What are the benefits of continuing a play-based approach to learning in Year One for children's development in spoken language?

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This study aims to consider whether the continuation of play-based learning would best support the development of spoken language for Year One children. This research was carried out in Cornwall through interviewing Reception and Year One class teachers and their children. These interviews highlight the perspectives of teachers and children about learning in Reception and Year One classes under the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2014) and the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013). A play-based learning approach is widely accepted for children in the Early Years, underpinned by the EYFS. However, when children transition from Reception to Year One, they face a dramatic difference in pedagogy. This research explores the reason for these pedagogical differences and the impact they have had on children’s experiences of being a learner, with a focus on early language development. The formal learning approach often used in Year One, reflects the pressure that Key Stage 1 teachers face to cover ‘academic content’ which often results in teachers neglecting play-based learning (Sandberg and Heden, 2011).
Introduction and rationale

This research project considers the benefits of a play-based learning approach for Year One children, with a particular focus on the development of spoken language (Department for Education (DfE), 2013, p.17). Young children in England experience a significant transition when they reach the end of their first year of primary school, as a result of a fundamental shift in curriculum emphasis (Dunlop and Fabian, 2006; Briggs and Hansen, 2012; Moyle, 2015). This transition is the move from the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2014) to the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013). Moyle (2015, p.85) compares the change in pedagogy between the EYFS and the National Curriculum to a ‘…sheer cliff’, suggesting a dramatic change in teaching approaches. It is widely accepted that play is fundamental for effective learning and development in the early years (McInnes et al, 2011) although it seems play is being squeezed out of the curriculum for children aged five onwards (Moyle, 2015). This study will consider the impact of a play-based learning approach for children’s spoken language development in Year One.

Initially, this research began with a research proposal (appendix 1). After discussions with my tutor, some adjustments were made to the original title to define a more focused area of research. Initially, this study was driven by my passion for early years education as well as my interests in play-based learning and spoken language development. This chosen area of study gave me the opportunity to build on my knowledge of the National Curriculum and contribute towards my own professional development.

Furthermore, a contributing factor for this chosen area of study was my final school experience in a mixed Reception and Year One class. I maintained a play-based pedagogy for planning and teaching the Reception aged children but was required by the school to use formal learning approaches when teaching the Year One children. Upon reflection, the Reception children demonstrated high levels of engagement and motivation during social, play-based activities. In comparison, Year One children showed some signs of disengagement and distraction when learning only through a formal approach. This led me to consider whether Year One children should be taught through a pedagogy that provides a balance between play-based learning and the regularly adopted formal teaching approach.

In practice, regular observations of children in the early years led me to recognise the many opportunities for social interactions that children of this age have. Evidently, these experiences promote development in the Prime Area of Communication and Language (DfE, 2014, p.24). In comparison, children in Year One have limited opportunities for play-based learning to develop their spoken language (DfE, 2013, p.17). Furthermore, a recent article in The Telegraph highlighted that there are current concerns for children’s ability to speak ‘properly’ (Gurney-Read, 2015).
Through considering these current concerns and my own interests, I decided to underpin my research with the following research question:

_In what ways does a play-based approach to learning support Spoken Language in Year 1?_

My intention was to explore this research question through existing literature and my own data collection methods. This research reflects a small-scale study with the involvement of two schools in Cornwall (appendix 3).

**Literature review**

This literature review focuses on the perceptions of play-based and formal learning approaches. Additionally, there is a significant focus on the current state of spoken language for young children. Furthermore, literature will be explored to consider how teachers can best support the progression of early language development.

**Play-based learning**

The significance of play for children’s learning and development has been recognised for many years and brought into prominence by philosophers such as Froebel (1826). He believed that play is the purest, highest and most natural form of learning. It is believed that play is essential for children’s learning (Hutt et al, 1989; Gooch, 2008). Similarly, the theories of Piaget (1976) and Vygotsky (1962) highlight the importance of play in children’s cognitive and social development. Considering this, it could be suggested that these views have influenced the development of Early Years practice and the EYFS (DfE, 2014) through the wide recognition that play should be central to young children’s learning.

It is widely understood in Early Years education and care, that play is central to children’s early experiences and a key feature of how they learn (Nutbrown, Clough and Selbie, 2008). Moyles (2015) suggests that play is an integral part of healthy childhood. Generally, the word ‘play’ is used liberally with the assumption that its meaning is understood, although defining play is problematic (Grieshaber and Mcardle, 2010; McInnes et al, 2011; Wilson, 2015). Differing interpretations of play would have an impact on practice (Bruce, 2004; Johnston and Nahmad-Williams, 2009). Beckley (2012) suggests that it would be more helpful to consider what the nature of play is, and the characteristics of play rather than the definition of the word. The role of play is a widely challenged, particularly by adults who view play as a waste of time (Johnson et al, 2005). In previous research, some teachers have noted that play in the classroom has not significantly contributed to children’s learning (Kraus, 2006). Unquestionably, it is particularly parents, policy
makers and politicians who often regard play as an interference for children’s learning (Jung and Jin, 2014).

