-dramatic play, junk art with recyclable materials and small world farm animals, and a floor construction play area with shoeboxes and small world farm animals (the shoeboxes and lids were labelled with matching pictures of farm animals). The student constantly monitored the children's engagement with the resources through observation, and she added to the resources as the play developed. For example, in the farm shop area, she added a soil box to extend the children's interest in the vegetables available for sale in the shop. She also planned to extend it further by adding a

'milking station' (a glove filled with white liquid) following a lesson on milk at Geography time and a vet's surgery as the children had prior experience of the vet as a topic. At the junk art play area, the student provided four types of materials sorted into labelled boxes: cardboard cylinders, cuboid boxes, fruit/vegetable nets and plastic food trays. While leaving it to the children to decide what to do with the materials, she also provided small world farm animals to carry the topic into the children's play. At the construction play area, the student had provided seven sets of shoeboxes, each set consisting of a large, a medium and a small shoebox fitted into each other and all similarly labelled with pictures of farm animals to encourage sorting and matching as well as promoting engagement with the farm topic. She had also provided small world farm animals in the hope of encouraging the children to develop play narratives on the topic of the farm.

Case Study 4: At the Zoo

This student's topic for the duration of her Playful Learning Intervention with a Junior Infants class (4-5 year olds), was the Zoo, and the play areas she focused on in particular were the playdough area, table top small-world construction and junk art. This student was less focused on provision of resources than on her own interactions with the children during play, and the children's interactions with each other during play. Nonetheless, she had provided two batches of home-made soft playdough in different colours along with open-ended accessories such as dried pasta shapes and straws cut to different lengths. For the table-top construction play, the children had access to sets of small blocks, zoo animal sets and hobby pipe cleaners. Interestingly, the student observed that the girls in her class were less interested in this play area than other in other play opportunities in the classroom. For junk art play, the materials made available by the student were categorized as cardboard, things that roll, and plastic containers. This student did not include any additional materials that might connect the junk art materials to the topic of the zoo, and was focused instead on the skills the children needed to pursue their own interests.

Case Study 5: the Fruit and Vegetable Shop

In this Playful Learning intervention in a primary one/two composite class, the student included the children within the planning process, and on listening to their voices, she turned the imaginative play area into a fruit and vegetable shop, with the help of 'Sally the puppet', who owned the store. Real fruit and veg were in abundance and a cash register with real money was also included to make the whole experience more authentic. As the intervention progressed the student added real knives to allow the children to cut up the fruit and engage in a range of sensory experiences. The children then received a video phone call from Sally, who explained that she had heard that the children were having so much fun and had been working so hard in her fruit and vegetable shop that she decided to open a café too. Sally also explained to the children that she needed them to run the new café, setting the table, taking orders and serving the customers, as she would be going on holiday for a few weeks. The children then felt they had a real role to play during their playtime by helping out Sally, giving them a sense of ownership and value. The PL intervention culminated with Sally the puppet, having had a camera inserted whilst away on holiday, showing the children a storyboard of all the different experiences they had had during their PL intervention.

Reflective Practice Diaries (RPDs)

The ten students (5 in NI and 5 in ROI) who had been randomly selected to be part of the evaluation cohort were required within their RPD to reflect on their own professional learning and children's learning during the playful learning intervention.

Professional Learning

An analysis of their reflections on their own professional learning about playful learning in practice are categorised across three main categories namely:

- The importance of a **playful** stimulus
- The need for meaningful **participation**
- The ability to afford opportunities for **progression**

The importance of a playful stimulus

The importance of providing a playful stimulus for the play-based learning experience was a dominant message within the students' reflections on their professional learning. A playful stimulus, according to the students, might have been a form of narrative such as a story, a letter, a video snapshot or the use of a puppet as a means of providing a context for the playful learning intervention, affording the children opportunities to make connections between the different play episodes from week to week and which they believed, ensured a more focused and higher level of play activity.

“ Providing children with the playful context of the story – Whatever Next and baby bear’s letters provided children with a focused experience to generate playful ideas and gave them the confidence and support to explore and expand on their vocabulary” (Student 10).

“As a professional, I learnt that the children responded well to the playful context that was set in the video of the puppet and the use of their local doctor’s surgery. It motivated them to play in the role play area and most children were eager to participate in the play activities and displayed a degree of curiosity and inquisitiveness after watching the video and interacting with the puppet” (Student 3).

“The use of a stimulus such as the Elves and Shoemaker story, was very effective when implementing a theme. It gave the children different ideas. I observed the children making a range of different play things at the playdough station based on the events of the books e.g. clothes for the Elves, shoe factories, gifts for the Elves and different pairs of shoes”(Student 5).

“As a professional, I learnt that using a puppet to introduce my playful intervention, highly engaged the children, as they wanted to know about the puppet, and why they had visited their class. I also learnt that creating a scenario, where the puppet has to go away and needs the children’s help, also stimulates and captures the children’s attention, as they want to know more about what their role is during their play. As an early years practitioner, I have also learnt that using a video message, and creating a climax and problem that fully involves the children, engages the children throughout their play, and motivates them to solve the problem, and as a result, extending their learning further” (Student 3).

Many of the students also reflected upon the playfulness and affordances of the resources as a stimulus for children’s learning:

“With regards to the playdough station this week, I learned that the little extras that you can include as a teacher can enhance the children’s learning. At the station I included buttons, pasta and cutting tools along with the playdough. These extra playful materials promoted the children’s creativity as they incorporated them in their work” (Student 7).

“Adding an original resource to the playdough – something that was a little different, kept the children really engaged and interested” (Student 1).

Providing real resources such as a stethoscope, blood pressure monitor and syringes, as well as progressing the play each week, meant that they were exciting and interesting to see. This created a highly motivated environment for children which stimulated high quality play” (Student 3)

“I’ve learnt that the children’s play does not always have to be something extremely elaborate or over the top, as I’ve learnt that using realistic and authentic resources help to engage and encourage them to learn more within their play, in comparison to a play activity, with lots of plastic resources that the children are not interested in” (Student 1).

“In this era which is highly influenced by technology, I think that it is very important that children experience play with rich concrete materials that requires them to use their own imagination and creativity” (Student 5).

Indeed as student 6 commented:

“I have learned the value of making all experiences playful as opposed to solely the main play activities. The children gave greater responses and had a deeper understanding as to what they were being asked when the plenaries were made more playful, such as when the children had to wear the ‘thinking cap,’ or roll the ‘ice cube.’”

The need for meaningful participation

Student reflections also emphasised the need for meaningful participation in children’s playful learning experiences which primarily focused on three aspects:

Teacher modelling: All participants identified teacher modelling as a strategy that allowed them to bring teaching into the playful experiences without being overly directed with the children. There were slightly different nuances in the participants’ underlying purpose in teacher modelling: Student 5 saw teacher modelling as a way of gently encouraging the

children to actually produce an artefact that reflected the 'On the Farm' theme; Student 8 mentions modelling in the context of using it to support a child in developing the language associated with playdough, and thereby to enhance the child's confidence; Student 1 planned to model playing in the sand to encourage more children to engage with the material. As summed up by student 2:

"This experience has taught me that the professional plays a significant role in modelling, for example, several children were using the till and looking at the price tags on the food items, and were trying to figure out how much they cost, when I carefully intervened and showed the children how to use the coins, how much each item would cost and how you can add two items to get an overall price. As a result of showing the children the correct amounts and how to handle the money, the children began to develop their own early mathematical experiences, and develop their own understanding of money. Without the adult intervening, the children might not have learnt how to do so, therefore, the adult plays a significant role scaffolding and modelling within the children's play".

In fact student 3 made a very interesting reflection about the significance of child modelling in playful experiences also: "...children can teach and learn from each other. Whilst I was able to support the children's learning and help them decide how they could discover which materials were waterproof, the most valuable lesson came from one of the pupils themselves'.

