Play for Inclusive Education on the Island of Ireland

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Executive Summary

The aim of this research project was to develop a survey to gather the attitudes of primary school teachers across the island of Ireland towards play, including a special focus on attitudes towards play for the inclusion of autistic learners within primary school classrooms. Given the significant lack of research in this area, the project sought to provide insight into primary school teachers' current play beliefs across the island of Ireland and facilitate the development of a measure of teachers' play beliefs for future research.

Play is central to early childhood development (Singer, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2003; Whitebread et al., 2012). This is reflected within both national (NCCA, 2009) and international policy recommendations (UNCRC, 1989). However, it remains unclear as to whether such values translate into practice. As a result, it is timely to systematically examine teachers' perceptions of play within primary school education and to provide data on a significant gap within the play literature. Also, it is important to examine teachers' attitudes towards play for inclusion. Specifically in the context of widening diversity of classrooms, including increasing numbers of autistic children accessing mainstream education (DES, 2019), as well as a dearth of knowledge on play for inclusion within the primary school classroom (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2020).

The SCoTENS seed funding supported a pilot study of teacher and child attitudes to play in education and involved several key data collection phases in order to develop a robust and rigorous measure of teacher attitudes to play in education. First, the literature was systematically searched to identify questions that had previously been used in empirical published research to assess teacher attitudes to play in education, with an additional search specifically for research on play for inclusive education. Second, parents and primary school-aged children (aged 8 or older) were invited to interviews to inform the development of the survey measure content. Lastly, primary school teachers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were interviewed in semi-structured online interviews (20-30 minutes) to facilitate the development of an appropriate survey instrument in order to ascertain teachers' play beliefs. During the interview, participants were prompted by the facilitator with a series of questions to ascertain their attitudes towards play in education more broadly and play for the inclusion of autistic pupils. Drawing together input from children, parents, teachers and the

published literature, we developed a teacher questionnaire to measure attitudes to play in primary school education.

The questionnaire developed in this study will be tested and validated beyond the lifecycle of this project and will become an openly accessible resource, making an important contribution to play research. By developing a robust instrument to ascertain teachers' attitudes towards play and play for inclusion of autistic learners within the classroom, our measure will facilitate future rigorous research in this field. Given that this is an emerging area of research, this project involved close consultation with key stakeholders (Milton, 2019; Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019) whereby parents and teachers of autistic children and school-aged children were invited to contribute their views at the beginning of the project, in formulating interview and survey content including aspects that they feel are important in the context of this research.

Introduction

Play is a powerful context for learning (Weisberg et al., 2016; Whitebread et al., 2012) and especially effective in supporting social-communication development (Barnett, 2018; Coehlo et al., 2017). Social-communication skills are often a significant challenge for autistic children and these skills may be compounded by the social demands of school (Callahan et al. 2008; Parsons et al. 2013). Therefore, there has been considerable interest in play as a context for supporting autistic children's social-communication development in education (see O'Keefe & McNally, 2023).

There is emerging evidence in support of play as a key pedagogical strategy in primary school classrooms (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021), with preliminary findings from survey data of 344 primary school teachers in the Republic of Ireland suggesting that teachers also strongly favour the use of play pedagogies to support inclusive education in mainstream and special education classrooms (Paper in Preparation, McNally and O'Keeffe). However, a systematic review by Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) highlighted a gap in professional development around play pedagogies, and there is evidence of uncertainty in applying play-based learning in the classroom (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Fung & Cheng, 2012).

Similarly, Hunter and Walsh (2014) highlighted that while play is now embedded in educational policy in Northern Ireland, skill development is needed to effectively support play practice. Gaps in professional development for supporting inclusive education practices have also been identified (Finlay, Kinsella & Prendeville, 2019; Segota et al. 2020) and there are persistent challenges in providing inclusive education for autistic children (Anglim et al. 2018; Shevlin, Winter & Flynn, 2013). Although there is a rich research base to indicate that play is an important pedagogical strategy in education, evidence regarding its potential to support autistic children in school settings has not been well synthesised. Therefore, there are limited resources to inform professional development in using play strategies for inclusive education.