Moyles (2015) highlights the challenges with play that arise from the perception of teachers who view teaching as a formal activity as opposed to a play-based approach. This is further supported by McInnes et al (2011) who suggests teachers are often apprehensive about encouraging play, as it could be considered that there is no clear link between play and learning. Wood (2013) acknowledges that the benefits of play would only become evident over time, which suggests that practitioners would become concerned for the value of children’s play as the benefits are not immediately obvious. Brock et al (2009) acknowledges that formal learning is related to teachers’ control, suggesting that the alternative is allowing children to control their own learning. Furthermore, teachers may be asked to justify their approaches to play to parents, colleagues, or inspectors (Wilson, 2015). Considering this, there is a general perception that parents prefer more formal approaches which could cause teachers to become more apprehensive about encouraging play-based learning experiences.

The need for play is demonstrated in the EYFS framework through the Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL) (DfE, 2014). The CoEL are said to be critical for building children’s capacity for their future learning (DfE, 2014). In comparison, there is no significant focus on play in the National Curriculum, although teachers have the flexibility to provide varied learning experiences for their pupils (DfE, 2013). However, in the current education system, it is suggested that progression involves making the transition from ‘…play/informal learning to work/formal learning’ (Wilson, 2015, p.38). Therefore, the expectation is that children will learn through a formal approach from the start of Year One under the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) with little opportunity for play-based learning.

Children start their education with ‘…an enthusiasm for learning through their natural curiosity about the world around them’ (Briggs and Hansen, 2012, p.4). The current education system appears to force children into learning the skills, knowledge and especially the facts that will help children pass their assessments (Clarke, 2014). Considering this, it seems that the system may have failed many children for whom ‘…learning is no longer a fun activity’ (Briggs and Hansen, 2012, p.4) but a tedious means to an end which provides limitations for children’s creativity (Desailly, 2012). It is widely accepted that play is essential for younger children’s learning, yet as children get older there is a dramatic shift in the emphasis given to play and creativity (Moyles, 2015).
The Tickell review (2011) of the EYFS advocates more adult-directed teaching to prepare children for the transition to Year One although the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2010), Sharp et al (2006), and Fisher (2011) promote the need for the continuation of play-based learning in Year One. It could therefore be argued that children should be given the opportunity to progress to more complex forms of play, as a means of developing their creativity and imagination (Wilson, 2015; Moyles; 2015).

Generally, in educational settings, play is used to harness children’s learning and development in line with curricular frameworks and wider societal expectations of schooling (Wood, 2010). Despite this, how play is used in education would depend on teachers’ pedagogy (Sanberg and Heden, 2011) although it is important to consider that curriculum pressures may affect the pedagogy used in teachers’ classrooms. Additionally, another potential challenge for the way that teachers manage play in their settings is their contrasting perspectives of play-based learning (Wilson, 2015).

Pugh (2010) suggests that ‘If the EYFS is to be really effective… it should be revised to cover the years from birth to six years, including both reception and Year One in primary school’ (2010, p.17). Interestingly, The Cambridge Primary Review recommended that the EYFS should be extended to age six and that Key Stage 1 should ‘become redundant’ (Alexander, 2010, p.491). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al, 2010) demonstrated that play contributes to the overall quality of provision. The findings of this study demonstrate that play-based learning activities are not more important than teacher directed activities. It was suggested that instead, it is a mix of child-initiated and teacher directed outcomes that contribute to pedagogical effectiveness (Sylva et al, 2010).

Considering this, play-based learning can often be interpreted to mean activities that are planned by adults to ensure it is ‘purposeful’ (Lindon, 2005, p.237). Although, it could be argued that children learn through play through their own direction with their own purpose (Beckley, 2012). Nonetheless, there is much research to suggest that effective pedagogy is a balance between adult-led and child-led activities (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Goouch, 2010; McInnes et al, 2011).

Despite the mantra of learning-through-play (Bennett et al, 1997), practitioners complain of the top-down pressures from the statutory subject-based curricula for school aged children, prompting ongoing struggles to incorporate playful pedagogies in Year One (Brooker and Edwards, 2010). Additionally, Fisher (2011, p.34) suggests that following a ‘…child centred pedagogy whilst attempting to meet the demands of the adult-led curriculum’ could pose dilemmas. Brooker and Edwards (2010) however, argue that not all children are best served through the implementation of playful pedagogical approaches. Considering this, Walsh et al (2011) advocates a more formal
approach from the very start of education, to foster children’s academic skills. Briggs and Hansen (2012) further support the formal approach by suggesting that play-based learning is unsatisfactory if the purpose of the learning activity is solely to assimilate knowledge.

Spoken language

The National Curriculum acknowledges ‘...the importance of Spoken Language in pupils’ development across the whole curriculum – cognitively, socially and linguistically.’ (DfE, 2013, p.13). Although, it is becoming a growing concern that children are entering primary school with poor language and social development (DCSF, 2009). Save the Children (2014) highlight that children without secure language skills, experience barriers to learning and attainment and every area across the curriculum is affected. To best support children, teachers must be aware of appropriate learning opportunities to develop children’s language abilities (DCSF, 2009).