Teacher-in-role: Student 4 reflected more widely on pedagogical interactions and explicitly considered teacher-in-role in the socio-dramatic play area as a way of engaging meaningfully with the children through play. She had noted that the children in her class found socio-dramatic play challenging, and she responded by entering the role play to support the play narrative and to encourage the children's involvement. Other examples of the teacher-in-role included student 3 taking on the role of the patient in the hospital to encourage the development of children's numeracy skills, reminding them to count the tablets before handing them over to the patient; she also acted as the pharmacist to model how to complete prescription labels and in her BBC newswire report, on the imminent closure of the school's doctor's surgery, she ended up playing the role of the camera person as many of the children preferred to be the reporter instead.

'Genuine engagement': Student 7 experienced uncertainty about how to help the children with play planning as they seemed to be having difficulty. The student resolved this by joining in the group planning time which "helped me assess the children's learning and see if they were all able to plan their own play experience". This approach was consistent with Student 8's conclusion that "It is important for the teacher to meaningfully engage with the children's play", with teacher/child conferencing providing an opportunity for the teacher to gather insights into the children's intentions and actions. Similarly this student was of the opinion that such genuine engagement was very important for the children's own sense of achievement: "A lot of praise and positive reinforcement, and genuine engagement in the activity gave the children a great sense of achievement and during the feedback session at the end of the play session, they felt confident showing their creation and telling the other children what they had done."

Other students also made reference to the fact that their engagements with young children during their playful learning experiences were informed by the children's own interests and experiences in an effort to make the interaction more genuine and the learning more worthwhile.

"When you are translating the children's play into practice, the adult's role is to build on the children's experiences and knowledge that they have previously acquired, in order to extend and progress the children's learning opportunities and to enable children's sustained shared thinking to take place" (Student 10).

"I have learned the importance of following the children's lead as a professional and taking action regarding their comments, such as when the child noticed that the sun wasn't really getting to our ice block, which was supposed to be in the sun. We then had to find somewhere more suited, which resulted in placing the bowl in a sunny area within the playground" (Student 6).

"This play experience taught me that as a professional, you need to follow the children's initiative and interest, for example, the children began to cut the fruit and vegetables, using a child-friendly knife, and this isn't something I had planned for this week. However, I prevented from intervening, and from this, the children initiated the development and progression of their fine motor skills, whilst clearly having fun, and getting to experience the different textures and smells" (Student 9).

Many of the students appeared to have interpreted genuine participation as being able to be adaptable and flexible in children's playful learning experiences.

"Through completing the intervention I can appreciate the importance of following the lead of the child, in order to make playful activities meaningful to them. I now appreciate that plans can be adapted as necessary to do so and the results of doing so are that the children are much more engaged in their learning" (Student 6).

"I've learnt the importance of being able to very quickly change or divert from the original plan or scheme ... I now feel more relaxed about letting the children take a degree of control over their learning and becoming more of a 'scaffolding' and supporting figure to the children" (Student 2).

"When translating play into practice, it is easy to become a controlling practitioner. Indeed I often interrupted children's play to insist that they write prescriptions or make patient notes. ... I have learned that I need to be flexible and not expect children to interpret play in the exact way I have planned" (Student 3).

The ability to afford opportunities for progression

Some of the students' comments reflected their understanding of the need for purposeful observations to ensure effective progression in children's learning. One of the students in particular (Student 7), as a result of engaging in the playful learning intervention realised the power of observation and reflection on children's overall learning:

"I've found it very beneficial taking observations of the children's work throughout this playful intervention to see how they have grown and developed through the activities each week but also how my teaching strategies have impacted on the children's learning. I've found it very beneficial to question and evaluate how I could make the experiences better, more personalised to suit each specific child and implementing different strategies that I have learnt throughout the PL module".

Student 6 also commented on the value of observations to ensure appropriate challenge within the playful experience:

"I learned to reflect on what was working and perhaps not working through ongoing observations during the activity. For example using the pipettes to put water on the blocks of ice were only putting small amounts of water into the large bowl, therefore I added small bowls to the water tray to be used as another option. I was also surprised at how the children used the new vocabulary learned throughout the activity by stating "I can't wait to do our experiment".

Similarly student 3 noted: “This experience has taught me that the children’s play can only be progressed, if observations of the children’s learning through play are undertaken and from these, new learning objectives are set, as well as providing new experiences and resources, in order to develop their learning further”.

Reference was also made to the importance of planning to enhance and extend the learning opportunities:

“One of the most important lessons I have learned about translating play into practice with young children is that through good planning based around a familiar topic and a powerful play stimulus, children’s play can continually progress into much deeper learning” (Student 9).

Student 7 agrees but cautions against planning being too rigid or too structured:

“I have learned that play requires a lot of planning and preparation, as well as observation to really witness what interests children and therefore provide appropriate playful learning experiences for them. However I have also learned that although play activities may not go exactly as planned this may in fact result in more opportunities for learning”.

Student 3 also made a very insightful comment about how children can progress and challenge their own learning on occasions when suitable opportunities are made available to them, developing the play experiences in ways that the teacher might never have predicted. Student 10 reflected:

“As the play developed, I realised the value of how children can extend and deepen each other’s learning by integrating different play stations together. Some children were playing with a puppet and brought their ‘friend’ over to the picnic area to ask their peers to feed the little girl as she was hungry. The puppet then ate too much, got sick and some of the children decided she needed to go to the doctor. This further developed the language being explored as vocabulary associated with medicine was introduced by some children with higher levels of English” (Student 10).

Challenges experienced during the PLT intervention

Although several challenges were experienced by the students throughout their PL interventions such as coping with technical difficulties, language issues with EAL children and SEN children not wanting to play without using an iPad, four main challenges were identified namely space, organisation, time and provision of resources.

Space

The impact of the numbers of children in the class in relation to the size of classroom emerges as an issue for a number of the participants:

- Student 7 described the classroom as 'restrictive' due to lack of space, with consequences for the children's ability to move from one play area to another:
- Student 10 noted "*The limited space also limited the size that the children could make their constructions*", so this participant rolled up a carpet each day to provide a solid base for the children's building.
- Student 2 commented how: "the children were distracted by the busyness of the classroom".

And as student 8 reflected: "One challenge faced was that once the children noticed that the plastic toy fruit and vegetables had been replaced with real ones, they all wanted to play in the imaginative role-play corner. However, as this play experience is set up in the classroom, there is limited space and therefore, the class rules state that only four children can access the fruit and vegetable shop at any time. I respected the class rules set, however, in order to improve this situation, I sought permission to move a few tables, in order to provide more space and therefore, more children were allowed to get involved and enjoy the playful experience".

Organisation

Organisation of the play environment is considered from a number of perspectives. Student 8 commented on learning about the importance of consistency in the location of resources, and the consequences when she put away playdough mats in a different place than previously. Student 4 encountered a problem with the storage of the children's artefacts, and rearranged the space to ensure that the artefacts survived until home-time. Having reflected on the length of time it took to tidy away the blocks, Student 1 realised that providing photographs of blocks on the shelves would have supported the children's

independent tidy-up. In fact Student 10 noted a challenge with the existing organization for tidy up time as the children would not stop playing. In an effort to overcome this challenge, she introduced a tidy up song which worked to good effect. Similarly student 3 found fitting in with the exiting classroom protocols a challenge particularly having to move children to another play station after 10 minutes of play. Noting the reduced impact this structured timing had on children's learning, student 3, having got the permission of the class teacher, allowed the children who played in her role play area to stay there until they wanted to move on.

Time

Timing of play sessions proved to be a challenge for the majority of the students:

"This week, time was a challenge, as the children got out early for parent teacher interviews and spent one hour rehearsing for their school nativity. I had to negotiate with the class teacher, a suitable time for me to complete this activity.... This was picked up on by the children during the plenary for this activity, which took place two days later, due to the time constraints, as they stated, 'we wanted longer'" (Student 6).