Play in Primary School Curricula on the Island of Ireland

Curriculum in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has the youngest school start age in Europe. In this context, educational reform, especially in the Early Years has focused on ensuring the developmental appropriateness of the curriculum. In 2007, the Early Years Enriched Curriculum was introduced and made statutory for all children in the Early Years in 2008 (Walsh, 2020). Importantly, the curriculum is evidence-based, relying heavily on the results of a study tracking children experiencing a trial of this curriculum in 100 schools over the period of the year 2000-2009 (McGuniness et al., 2014). The introduction of the new curriculum noted a considerable emphasis on play embedded throughout children's educational experiences. Outcomes indicated high levels of acceptability of this play-based curriculum from parents (Walsh, 2020) and increased positive learning outcomes, specifically in literacy and numeracy (McGuniness et al., 2014). This curriculum transition was also generally warmly welcomed by practitioners, but early educators reported that they lacked confidence and skills to embed this play-based pedagogy in their practice (Walsh et al., 2019). In 2013 Learning to Learn: a Framework for Early Years Education and Learning was introduced (DENI, 2013). This specifically emphasised the need for professional development and training for educators, with a specific focus on play pedagogy and a realignment between the pre-school and Foundation stage learning, This realignment enabled smooth transitions for children through encouraging the consistency of practice and the broad application of play throughout the Early Years and Foundation Stage Curricula. The upskilling of the workforce is essential to ensure the effective implementation of any new curricula, and there are exemplars of support provided to schools through trainings models such as the Education Authority training programme and Playful Learning Hubs (Walsh, 2020). The outcome of this curriculum and training investment was a broad adoption of play-based pedagogical practice in primary (specifically early years) education in Northern Ireland.

More recently the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) emphasises the importance of learning through play, specifically in pre-school and foundation stages, providing training, resources and practical examples of how play can be embedded in everyday practice (CCEA, 2022). However, it should be acknowledged that this focus on play-based pedagogy is primarily for Early Years settings. Although, of course, play and practical experiences are encouraged through children's primary school education, the emphasis on these practices dominates education for younger children. However, given that primary educators in Northern Ireland have been given the opportunity to upskill in play-

based pedagogy it should be anticipated that these approaches should permeate through the educational system.

Curriculum in the Republic of Ireland

The current positioning of play within the Republic of Ireland primary school education system is represented across two different curricular frameworks. Aistear (NCCA, 2009), the early years curriculum framework from birth to six years, spans across both early childhood settings and the first two years of primary school education. It is based on a holistic approach to play underpinned by four interconnected themes: Wellbeing; Identify and belonging; Communicating and; Exploring and Thinking (NCCA, 2009). Aistear is designed to complement the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) and individual subject domain areas within the early years primary classroom and highlights the value of play as a pedagogical tool in enhancing learning alongside the fundamental role of adults in facilitating learning and development through play. Samples of play-based learning activities are provided in relation to the above themes.

Although teachers in the RoI appear to positively endorse play within education (Gray & Ryan, 2016; O'Keeffe & McNally, In Preparation), research reports difficulties translating Aistear into practice and implementing a dual curriculum. This is further compounded by reports of lack of knowledge and professional support among Irish teachers (Gray and Ryan, 2016; Hayes & Garrity, 2019; Woods, Mannion & Garrity, 2022). In recent years, Aistear has been supplemented with guidelines to support play experiences within the classroom in terms of planning, assessment and collaborating with parents (NCCA, 2021). However, there remains much criticism regarding the lack of statutory obligation and accompanying legislation in relation to the implementation of Aistear, resulting in much ambiguity surrounding its application in the classroom (French, 2013; Woods, Mannion & Garrity, 2022).