"Due to time constraints and the class Christmas decorations being put up, the children could not engage as fully in the dramatic play as I had hoped they would" (Student 2)

"I also found that my playful learning session took a longer period of time than I had originally accounted for as they children spent more time experiencing and exploring the variety of materials than I had indicated on my planner. However I felt that the longer children had to explore and experiment the greater value the activity had on their sensory learning and the more they enjoyed the experience. Therefore as a professional I have learned that the value of the lesson is not how well I stick to a rigid planner or timetable, but assessing the quality, purpose, enjoyment, playfulness of the children's experiences" (Student 10).

Provision of Resources

Reflections on resource provision constitute the dominant area of concern for the students. On the practical side, there is frequent mention of the necessity for having sufficient resources for the numbers of children and ways in which this can be achieved. Both practical issues (e.g. materials being broken/damaged, children using up more junk art materials than anticipated) and the nature of the resources (e.g. the variety of colours of playdough, the 3D

shapes represented in the junk art materials) receive attention. Finding solutions to these issues were of immediate concern to all the participants.

Children's Learning

Within their RPDs, the students also reflected on the children's learning within the PL experience in a variety of ways:

Skills

Some of the commentary on children's development of skills is in the context of facilitating children in the exercise of their creativity. This occurs primarily in the context of junk art. Fine motor skills such as cutting, sticking and tearing are referred to, but in this context planning the artefact, problem solving and 'follow through' (Student 8) in its execution and ensuring the solidity of the artefact are also considered. All of these skills contribute to the realization of the children's creativity and imagination, aspects of learning that have clearly made an impression on the students: "The children can be so creative and imaginative and they can come up with so many different ideas that I would never have thought of" (Student 1). In addition, consistent opportunities to exercise these skills enhanced the children's ability to pursue their plans: "... as they practiced [tearing the masking tape] the skill more and more, I noted that the children were able to execute the skill with increasing confidence and competence" (Student 7). In this context, Student 4 refers to the children as acting as 'inventors'. Other references to fine motor skills development include children getting the opportunity to spread the butter and to decorate the cookies (Student 9) during baking type experiences and using different equipment such as an ice-cream scoop, large plastic tweezers, kitchen tongs etc. when playing in the sensory Tuff Tray (Student 8).

Communication skills are also referred to, and it is clear from one of the students' reflections that play is highly valued as a means to promote children's language. Student 10 undertook her PL intervention with predominantly EAL (English as an Additional Language) children and she noted her amazement at the extent to which play afforded the children the opportunity to use their language and in so doing overcome the language barrier. She also made reference to how play is also very powerful in meeting the emotional needs of these

very young EAL children, providing these young children with a kind of coping mechanism with what was going on around them. When referring to one child in particular she notes:

“Each day I witnessed this child being left in the classroom in tears by his sister and I watched in amazement as how as soon as he began to play, he appeared calm and settled, trusting the unfamiliar environment”.

Student 7 extended the consideration of communication into cognitive development in identifying sharing plans, explaining outcomes, problem-solving and conflict resolution as elements of communication facilitated through play. Social skills such as sharing, turn-taking, conflict resolution, and leadership were also referenced.

Thinking skills also were also included on students’ reflections about children’s learning. The children developed their lateral thinking as they had to think imaginatively about how to use the relatively open ended resources to replicate their designs in the form of a castle. They experienced a range of materials and learned about the texture of the various resources while also developing language skills in turn increasing their vocabulary, through describing the properties of the various resources. During this activity the children’s hand eye coordination and fine motor skills were developed further, by using equipment such as, scissors and a cellotape dispensers.

The children learned how to think back and recall what activities they had done over the past few weeks. The children learned how to reflect upon these and think about what they had learned from doing them as well as which one they liked the best and the least. The children practiced placing the activities in rank order, which they had previously learned during the ‘freeze and free Anna’ task.

Subject content learning

Much reference was made by the students about the subject content knowledge that the children developed through play. Reference to Science in particular was in abundance such as the texture of ice and awareness of what happens to ice when it melts e.g. “it goes into a

big puddle” as suggested by one child was also commented upon. In addition other references included taste and smell of fruit when it was cut open (Student 9), new scientific vocabulary such as fair test and prediction (Student 6), what makes ice melt fastest or slowest (Student 6), language associated with space and rockets, the solar system as well as the scientific term – waterproof (Student 2) and the best way to balance blocks in construction play (Student 7).

Numeracy also appeared to receive much attention as evidenced in the reflections below:

The children “counted and ordered people in the waiting room; they used phones to practise reading and using numbers, making numbers relevant to everyday life” (Student 3).

“Matching and sorting different Christmas decorations Comparing the sizes of the gingerbread men from smallest to largest” (Student 2).

“Tidy-up time demonstrating sorting and categorizing” (Student 4).

“Finding different items in the moon dust and counting in turn, promoting one to one correspondence and counting backwards when launching the rocket” (Student 10).

“Playing with real money and a till.....prices added to all of the shop items....the children were following a recipe, encouraging them to sequence and setting the table for customers in the cafe” (Student 9).

Aspects of all types of literacy were also commented upon in the students’ reflections on children’s learning. The specific vocabulary associated with the topics being taught or the themes being pursued was particularly noted by the students. For example, Student 7 refers to the children’s learning and use of ‘book specific vocabulary’ on the theme of the garage and transport; student 9 refers to the increase in vocabulary relating to fruit and vegetables; whilst student 3 notes the hospital specific language used by the children such as stethoscope, X Ray, syringe, bandage, patient and pharmacy. Other references to literacy learning included, reading and recording appointments (student 3), writing shopping lists,

reading recipes, reading shopping lists, taking orders on clip boards (student 9), where play provided motivation for meaningful writing activities.

Other subject-specific learning included some reference to Geography such as 'People who help us' - the doctor, the pharmacist, the nurse, the paramedic and the shop keeper, the detail in a junk art artifact demonstrating knowledge of trains (Student 7) and knowledge of the season Winter (Student 6):

One child expressed how his brother had been "watching a show and it had snow on the road so they had to get 'grated' by the big trucks."

Perseverance was referred to specifically by student 8 and having fun by student 2 but the development of learning dispositions is generally implicit rather than explicitly addressed in the reflections.

POST-INTERVENTION PHASE QUESTIONNAIRE FINDINGS

A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response. The responses to Q15-44 were regrouped into 'No Importance', 'Some Importance or Important' and 'Very Important or Essential' to suit cross tab and chi square test (Miller et al. 2002: 127). The responses to Q46-107 were regrouped into 'Disagree', 'Unsure' and 'Agree' to suit cross tab and chi square test (Miller et al. 2002: 127).

To ensure enhanced validity, all questions which rendered 20% of cells with an expected count less than 5 were discounted. Of those questions with adequate frequency counts, 15 questions showed a statistically significant association. Each of these specific questions are fully addressed below and details of the statistical significance have been included.

Questions associated with 'What is important in the early years setting...?' (Q15-44)

18) Provide music and opportunities for dance

Table 10: Music and opportunities for dance

		PrePost		Total	
		Pre	Post		
Q18RC	'Important or Some Importance'	Count	19	3	22
		% within PrePost	17.9%	5.1%	13.3%
	'Very Important or Essential'	Count	87	56	143
		% within PrePost	82.1%	94.9%	86.7%
Total		Count	106	59	165
		% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Test 1: Music and opportunities for dance

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.408 ^a	1	.020		
Continuity Correction ^b	4.353	1	.037		
Likelihood Ratio	6.172	1	.013		
Fisher's Exact Test				.029	.015
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.375	1	.020		
N of Valid Cases	165				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 7.87.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

- As Table 10 illustrates, ‘Important or Some Importance’ decreased by 12.8%, ‘Very Important or Essential’ increased 12.8%
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2 (1, n=165) = 5.41, p<.05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

21) Engage in songs and rhymes playfully

Table 11: Engage in songs and rhymes playfully

		PrePost		Total	
		Pre	Post		
Q21RC	‘Important or Some Importance’	Count	15	1	16
		% within PrePost	14.2%	1.7%	9.7%
	Count	91	58	149	

	'Very Important or Essential'	% within PrePost	85.8%	98.3%	90.3%
Total		Count	106	59	165
		% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Test 2: Engage in songs and rhymes playfully

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.716 ^a	1	.010		
Continuity Correction ^b	5.369	1	.021		
Likelihood Ratio	8.494	1	.004		
Fisher's Exact Test				.011	.006
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.675	1	.010		
N of Valid Cases	165				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.72.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

- As Table 11 illustrates, 'Important or Some Importance' decreased by 12.5%, 'Very Important or Essential' increased 12.5%
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2 (1, n=165) = 6.72, p < .05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

24) Encourage children to use books as props during their play (e.g. telephone directory, note pads, menus)

Table 12: Encourage children to use books as props during their play

			PrePost		Total
			Pre	Post	
Q24RC	'Important or Some Importance'	Count	31	7	38
		% within PrePost	29.5%	12.1%	23.3%
	'Very Important or Essential'	Count	74	51	125
		% within PrePost	70.5%	87.9%	76.7%
Total		Count	105	58	163
		% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Test 3: Encourage children to use books as props during their play

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.367 ^a	1	.012		
Continuity Correction ^b	5.428	1	.020		
Likelihood Ratio	6.882	1	.009		
Fisher's Exact Test				.012	.008
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.328	1	.012		
N of Valid Cases	163				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 13.52.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

- As Table 11 illustrates, 'Important or Some Importance' decreased by 17.4%, 'Very Important or Essential' increased 17.4%

- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2 (1, n=163) = 6.37, p < .05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

25) Sing number songs and play number games

Table 12: Sing number songs and play number games

		PrePost		Total	
		Pre	Post		
Q25RC	'Important or Some Importance'	Count	26	5	31
		% within PrePost	24.5%	8.5%	18.8%
	'Very Important or Essential'	Count	80	54	134
		% within PrePost	75.5%	91.5%	81.2%
Total		Count	106	59	165
		% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Test 4: Sing number songs and play number games

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.402 ^a	1	.011		
Continuity Correction ^b	5.393	1	.020		
Likelihood Ratio	7.085	1	.008		
Fisher's Exact Test				.012	.008
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.363	1	.012		
N of Valid Cases	165				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.08.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

- As Table 12 illustrates, 'Important or Some Importance' decreased by 16%, 'Very Important or Essential' increased 16%
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2 (1, n=165) = 6.40, p < .05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

30) Provide water play with a range of items (*cups, floating/sinking items, dye*)

Table 13: Provide water play with a range of items

		PrePost		Total	
		Pre	Post		
Q30RC	'Important or Some Importance'	Count	20	3	23
		% within PrePost	18.7%	5.1%	13.9%
	'Very Important or Essential'	Count	87	56	143
		% within PrePost	81.3%	94.9%	86.1%
Total		Count	107	59	166
		% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Test 5: Provide water play with a range of items

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.899 ^a	1	.015		
Continuity Correction ^b	4.814	1	.028		
Likelihood Ratio	6.767	1	.009		
Fisher's Exact Test				.018	.011
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.864	1	.015		
N of Valid Cases	166				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.17.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

- As Table 13 illustrates, 'Important or Some Importance' decreased by 13.6%, 'Very Important or Essential' increased 13.6%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2 (1, n=166) = 5.90, p < .05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

44) Provide 'small world' toys (e.g. garage, farm set, vehicles, small people figures)

Table 14: Provide 'small world' toys

			PrePost		Total
			Pre	Post	
Q44RC	'Important or Some Importance'	Count	24	3	27
		% within PrePost	22.4%	5.1%	16.3%
	'Very Important or Essential'	Count	83	56	139
		% within PrePost	77.6%	94.9%	83.7%
Total		Count	107	59	166

% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
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Chi-Square Test 6: Provide 'small world' toys

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2- sided)	Exact Sig. (1- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.401 ^a	1	.004		
Continuity Correction ^b	7.176	1	.007		
Likelihood Ratio	9.791	1	.002		
Fisher's Exact Test				.004	.002
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.350	1	.004		
N of Valid Cases	166				

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 9.60.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

- As Table 14 illustrates, 'Important or Some Importance' decreased by 17.3%, 'Very Important or Essential' increased 17.3%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2 (1, n=165) = 8.40, p < .05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

Commentary

Drawing on these inferential statistics relating to the differences in the students' pre and post responses to what they deem of importance in an early years setting, it could be argued that as a result of their engagement in the PL intervention, students post intervention are more conscious of the importance of those softer, playful and creative curricular learning experiences as constituting an important place in the early years setting

i.e. making learning more playful. Likewise there are tentative resonances within these findings that student have become slightly more conscious about the need to make play experiences more learning-focused.

Questions relating to ‘Your perceptions on play and playful learning experiences’ (Q46-84)

Q51) In school, children always learn when they play

Table 15: In school, children always learn when they play

			PrePost		Total
			Pre	Post	
Q51RC	‘Disagree’	Count	16	31	47
		% within PrePost	15.2%	54.4%	29.0%
	‘Unsure’	Count	38	6	44
		% within PrePost	36.2%	10.5%	27.2%
	‘Agree’	Count	51	20	71
		% within PrePost	48.6%	35.1%	43.8%
Total	Count	105	57	162	
	% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Chi-Square Test 6: In school, children always learn when they play

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	30.007 ^a	2	.000
Likelihood Ratio	30.382	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	14.397	1	.000

N of Valid Cases	162		
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a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 15.48.

- As Table 15 illustrates, 'Disagree' increased by 39.2%, 'Unsure' decreased by 25.2% and 'Agree' decreased by 13.5%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2 (2, n=162) = 30.0, p<.001$
- These results suggest that there is a highly significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

Q54) There is too little time spent on play in the early years

Table 16: There is too little time spent on play in the early years

			PrePost		Total
			Pre	Post	
Q54RC	'Disagree'	Count	26	3	29
		% within PrePost	24.5%	5.4%	17.9%
	'Unsure'	Count	25	20	45
		% within PrePost	23.6%	35.7%	27.8%
	'Agree'	Count	55	33	88

	% within PrePost	51.9%	58.9%	54.3%
Total	Count	106	56	162
	% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Test 7: There is too little time spent on play in the early years

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.798 ^a	2	.007
Likelihood Ratio	11.341	2	.003
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.244	1	.039
N of Valid Cases	162		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 10.02.

- As Table 16 illustrates, 'Disagree' decreased by 19.1%, 'Unsure' increased by 12.1% and 'Agree' increased by 7%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(2, n=162) = 9.8, p < .05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

Q55) All adult intervention in play enhances children's learning

Table 17: All adult intervention in play enhances children's learning

			PrePost		
			Pre	Post	Total
Q55RC	'Disagree'	Count	50	38	88
		% within PrePost	47.2%	66.7%	54.0%
	'Unsure'	Count	27	6	33
		% within PrePost	25.5%	10.5%	20.2%
	'Agree'	Count	29	13	42
		% within PrePost	27.4%	22.8%	25.8%
Total	Count	106	57	163	
	% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Chi-Square Test 8: All adult intervention in play enhances children's learning

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.998 ^a	2	.030
Likelihood Ratio	7.388	2	.025
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.968	1	.085
N of Valid Cases	163		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.54.