The RoI Primary School curriculum endorses play as a valuable medium for learning across curricular domain areas and outlines the role of play in supporting children's sense of exploration and discovery (NCCA, 1999). Sample opportunities for play-based learning activities are highlighted across individual subject curriculum. However, the RoI Primary School curriculum is currently undergoing major redevelopment since its inception in 1999. The newly revised curriculum framework (NCCA, 2023) repositions play as a vital medium for learning across all primary schools and special schools and is working towards supporting

alignment across Aistear and the Primary School Curriculum by focusing on the 'centrality of play and playful approaches in primary and special schools where they are key elements of learning and teaching' (NCCA, 2023, p.25).

Within this newly proposed framework, play is conceptualised as: child-led whereby children lead and direct the play; adult-led whereby teachers lead and direct the play and; adult-guided whereby educators and students 'share (the) play activity' (NCCA, 2023, p.25). Like Aistear, it emphasises the role of the adult in enhancing play (NCCA, 2023) whilst providing opportunities for children to exhibit autonomy and ownership over learning (NCCA, 2023). The framework, however, not only highlights the role of play as a pedagogical tool to support learning but also children's 'right and a desire to play' (NCCA, 2023, p.25).

Amidst this renewed focus on play within curricular redevelopment, it is anticipated that the fundamental role of play as a pedagogical tool for learning and development will be enforced across the primary school.

Current Study

Given the increasing role of play in teaching in primary schools across the island of Ireland, and in light of the evidence of play as a potentially powerful context for supporting the learning of autistic children in education, we sought to consult with children, parents and teachers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland about their experiences of, and attitudes towards, play in education. We also sought to review literature on published studies of attitudes to play in education.

The objective of this consultation and review of the literature was to contribute pilot data on the experiences of play in school from a teacher and child perspective with the ultimate goal of developing a new measure of teacher attitudes to play in inclusive education.

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Method

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Materials

A literature review was first conducted to identify published peer-reviewed studies on teachers' attitudes to and views of play in education. Themes within this literature were

highlighted and used to inform the development of our teacher attitude to play scale and to inform our interview schedules with primary-school teachers and school-aged children.

Participants

Teachers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were invited to take part in focus groups on play practices and pedagogies, and on teachers' attitudes towards play in the classroom. Parents and children were also invited to take part in online interviews on their experiences of play in education and their views on the role of play in education.

Recruitment for the parent-child interviews and teacher focus groups was carried out through convenience sampling within the primary researchers' networks. Parents of children aged 8 and over were invited to participate in the interviews.

Three teachers, five parents and six children (N=14) took part in the study and shared their experiences and views of play in education in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. One teacher taught in the Republic of Ireland and two taught in Northern Ireland. All were experienced teachers with a minimum of five years teaching experience in the classroom. Two girls and four boys aged between eight and ten years participated in the study. Three children attended schools in Northern Ireland and three attended schools in the Republic of Ireland. All five parents who participated in the study were mothers of the children interviewed.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was sought for the study by the university Research Ethics Committee at Dublin City University. Approval was granted in January 2022 and full DPU approval in February 2022. Parent-child interviews followed approved protocols and procedures in relation to parent consent and children's assent. Consulting with parent and child-dyads in a 1-1 context allowed for greater flexibility in relation to participatory methods to ensure sessions were in an accessible and engaging format for all children so that all voices could be heard, in line with a children's rights-based approach (see Appendices A and B for the interview protocols for children and parents). It also maximised participant time involved in the research by seeking both parent and child views concurrently.

Teacher focus groups comprised both mainstream and special education teachers (see appendix C for the focus group interview schedule).

Analysis

A conceptual content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018) was undertaken of the focus groups and interview data to identify important themes and concepts for the development of the teacher attitude scale. The research questions underpinning the analysis were therefore: (1) what are the key terms about play and inclusive education that arose during interviews?; and (2) were there any clear attitudes and views conveyed in the interviews?

Full transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were selected for analysis. The text was coded into manageable content categories. After reducing the text to categories, specific words and patterns were coded for that informed the research questions. The level of analysis was the word, phrase, or sentence. An interactive set of categories was developed which allowed for the introduction and analysis of new and important material relevant to the research questions. The following pre-defined categories were used: Play in education; Play for inclusion more generally; and Play for autistic children in education contexts.