- As Table 17 illustrates, 'Disagree' increased by 19.5%, 'Unsure' decreased by 15% and 'Agree' decreased by 4.6%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(2, n=163) = 7, p < .05$

- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

Q60) Too much choice in play hinders learning

Table 18: Too much choice in play hinders learning

			PrePost		Total
			Pre	Post	
Q60RC	'Disagree'	Count	33	11	44
		% within PrePost	31.1%	18.6%	26.7%
	'Unsure'	Count	49	19	68
		% within PrePost	46.2%	32.2%	41.2%
	'Agree'	Count	24	29	53
		% within PrePost	22.6%	49.2%	32.1%
Total	Count	106	59	165	
	% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Chi-Square Test 9: Too much choice in play hinders learning

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.319 ^a	2	.002
Likelihood Ratio	12.111	2	.002
Linear-by-Linear Association	9.796	1	.002
N of Valid Cases	165		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 15.73.

- As Table 18 illustrates, 'Disagree' decreased by 12.5%, 'Unsure' decreased by 14% and 'Agree' increased by 21.6%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.

- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2 (2, n=165) = 12.32, p < .05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

Q71) Children may not always learn when they play

Table 19: Children may not always learn when they play

			PrePost		Total
			Pre	Post	
Q71RC	'Disagree'	Count	25	9	34
		% within PrePost	23.4%	15.3%	20.5%
	'Unsure'	Count	32	4	36
		% within PrePost	29.9%	6.8%	21.7%
	'Agree'	Count	50	46	96
		% within PrePost	46.7%	78.0%	57.8%
Total	Count	107	59	166	
	% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Chi-Square Test 10: Children may not always learn when they play

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	17.017 ^a	2	.000
Likelihood Ratio	18.713	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	9.093	1	.003
N of Valid Cases	166		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 12.08.

- As Table 19 illustrates, 'Disagree' decreased by 8.1%, 'Unsure' decreased by 23.1% and 'Agree' increased by 31.3%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2 (2, n=166) = 17.02$, $p < .001$
- These results suggest that there is a highly significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

Q68) Adult led activities are more stimulating and challenging than play activities

Table 20: Adult led activities are more stimulating and challenging than play activities

			PrePost		Total
			Pre	Post	
Q68RC	'Disagree'	Count	76	49	125
		% within PrePost	71.0%	83.1%	75.3%
	'Unsure'	Count	25	4	29
		% within PrePost	23.4%	6.8%	17.5%
	'Agree'	Count	6	6	12
		% within PrePost	5.6%	10.2%	7.2%
Total	Count	107	59	166	
	% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Chi-Square Test 11: Adult led activities are more stimulating and challenging than play activities

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.813 ^a	2	.020
Likelihood Ratio	8.732	2	.013
Linear-by-Linear Association	.581	1	.446
N of Valid Cases	166		

a. 1 cells (16.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.27.

- As Table 20 illustrates, ‘Disagree’ increased by 12.1%, ‘Unsure’ decreased by 16.6% and ‘Agree’ increased by 4.6%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(2, n=166) = 7.81, p < .05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

Q71) Children may not always learn when they play

Table 21: Children may not always learn when they play

		PrePost		Total	
		Pre	Post		
Q71RC	‘Disagree’	Count	25	9	34
		% within PrePost	23.4%	15.3%	20.5%
	‘Unsure’	Count	32	4	36
		% within PrePost	29.9%	6.8%	21.7%
	‘Agree’	Count	50	46	96
		% within PrePost			

	% within PrePost	46.7%	78.0%	57.8%
Total	Count	107	59	166
	% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Test 12: Children may not always learn when they play

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	17.017 ^a	2	.000
Likelihood Ratio	18.713	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	9.093	1	.003
N of Valid Cases	166		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 12.08.

- As Table 21 illustrates, 'Disagree' decreased by 8.3%, 'Unsure' decreased by 23.1% and 'Agree' increased by 31.3%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(2, n=166) = 17.02$, $p < .001$
- These results suggest that there is a highly significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

Q77) Play does not underpin future educational success

Table 22: Play does not underpin future educational success

	PrePost		Total
	Pre	Post	

Q77RC	'Disagree'	Count	51	37	88
		% within PrePost	48.1%	62.7%	53.3%
	'Unsure'	Count	26	16	42
		% within PrePost	24.5%	27.1%	25.5%
	'Agree'	Count	29	6	35
		% within PrePost	27.4%	10.2%	21.2%
Total	Count	106	59	165	
	% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

Chi-Square Test 13: Play does not underpin future educational success

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.894 ^a	2	.032
Likelihood Ratio	7.516	2	.023
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.927	1	.015
N of Valid Cases	165		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 12.52.

- As Table 22 illustrates, 'Disagree' decreased by 14.6%, 'Unsure' increased by 2.6% and 'Agree' decreased by 17.2%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(2, n=165) = 6.89, p < .05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

Commentary

These inferential statistics help to convey students’ growing critical attitude towards play in practice where they are no longer simply willing to accept that all play, irrespective of its quality, is of value to young children and that learning will automatically take place. A similar attitude comes to the fore in their post intervention response to question 55 regarding adult intervention in children’s play where there appears to be a growing realisation that only skilful interactions on the part of the teacher will promote learning in play on the part of the child. Likewise there appears to be an increased acceptance that affording too much choice to children in play can actually damage their learning but that play is not just about social and emotional development but can have educational value, perhaps with the hidden innuendo that this can only be the case if it is of a certain quality. Indeed the students’ response to question 54 “there is too little time spent on play” post intervention confirms this critical attitude towards play in practice where many are of the opinion the simply increasing the amount of time for play is less important than actually considering its quality.

Questions on ‘Your perceptions on the role of the adult during playful experiences’ (Q85-107)

Q107) To deliver a play-based pedagogy effectively, you must be highly educated

Table 23: To deliver a play-based pedagogy effectively, you must be highly educated

			PrePost		Total
			Pre	Post	
Q107RC	‘Disagree’	Count	35	16	51
		% within PrePost	32.7%	27.1%	30.7%
	‘Unsure’	Count	35	8	43
		% within PrePost	32.7%	13.6%	25.9%
	‘Agree’	Count	37	35	72
		% within PrePost	32.7%	27.1%	30.7%

	% within PrePost	34.6%	59.3%	43.4%
Total	Count	107	59	166
	% within PrePost	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi-Square Test 14: To deliver a play-based pedagogy effectively, you must be highly educated

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.139 ^a	2	.004
Likelihood Ratio	11.521	2	.003
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.798	1	.028
N of Valid Cases	166		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 15.28.

- As Table 23 illustrates, 'Disagree' decreased by 5.6%, 'Unsure' decreased by 19.1% and 'Agree' increased by 21.7%.
- A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between pre/post-intervention and response.
- The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2 (2, n=166) = 11.14, p < .05$
- These results suggest that there is a significant association between pre/post intervention and response.

Commentary

The significant difference in student responses to this question pre and post intervention goes some way in showcasing the enhanced understanding that many students now have about the complexity of teaching in the early years and the need for a high level of professional development to enable them to do so effectively.

OVERARCHING CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students' understanding and perceptions of PL in Practice Pre-Intervention

The findings generated from this study have showcased that prior to the PL intervention commencing, Irish students as a whole i.e. both NI and ROI appeared generally to value play and the associated principles of child-initiation and the development of the whole child as highly important for children's learning. Yet whilst they appeared to value play for all aspects of children's learning, deeper analysis highlights a degree of uncertainty in their responses relating more specifically to play as learning in practice. Complex statements concerning the amount of choice children should be afforded within their PL experiences, the role of the adult in maximising the children's learning within playful activities, the place of challenge in children's play and the actual specifics about the amount of time that should be granted to play-like experiences all generated a degree of ambiguity within the student response. Such thinking would support the literature base where students, like many teachers, seem to espouse somewhat romantic and superficial notions of the value of play for children's learning (Walsh et al, 2017). However such a positive perception of the role of play in practice does not appear to correlate with an in-depth and coherent understanding of how high quality playful learning should be translated into practice. Such a finding might perhaps have its origins in the lack of opportunity to see high quality examples of PL in practice (Vera and Geneser, 2012) where many early years teachers across Ireland appear to have succumbed to the academic pressures that belie the good intentions of both the Foundation Stage Curriculum in Northern Ireland and the Aistear curricular guidance in the ROI (Hunter and Walsh, 2014 and Gray and Ryan, 2016). As a result play in practice remains on the periphery with only a 'tenuous' link with the curriculum (Wood and Chesworth, 2017: 55). Such findings accentuate the need for ITE experiences to effectively prepare students to embrace these challenges by equipping them with an appropriate repertoire of pedagogical strategies in playful learning focused modules as well as affording them practical opportunities to try out their newly acquired skills. In turn this will help ensure a high level of confidence and competence on the part of the students to guarantee the effective translation of playful learning into practice (Jung and Jin, 2014 and 2015).

In some cases, it could be argued that the students' responses came across as somewhat paradoxical and contradictory (Sherwood and Reifel, 2012). Despite an almost unanimous response endorsing the place of play in the early years setting and disagreeing with the view that play activities should be mainly adult-directed, formal teaching was also prioritised and a sizeable minority response was in favour of the completion of literacy and numeracy worksheets and more sedentary tasks in general. Similarly whilst a large majority of students rated play as highly valuable for children's learning across all domains, a degree of dissonance in student responses was in evidence when they were asked about the direct association between play and educational outcomes and success and even whether a highly educated professional was needed to put play into practice.

These conflicting responses on the part of the students could be interpreted simply as the students lacking a clear understanding about the complexities of play in practice. However it could also be inferred that these somewhat contradictory responses display a confused audience who feel pulled in different directions. Such findings could therefore be tentatively endorsing the fact that a clear-cut distinction between playing, learning and teaching is not always in the best interests of the children concerned and that a more expansive definition of play as learning in practice is required (Pyle and Danniells, 2017). In addition, the findings point to the need for more integrated and blended pedagogical approaches rather than a mere focus on child-initiation versus teacher direction to ensure the best possible learning experience and outcomes on the part of the children concerned (Walsh et al, 2017; Van Oers and Duikers, 2013 and Wood, 2014).

Students' understanding and perceptions of PL in Practice Post-Intervention

Drawing on the statistical analysis undertaken between the pre-and post-responses, it could be argued that the students in the main post intervention, appeared to have shifted their perceptions from a mere acceptance that all play has value, to a greater critical appreciation of playing as learning and teaching as the essence of a high quality early years learning experience in practice. Having engaged in the PL intervention, students now appeared more conscious about the inherent complexities of ensuring a high quality playful learning

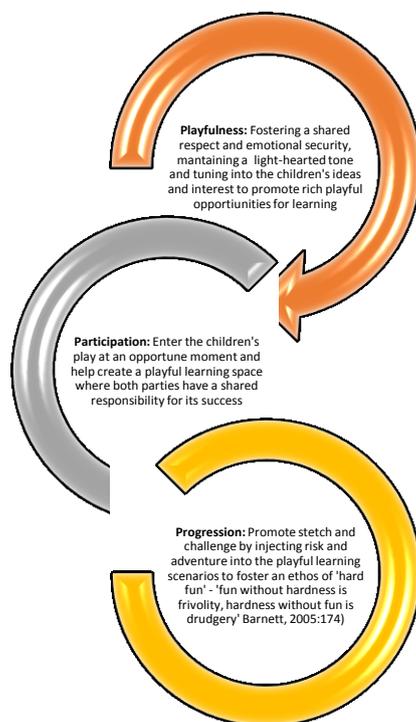
experience in practice, yet seemed to have acquired a more coherent and in-depth understanding about how playful learning can be effectively mastered in practice. They appeared to have moved their conceptualisation of playful learning beyond the simplistic, binary notions of e.g. play, not play; the adult involved or not involved in the play experience (see Fleer, 2015) and seemed now to have acquired a more informed notion of the importance of more blended and integrated pedagogies in the early years, consistent with the current thinking in the field such as Hakkarainen et al, 2013, Van Oers and Duijkers (2013), Pramling Samuelsson and Pramling (2016) and Walsh (2017). The students now seemed less concerned with the managerial aspects of the play session in terms of e.g. how long the play session should be. Instead the overarching quality of the pedagogical interactions and the learning opportunities afforded in the playful experience now seemed of greater importance to the students in general, where they had become more conscious of the need to make curriculum content/learning more playful and to make play experiences a little more learning-focused – a subtle blending in action.

In this way it could be argued that the intense professional development master classes, coupled with the opportunity to put a PL intervention in practice had enhanced the students' knowledge and understanding of play-based pedagogies in practice. These findings therefore support the underpinning notion that ITE experiences can impact in a positive manner on students' beliefs and practices on playful learning and teaching and point to the need for similar opportunities to be afforded to pre-service teachers across a range of different degree programmes. Beyond the normal exchange of knowledge and practice, this PLT intervention afforded the students the opportunity to work on a hands-on playful initiative, informed by theory, in close collaboration with their class teacher and teacher educator, all of which seemed to ensure positive outcomes, consistent with the thinking of research conducted by Jung and Jin (2015), Hakkarainen et al (2013) and Ryan and Northery-Berg (2014).

In addition to the evidence gleaned from the survey questionnaire, the findings from the ten students' reflective diaries also were highly insightful in showcasing the changing attitudes of students towards play as learning in practice and the underpinning knowledge gained

about the pedagogical strategies for effective implementation. The reflective diaries showcased the emphasis students seemed to be placing post intervention on their role as the teacher/ professional in the PLT experience. There seemed to be an underpinning awareness that it was the responsibility of the skilful teacher to enable educational, yet playful opportunities in line with the children’s interests and experiences, blending in the teachable moments when possible, through the teacher’s ability to challenge and extend the children’s thinking further, rather than ‘smuggling curriculum content’ (Hedges, 2014: 198) into the playful experience or ‘hijacking the direction of learning’ (David and Peters 2011: 5) by teaching didactically.

Indeed we would contend that the detailed, reflective evidence on the part of the students shines some new light on how in fact these integrated and blended pedagogies such as PLT proposed by Walsh (2017) and Walsh et al (2017) can actually be effectively translated into practice, focusing directly on the 3 P concept – **Playfulness**, **Participation** and **Progression** which emerged from the diary data, a finding which has implications not only for student teachers but also teacher educators and practising teachers in general. This 3P concept is explained more fully in Figure 4:



Next Steps

In brief, the findings from this small-scale study in terms of the Playful Learning intervention certainly seemed to ensure principally positive outcomes on the part of the students concerned, particularly in terms of their understanding of high quality integrated playful learning pedagogies in practice and a growing critical appreciation that only quality play and playful pedagogies have value for children's learning. Yet it is important to reiterate that this study was very small in design and focused solely on two cohorts of students in two relatively small institutions where they had close contact and direct support from their university tutors, both of whom were experts in the field of Playful Learning and Teaching and their class teachers. The question therefore that directly emerges from the existing data is whether we can continue to ensure such positive outcomes if the confines of such a study were to be extended to a more macro audience, without compromising the integrity of the intervention as a whole. Indeed those challenges, namely space, organisation, time and resources, that were referred to by the students when implementing their PL interventions tended to be quite top-down in perspective, coinciding with the underpinning issues voiced by many practising teachers as the principal reason why quality play cannot be sustained in practice, findings which reinforce to some extent the 'policy-capture' of play' in general (Wood, 2014:151). In this way the authors from this report argue that if we want to make macro and sustainable changes to our early years practice across Ireland, it is of primary importance that we get students, teachers and teacher educators to work together, which proved clearly advantageous in this study. Furthermore the time is ripe to ensure that policymakers are directly involved and entirely committed to such an intervention right from the outset, fully aware of its potential benefits, to finally ensure that the real needs and interests of our youngest children are being wholly met in our early years classrooms.