The existence rather than frequency of the concept was coded, given the small sample size. Text was translated into codes by extracting relevant words or phrases and were filed under pre-defined categories, and irrelevant information was ignored. Overall, the content analysis enabled conclusions and generalizations around attitudes, views and concerns around play in education, and for general trends and patterns to be identified that would inform the development of the teacher attitudes to play measure.

Results

Themes from the Literature Review

Only 12 peer-reviewed studies were identified which examined teachers' attitudes to play in education. Several themes were evident in this literature: the extent to which play is viewed as a positive context for learning and development (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Howard, 2010; Hunter & Walsh, 2017; Izumi-Taylor et al., 2014; Walsh & Fallon, 2021; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021; Fogle & Mendez, 2006), the role of the teacher in play (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Howard, 2010; Hunter & Walsh, 2017; Walsh & Fallon, 2021; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021; Fogle & Mendez, 2006), the value of play as an activity for children (Fisher, 2021;

O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021; Fogle & Mendez, 2006), and teachers' confidence about teaching through play and using play in the classroom (Howard, 2010; Hunter & Walsh, 2017; Walsh & Fallon, 2021; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021).

There was a particularly limited research on play for inclusive education (e.g. Lenovakis et al., 2018; Danniels & Pyle, 2021). In Danniels and Pyle's survey of 42 kindergarten teachers, they found that the majority of teachers (62%) conceptualised play as having a role in supporting teaching and learning and believed play was an important context for curricular/academic learning. Just over half of the teachers (55%) emphasised a link between play and social-emotional development and wellbeing. Over half also agreed that there was a need to promote a greater inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in play. The ways in which teachers in this study promoted inclusive play included the use of open-ended materials, incorporating children's interests, scaffolded teacher support, direct teacher support in play, peer support in play, and carefully considering the environment and ensuring there was an accessible layout and range of play materials. Finally, teachers in the study highlighted the need for support to enact inclusive practice in play in the classroom and the need for further training (Danniels & Pyle, 2021).

Conceptual Content Analysis

Teachers' Views of Play in Schools

Several of the themes which were identified in the literature on teachers uses of, and attitudes to, play in education were also evident in the interviews with teachers in our study. In addition to themes around the role of the teacher in play in the classroom, the need for support and training, the importance of play for inclusive education, and the role of play in learning and development, teachers who were interviewed highlighted the importance of play in assessment in special education. The need for resourcing (both in terms of materials and more staff to support play in the classroom) was also highlighted.

Our data generated a new theme that play may be viewed as only for younger classes or that play is only appropriate for teaching younger children also emerged in conversation with all three teachers in the study. This theme emphasises teachers attitudes and perceptions of play and its usefulness for learning throughout development.

One teacher observed that play supports deeper learning for autistic children, rather than traditional teaching or the use of worksheets for example. Outdoor play in particular was noted as a context for supporting all children's learning and development in school settings

but especially children with additional learning needs as one teacher felt that children could relax more in outdoor spaces. Additionally in the context of neurodivergent children, teachers emphasised that play can encourage communication across children, bolstering inclusive practices.

Children's and Parents' Views of Play in Schools

Outdoor play was the most frequently mentioned type of play at school among children and their parents. One parent highlighted the risky nature of outdoor play also. Play as a social activity in school also featured strongly in interviews, particularly among parents. One parent also highlighted the value of play for rapport and building relationships with teachers.

Play was discussed by several parents in the context of learning, though there were opposing views at times. For example, some parents viewed play as important for learning in school whereas two parents emphasised play as a break from learning and as an escape from school work. Indeed, one of the children interviewed described play in terms of a reward for good work in school and something that children earned throughout the school week.

One child in the study described play more widely in terms of playing outdoors, and his favourite game of soccer. For this child, play in school happened through active play in PE (Physical Education) classes. Two other boys interviewed in Northern Ireland also described in terms of physical exertion and engagement, pointing to the effects of play in terms of hunger and tiredness. These children also highlighted digital gaming as play and demonstrated a developmental view of play whereby they discussed play they had engaged in when they were younger compared to the play they often engaged in now.