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APPENDIX A

Playful Learning Across Ireland: a student teacher intervention in Early Years Education (PLAI)

Student Questionnaire Pre-Intervention: Instructions for Completion

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. This questionnaire forms part of the PLAI (*Playful Learning Across Ireland*) project. A research team from Stranmillis University College Belfast and the Church of Ireland College in Dublin, commissioned by the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCOTENS) is conducting this examination of playful learning in early childhood settings in Ireland.

This questionnaire is to gather some information about you as a student and your experiences of playful learning at university and during your own school experience. Your perceptions on the role of play in young children's learning and the role of the teacher/practitioner in children's play will also be gathered. Please read each question and instructions carefully and please attempt to answer all questions as honestly as possible.

Your answers will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be divulged to anyone outside of the research team. All information gathered will be treated as confidential, will be used for the purposes of research only and no school/setting, teacher/practitioner or child will be named in any research findings without sought written permission. All electronic data will be held on a password protected PC in a secure room at Stranmillis University College, Belfast and the Church of Ireland College, Dublin, accessible only to the research team. All information will be processed in accordance with data protection legislation.

We appreciate your participation and your answers will play an important role in helping us to examine playful learning across Ireland. The ultimate aim of our project is to consider how student teachers can be best prepared to provide a high quality playful learning experience for young children in practice and in turn through the experiences of the teachers/practitioners, enhance the overall quality of the playful experiences of young children in practice.

Glossary of terms in this questionnaire

- By children, we mean those children aged 3-6 years old.
- By adults, we mean you as a practitioner/teacher.
- By pedagogy, we mean – *the teaching and learning experiences that are available in the early years context*
- *By degree enhancement we mean additional activities undertaken by students inside of the University College but beyond their normal degree course to enhance their CV.*

Section 1: About you:

1/ Your name (optional): _____

2/ Are you: Male Female

3/ Please circle the age group you belong to: 18-25 26-35 36-45 46-54 Over 55

4/ Please circle the degree programme that you are presently engaged in: BEd SUC BEd CICE ECS PGCE

5/ Detail the modules you have already undertaken which have focused on curriculum and pedagogy in early years learning and teaching

6/ What type of extra training/ professional development/degree enhancement activities, if any, have you had which have focused on curriculum and pedagogy in early years teaching and learning?
Please tell us below:

7/ What do you hope to become in the future? (Be specific in your response)

Section 2: About your own early years experience:

8/ As a young child did you attend any of the following early years settings

Childminder

Sessional preschool e.g. playgroup / crèche

Full day care

Nursery school

9/ If yes, how would you describe the type of experience you received there?

10/ How would you describe the playful experiences you received within the pre-school context?

11/ How old were you when you entered primary school?

12/ How would you describe the type of experience you received in the early years of schooling?

13/ What, if any, opportunities did you get to play in the early years of school and what did these experiences look like?

14/ What, if anything, did you learn about play and learning from your own school days?

Section 3: What is important in the early years setting

Rate the following experiences in accordance with their importance in an early years setting: *(Please tick the appropriate box)*

In an early years experience for 3-6 year old children you should....	No importance	Some Importance	Important	Very Important	Essential
15/ Use play as a learning tool					
16/ Plan for children to do sensory activities – see, hear, smell, feel, taste					
17/ Encourage children to play outdoors (weather permitting)					
18/ Provide music and opportunities for dance					
19/ Encourage children to complete worksheets to enhance literacy and numeracy					
20/ Encourage children to participate in imaginative play (e.g. playing hospital, vets, shop, home play)					
21/ Engage in songs and rhymes playfully					
22/ Provide opportunities for colouring in pictures					
23/ Use books and pictures to tell stories					
24/ Encourage children to use books as props during their play (e.g. telephone directory, note pads, menus)					
25/ Sing number songs and play number games					
26/ Teach children to write letters					
27/ Encourage children to engage with books (e.g. in the book corner, library)					
28/ Teach early number concepts					
29/ Provide sand tray with a range of items (spades, funnels, cups, vehicles)					
30/ Provide water play with a range of items (cups, floating/sinking items, dye)					

31/ Teach children to write numbers					
32/ Provide small, manipulables items (e.g. beads to string, small lego)					
33/ Provide play materials such as different types of papers, large cardboard boxes, pots and pans, plasticine, play dough, paper, crayons, finger paints, and so on					
34/ Use props to encourage physical movement (e.g. scarves, hoops, balls, low beams)					
35/ Make space for children to move and play freely and safely (e.g. running, jumping, climbing, crawling etc...)					
36/ Teach children to read					
37/ Provide ipads, computers and interactive white boards for children to use					
38/ Provide materials for construction (large blocks, duplo, lego, etc...)					
39/ Encourage children to complete worksheets to enhance literacy numeracy skills					
40/ Set homework for children					
41/ Encourage children to remain sedentary at their own table and chair					
42/ Encourage children to make marks on surface (e.g. paper, easel, board) with various writing implements (e.g. chalk, crayons, paint brush, pencil, pens etc...)					
43/ Teach children songs and rhymes					
44/ Provide 'small world' toys (e.g. garage, farm set, vehicles, small people figures)					

45/ Please include details of any other activities/experiences that you feel should take place in the early years of schooling:

Section 4: Your perceptions on play and playful learning experiences:

Here are some statements that people make about children, adults and play. Please think about children in terms of 3-6 year olds.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with each statement on a 5-point scale. Please indicate your level of agreement by ticking the relevant box:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncommitted/ Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
46/ I enjoy play-based learning sessions.					
47/ Children can have significant learning experiences during play.					
48/ With young children, it is important to consider physical, emotional, social and cognitive learning together.					
49/ Play should have a central place in children's learning.					
50/ Children only learn from formal adult- led activities.					
51/ In school, children always learn when they play.					
52/ The early years is all about the development of children's learning dispositions and social and emotional well-being.					
53/ During play, the teacher should always be interacting with the children.					
54/ There is too little time spent on play in the early years.					
55/ All adult intervention in play enhances children's learning.					
56/ Play contributes to children's holistic development.					
57/ Play has little impact on children's intellectual development.					
58/ Play should be child-led/initiated.					

59/ Children always challenge themselves within play					
60/ Too much choice make in play affords children few learning opportunities					
61/ Children are best left to play by themselves.					
62/ Play impacts more on children's social development than their cognitive development.					
63/ Play is good in theory but difficult to put into practice.					
64/ Play activities should be adult-directed.					
65/ Children learn more effectively by direct teaching than through play.					
66/ It is difficult to know what children are learning as they play.					
67/ All play has educational value					
68/ Adult led activities are more stimulating and challenging than play activities.					
68/ There should be an equal mix of child-initiated and adult -initiated activities.					
70/ Playful experiences can be more than the sand and water tray					
71/ Children may not always learn when they play.					
72/ Following children's interests results in a haphazard approach to both planning and play.					
73/ Children should be asked to complete specific tasks during play.					
74/.Play is all about fun but not learning					
75/ Play provides an opportunity for adults to assess children's development.					
76/ The early years experience should focus directly on literacy and numeracy					
77/ Play does not underpin future educational success					
78/ Play is all about settling the children in the morning, but children only learn when the real work begins					
79/ During play it is important to record observations about the children's learning.					
80/ Subject knowledge has no place in an early years setting					

81/ The curriculum is busy enough without adding in play					
82/ Playing, learning and teaching should be fully synchronised in the early years					
83/ The curriculum can be delivered through the medium of play					
84/ Children can get bored during play					

Section 5: Your perceptions on the role of the adult during playful experiences

85/ To ensure effective learning, the teachers must always follow the child's lead in children's play					
86/ The role of the teacher in children's play is all about affording children appropriate resources					
87/ Teachers can be players too in imaginary play experiences					
88/ Play is the child's world and there is no place for adults					
89/ Adults always interrupt the flow of children's play					
90/ When teachers engage skilfully in children's play, the quality of the learning experience is enhanced.					
91/ To ensure effective playful interactions, the teachers' and children's play intents must be similar					
92/ During play, the role of the teacher is to observe and to assess children's learning					
93/ Play provides teachers with the opportunity to listen to children's reading					
94/ Adults challenge the children only when asking them questions during play					
95/ The role of the adult in play is always managerial					
96/ Practitioners can challenge thinking when playing with children					
97/ Adult intervention in play always promotes learning.					