One parent made a distinction around the type of play engaged in by her autistic and neurotypical sons and emphasised the importance of sensory play for her autistic son. Another parent emphasised the key role of play in children's everyday lives and some parents believed children may not recognise that they were playing in school where it may have been seamlessly integrated into learning.

Developing the Teacher Attitudes to Play in Education Scale

Best practice for questionnaire development includes deductive and inductive approaches (e.g. Cahoon et al., 2021). Within this project we used both approaches.

The deductive approach included an extensive literature search through which 12 papers were identified that included either a questionnaire or questions on teachers attitudes towards play. All questions (N=165) that were used for data collection in these papers were extracted to deductively identify items for inclusion in our survey. Following this process, three of the project team identified and discussed duplication or significant overlap of extracted questions or questions that were out irrelevant to the intended aim of the survey. Therefore, through this process 111 items were removed from the extracted question bank, with 54 items remaining. After subsequent closer scrutiny a further 10 items were removed due to duplication. Careful reading and interpretation of the remaining 44 items led to seven items being amended to increase readability and understanding of content.

In addition, the conceptual content analysis generated themes inductively and items were generated to tap into these concepts and ideas. Thus we were able to ensure that the views identified in interviews and focus-groups were represented in the survey through an inductive process. Nine new items were proposed focusing on the use of play as an educator observation/assessment tool (x1), access to resources (x2), the developmental appropriateness of play for learning (x1), play for deeper learning (x1), play for social-communication (x1) and outdoors play (x2).

Therefore, by using both inductive and deductive approaches we have generated a survey that covers the following content: (1) Play for learning and development, (2) The value of play, (3) adult/educator involvement in play, (4) confidence in delivering play, (5) enjoyment and training in play, (6) play and inclusion. The final survey includes 60 items and is attached in Appendix D.

Next steps for the questionnaire development is to ensure face validity by asking for feedback from teachers on the content of the survey. Then the survey will be distributed to a large sample of teachers to establish the factor structure and reliability of the measure.

Discussion

Our research with teachers, children and parents on the island of Ireland found similar themes around approaches to, and experiences of play, in schools that are evident in the research literature. In keeping with previous studies on teachers' attitudes to play which have been shown to be generally positive towards play, and demonstrate a high valuing of play in the classroom (e.g. Danniels & Pyle, 2021; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021), we found that

teachers valued play for children's wellbeing, their social development and as a way to assess and support the learning of autistic children. Teachers in our focus groups also highlighted a gap in professional development in the use of play pedagogies in the classroom, which was found by Bubikova-Moan and colleagues (2019) and reflected published research (Gray & Ryan, 2016; Hayes & Garrity, 2019; Woods, Mannion & Garrity, 2022). There was also much discussion around how to apply play-based learning in the classroom in terms of resources and wider societal attitudes towards play and uncertainties around teaching through play which have also been captured elsewhere (e.g. Gray & Ryan, 2016; Fung & Cheng, 2012).

Though our sample size was small, teachers from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were represented and shared their insights on play in the context of the respective curricula in which they taught. The small number of participants allowed for longer, more in-depth discussion of issues around play in primary schools. Teachers in our study particularly highlighted a tension around attitudes to play, whereby they felt that many parents and teachers may view play as only appropriate for younger children and not for older children in schools. This is an important contribution to our understanding of attitudes to play in education by highlighting children's age as a key variable in shaping attitudes towards play in education, and should be explored further in future studies on play-pedagogies in primary school education.

Teachers in our sample explored in-depth the potential of play for supporting autistic children and children with communication and language difficulties in particular. Again, the depth of consideration by teachers around play pedagogies to support children's development and learning in educational contexts suggests that play is a potentially powerful context for inclusive education from the perspective of teachers who are responsible for leading these classrooms. However, through these discussions it became clear that staff resourcing was imperative to successfully implement rich opportunities for playful learning and social skill development for all children in the classroom, reflecting wider reports in the literature of persistent challenges in providing inclusive education for autistic children (Anglim et al. 2018; Shevlin, Winter & Flynn, 2013).

Importantly, our study included the perspectives of primary school-aged children on play in education in order to further inform the development of a new measure of teachers' attitudes to play, and aligns with calls to consult with children directly on play (Howard, 2019). For most children, play in school was associated with active play in the yard at break-time or in PE classes. For one child play was also associated with reward for hard work and engagement in school throughout the week. In contrast, parents observed that play was

important for children's social development in school and that children may not be aware that they were playing or that play-based pedagogies were being used during classroom teaching. Thus, children's conscious reporting of play experiences may be influenced by time and space-bound concepts of where and when play happens in school settings. To children, embedded play in classroom activities may not be regarded as such due to their own internal definitions of what "play" truly is.

Drawing on the findings from teachers, children and their parents, as well as our review of the published research on teachers' attitudes to play in education, we developed a new measure which will be tested beyond the lifecycle of this project and will become an openly accessible resource. By developing a robust instrument to ascertain teachers' attitudes towards play and play for inclusion of autistic learners within the classroom, this study will facilitate future research in this field. Indeed there have been calls for valid and reliable measures in play research to support rigorous data collection in this field (Zhao et al., 2019). Development of this measure supports the wider educational research community in the investigation of attitudes which inform play practices in the classroom. By including a focus on attitudes to play for inclusive education, this measure also provides a resource for assessing and further exploring how play is used in inclusive education and help to identify areas of need for professional development and resources.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Child Participants

Children's Ice-breaker and Capacity Building Activities Pre-Consultation

Introductory Ice-breaker Activities
- Show and Tell (children 'bring along' favourite toy or item from home/school)
- Getting to know you game- e.g. I have a dog, I have a sister, I like apples etc.

Capacity Building Exercises
- Photo-elicitation; using pictures of children playing in multiple different ways e.g. on their own, with peers, with family, with different types of materials (Lego, sand, cardboard box), in different settings (classroom, playground, park, at home). Use photos as an initial prompt (Shaw, 2021) for discuss and stimulus material (Clark, 2003)
- Use of Teddy e.g. Danny the Dog that is used as a stimulus for children to describe play in the classroom (Clark, 2005; Booth et al., 2019)
- Create drawing of play
- Designing code names and individual aliases

Session Activities Toolkit
- Draw-and-tell: E.g. Drawing frames (in particular for younger children) based on a sentence e.g. When I play in school, I like (Einarsdottir et al., 2007). Discuss similarities and differences between children's drawings/experiences (Horgan, 2017). These activities will be strongly focused on children's narrative during process as opposed to outputs (Coates & Coates, 2004)
- Sort and Rank Activities (Clark, 2012) e.g. Adapted Pots and Beans Activity (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998) whereby children will sort pictures/written statements into bins/hoola hoops on floor based on pre-defined categories with opportunities to add their own additional categories
- Finger puppets to elicit discussion based on prompt questions/written statements e.g. play is Leigh, 2020)
- Thumbs-up or down (Gray & Winter, 2011; Robinson & Gillies, 2012) or Agree/Disagree based on specific statements regarding play within the classroom
- Feelings cards (Hill et al., 2016) in response to study findings
- Use of Teddy e.g. Danny the Dog that is used as a stimulus for children to describe play (Clark, 2005; Booth et al., 2019)

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Parents

Opening Questions:

1. How are things today?
2. What do you think of when you hear the word play (draw/write)-what words come to mind?
3. Do you think it's important to examine teachers' views of play? Why?

Key Questions:

4. Is there any particular aspect that you think it's important to include when consulting with teachers in relation to their play beliefs?
5. Is there any particular aspect that you think it's important to include when consulting with teachers in relation to their beliefs surrounding play for inclusion (of autistic learners)?

Closing Question:

1. Is there anything else you can think of that may be helpful for me when compiling this survey?

Appendix C: Interview/Focus Group Protocol for Teachers

Opening Questions:
1. How are things with you today?
2. What do you think of when you hear the word play (draw/write)-what words come to mind?
3. Do you think it's important to examine teachers' views of play? Why?