98/ Adult intervention in play needs to be skilful if children's understanding is to be enhanced.					
99/ Play only results in learning when the adult directs the playful experience.					
100/ During play, teachers need to focus solely on stretching children's cognitive learning					
101/ Children can be provided with too much choice during play					
102/ Teachers must structure the play experience to ensure learning takes place					
103/ An early years teacher must know how to play					
104/ Skilful interactions during play can bring the children's playful experiences to new heights					
105/ Children should be free to make their own choices during play.					
106/ A play-based curriculum 'deprofessionalises' the role of the teacher					
107/ To deliver a play-based pedagogy effectively, you must be highly educated					

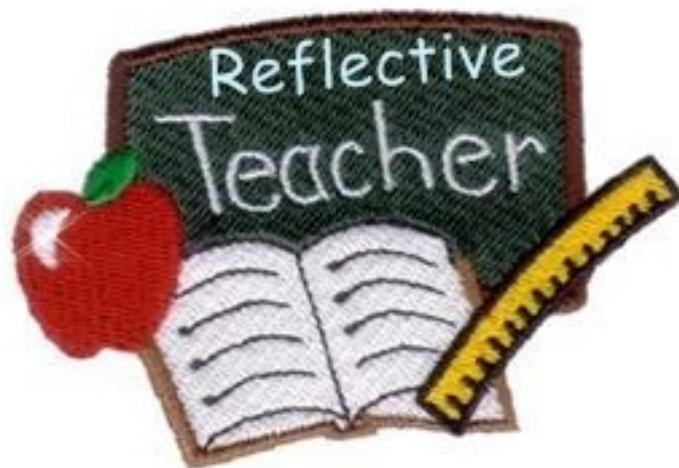
***Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions.
Your responses are extremely valuable to our study.***

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE DIARY: PLAYFUL TEACHING AND LEARNING INTERVENTION

Name: _____

Degree programme: _____

University: _____



What did you learn as a professional?

Challenges you faced and action taken

Anything else worthy of note

Week 2

Provide a brief synopsis of the PTL experience you have chosen for this week

Next Steps

Anything else worthy of note

Anything else worthy of note

Week 4

What did the children learn?

What did you learn as a professional?

APPENDIX C

Playful Learning Across Ireland: a student teacher intervention in Early Years Education (PLAI)

Student Questionnaire: Post Intervention

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. This questionnaire forms part of the PLAI (*Playful Learning Across Ireland*) project. A research team from Stranmillis University College Belfast and the Church of Ireland College in Dublin, commissioned by the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCOTENS) is conducting this examination of playful learning in early childhood settings in Ireland.

This questionnaire is to gather some information about you as a student and your experiences of playful learning at university and during your own school experience. Your perceptions on the role of play in young children's learning and the role of the teacher/practitioner in children's play will also be gathered. Please read each question and instructions carefully and please attempt to answer all questions as honestly as possible.

Your answers will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be divulged to anyone outside of the research team. All information gathered will be treated as confidential, will be used for the purposes of research only and no school/setting, teacher/practitioner or child will be named in any research findings without sought written permission. All electronic data will be held on a password protected PC in a secure room at Stranmillis University College, Belfast and the Church of Ireland College, Dublin, accessible only to the research team. All information will be processed in accordance with data protection legislation.

We appreciate your participation and your answers will play an important role in helping us to examine playful learning across Ireland. The ultimate aim of our project is to consider how student teachers can be best prepared to provide a high quality playful learning experience for young children in practice and in turn through the experiences of the teachers/practitioners, enhance the overall quality of the playful experiences of young children in practice.

Glossary of terms in this questionnaire

- By children, we mean those children aged 3-6 years old.
- By adults, we mean you as a practitioner/teacher.
- By pedagogy, we mean – *the teaching and learning experiences that are available in the early years context*
- *By degree enhancement we mean additional activities undertaken by students inside of the University College but beyond their normal degree course to enhance their CV.*

Section 1: About you:

1/ Your name (optional): _____

2/ Are you: Male Female

3/ Please circle the age group you belong to: 18-25 26-35 36-45 46-54 Over 55

4/ Please circle the degree programme that you are presently engaged in: BEd SUC BEd CICE ECS PGCE

Section 2: What is important in the early years setting

Rate the following experiences in accordance with their importance in an early years setting: *(Please tick the appropriate box)*

In an early years experience for 3-6 year old children you should....	No importance	Some Importance	Important	Very Important	Essential
15/ Use play as a learning tool					
16/ Plan for children to do sensory activities – see, hear, smell, feel, taste					
17/ Encourage children to play outdoors (weather permitting)					
18/ Provide music and opportunities for dance					
19/ Encourage children to complete worksheets to enhance literacy and numeracy					
20/ Encourage children to participate in imaginative play (e.g. playing hospital, vets, shop, home play)					
21/ Engage in songs and rhymes playfully					

22/ Provide opportunities for colouring in pictures					
23/ Use books and pictures to tell stories					
24/ Encourage children to use books as props during their play (e.g. telephone directory, note pads, menus)					
25/ Sing number songs and play number games					
26/ Teach children to write letters					
27/ Encourage children to engage with books (e.g. in the book corner, library)					
28/ Teach early number concepts					
29/ Provide sand tray with a range of items (spades, funnels, cups, vehicles)					
30/ Provide water play with a range of items (cups, floating/sinking items, dye)					
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43/ Teach children songs and rhymes					
44/ Provide 'small world' toys (e.g. garage, farm set, vehicles, small people figures)					

45/ Please include details of any other activities/experiences that you feel should take place in the early years of schooling:

Section 3: Your perceptions on play and playful learning experiences:

Here are some statements that people make about children, adults and play. Please think about children in terms of 3-6 year olds.

Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with each statement on a 5-point scale. Please indicate your level of agreement by ticking the relevant box:

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106/ A play-based curriculum 'deprofessionalises' the role of the teacher					
107/ To deliver a play-based pedagogy effectively, you must be highly educated					

108/ As a result of participating in this PTL intervention how, if any, have your perceptions and understandings changed about the value of play for learning?

109/ As a result of participating in this PTL intervention how, if any have your perceptions and understandings changes about the role of the teacher/practitioner in children's play?

110/ How would you sum up the impact the PTL has had on your professional development?

***Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions.
Your responses are extremely valuable to our study.***

In an attempt to resolve some of the lingering tensions involved in implementing play as learning in early years classrooms across the island of Ireland, a shared form of professional development known as 'Playful Learning' was delivered together to a group of student teachers in the final years of their degree programme both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The professional development programme was two-fold: it involved a shared programme of study on up-to-date research and practices on playful learning and teaching and a playful learning intervention, where students, both North and South, had the opportunity to plan and implement a series of playful learning experiences in an early years classroom/setting of their choice.

This report details the impact of such an intervention on student teachers' beliefs and practices about playful approaches to teaching and learning and will attempt to unpick the underpinning features of a high quality playful learning approach in practice.