Key Questions:
4. Have you any advice to offer in terms of key points to consider when consulting with teachers in relation to ascertaining their play beliefs?
5. Have you any advice to offer in terms of key points to consider when consulting with teachers in relation to ascertaining their beliefs towards play for the inclusion of autistic learners?

Closing Question:
6. Is there anything else you can think of that may be helpful for me when compiling this survey?

Appendix D - Teacher Attitudes to Play in Education Scale

Play for Learning and Development:

Response code: 1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree

1. Play contributes to children's holistic development
2. Children should have opportunities to play in school
3. Children can have significant learning experiences during play
4. Play is essential in supporting children's emotional development
5. Play is essential in supporting children's social and communication development
6. Children always learn when they play
7. Play has little impact on children's intellectual development
8. Play should have central place in children's learning   in school
9. Children only learn from formal adult-led activities
10. Children learn more effectively by direct teaching than through play
11. It is difficult to know what children are learning as they play
12. All play has educational value
13. Play is an integral component for learning and development in early childhood education (age-related)
14. The curriculum can be delivered through the medium of play
15. Play is all about fun but not learning
16. Fun is an essential characteristic of play
17. Play does not underpin educational success
18. Children play because they want to, and the process of such play is important to their learning and development
19. The curriculum is busy enough without adding in play
20. Play is important for children
21. Play provides an opportunity for adults to assess children's development
22. Play supports autonomy and agency
23. Play supports creativity and imagination

Valuing Play

Response code: 1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree

1. Play is strongly valued within my classroom
2. Play is strongly valued within my school
3. Play is strongly valued by parents of children in my classroom
4. Children in my class engage in sustained periods of play each day (at least one hour)

Adult/Teacher Involvement in Play

Response code: 1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree

To what extent do you agree with the following statements:
5. Teachers should supervise but not interfere with students' play
6. Teacher intervention in play hinders learning
7. Teacher intervention in play needs to be skilful if children's learning is to be enhanced
8. During play, all interactions with the teacher helps children learn
9. Play activities in the classroom should be teacher directed
10. During play, the teacher should be interacting with the children
11. Play should be child-led/initiated

Response code: 1= very low – 5= very high
12. Rate your level of involvement in children's play in your classroom (1 very low, 5 very high)

Confidence

Response code: 1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree

13. I feel confident in my level of knowledge regarding play and early childhood development
14. I feel confident implementing play in my classroom
15. I feel confident using play to support children's learning
16. I feel confident guiding and supporting children's play in my classroom
17. I feel confident planning and organising play in my classroom
18. I feel confident incorporating play into the achievement of curricular learning goals
19. I feel confident supporting the play of children with additional learning needs

Enjoyment/Training

Response code: 1= very low – 5= very high

20. Rate your level of training in play (1, very low, 5, very high)
21. Describe type of training in play received (open ended)

Response code: 1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree

22. I enjoy play sessions

Play and Inclusion

Response code: 1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree

23. Play is a fundamental right for all children
24. All children should be given equal opportunities to play within the classroom
25. Teachers have an integral role in supporting the play of children with additional learning needs
26. Play is a valuable medium in supporting the inclusion of all children within the classroom
27. Play is a natural context for supporting learning across diversity of learners in the classroom
28. Autistic play can be different to neurotypical play
29. Play is as important for Autistic children as it is for neurotypical children

New items / themes to add based on teacher interviews

Response code: 1 strongly disagree – 5 strongly agree

30. Play is important for observation and **assessment** in special education
31. Access to resources (e.g. developmentally appropriate toys) is important for facilitating play for all children.
32. **Additional** teachers (bodies in the classroom) are required for meaningful play in the classroom
33. Play is only appropriate for teaching younger children
34. Play supports **deeper learning experiences for autistic children** (than traditional teaching / use of worksheets for example)
35. **Outdoor play is different to indoor play**
36. Outdoor play enables different learning experiences for Autistic children
37. Play facilitates social communication skills for neurodiverse children in the classroom