It is recognised that Spoken Language skills are essential for ‘...the development of reading and writing.’ (DfE, 2013, p.13). This is further supported by Moyles (2015, p.250) who highlights that linguistic development provides access to future learning through equipping the child with an ‘...essential communication tool’. Similarly, Save the Children (2014) highlight that language skills provide the foundations for reading abilities. This charity recognises that there are wide gaps in early language development between low income and high-income families. It is suggested that ‘...without first developing good early language skills...children will not be able to benefit from all other opportunities education offers.’ (Save the Children, 2014, p.25). This acknowledges that social class has an impact on children’s early language development (Smith, 2010; Save the Children, 2014).

Spoken language as a tool for learning is described as ‘...one of the readiest ways of working on understanding’ (Barnes, 2008, p.4) which builds on Bruner’s (1978) scaffolding theory of new knowledge being built on a foundation of existing knowledge, through elicit dialogue and social interaction. Palaiologou (2013) highlights that the amount of talk and time given for talk depends on the value the class teacher ascribes to talk. Furthermore, Browne (2009) suggests that the effectiveness of the practitioner’s role when working with young children is related to their understanding of the values of talk and the strategies and activities that encourage speaking and listening. Therefore, if children start to fall behind with their early language skills, they are likely to still be behind in their last year of primary school, this is particularly common for children from low income families (Save the Children, 2014).
**Progression in spoken language**

The ‘Read On. Get On’ campaign (Save the Children, 2014) is a current initiative to develop improved language skills for children by 2020. Save the Children (2014) recognised that poor early language skills resulted in poor reading skills for the future. Considering this, it is widely understood that language skills provide a foundation for children’s literacy abilities (Cremin, 2015).

Sanberg and Heden (2011) recognise that through play-based learning, children develop more advanced language and social skills, with some support from adults. Additionally, Save the Children (2014) suggest that play can make a dramatic difference in developing strong language skills, particularly with shielding children from the impact of poverty. Therefore, play-based learning should be encouraged in language rich environments to ensure progression in spoken language (Palaiologou, 2013).

Vygotsky (1978) highlighted that a more expert partner can accelerate the progress of those with less expertise in a given area through appropriate communication and scaffolding. From this, teachers can encourage progress in spoken language through scaffolding children’s development. This could be achieved by teachers modelling language and asking questions (Smith, 2010), or providing play-based learning experiences (Moyles, 2015). Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) acknowledges that is was through play that children acquire language. Additionally, he recognised that language and thought were inseparable, demonstrating the relationship between dialogue and cognitive awareness (Vygotsky, 1978).

Palaiologou (2013) suggests that teachers could promote communication and language development through bringing interesting adults into the school, to encourage children to ask questions and be exposed to new language. Additionally, role-play areas support and encourage collaborative talk and provide opportunities for children to learn how to communicate together in a range of situations (Moyles, 2015). Furthermore, Beckley (2012) suggests role-play gives adults the opportunity to extend children’s language use through modelling behaviour.

Walsh et al (2011, p.108) highlights there is an emerging acceptance that high quality Early Years pedagogy is associated with ‘...a balance between child and adult-initiated activities’ and mixed pedagogies to suit the curriculum content and topic. Similarly, Wood and Attfield (2013) suggest an approach based on both curricula generated play-based learning, and a play generated curriculum based on teachers responding to children’s interests. This literature promotes a balance of play-based learning and formal learning approaches for children. Although, it is important to consider the formal approach often adopted in primary schools generally have planning frameworks that would not support these ideas (Martlew, Stephen and Ellis, 2011).
Methodology and methods

Methodology refers to the values and principles, philosophies and ideologies that underpin research (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012). Upon reflection, it is clear that my research has a ‘child-centred’ (Roberts-Holmes, 2014, p.24) methodology. This has informed the questions I have asked, the literature I have read and the methods that I have used (Walker and Solvason, 2014). After careful consideration, I have carried out qualitative research methods to develop a deeper understanding of teachers’ and children’s thoughts and perspectives, in the form of observations and interviews (Roberts-Holmes, 2014; Mukherji and Albon, 2015; Walker and Solvason, 2015). I am aware that for the qualitative research to be valid, it is dependent on how accurately I represent the ‘…voices and experiences of the research participants’ (Robert-Holmes, 2014, p.72). Initially, I contacted the two schools who have participated in the research to introduce myself and my research through a pack containing: the research brief (appendix 4, p.55), consent letters for the head teacher (appendix 5), class teachers (appendix 6), parents (appendix 7) and children (appendix 8), and interview question examples for the class teachers (appendix 9) and children (appendix 10). Unquestionably, gaining the participants’ consent is important for ethical considerations and building trust in the relationship between myself and the participants (Alderson, 2008). Through research into methodology in the Early Years, it is clear that it is important to develop trust between the researcher and the participants (Walker and Solvason, 2015). From this, I ensured that I was an honest and reliable researcher who communicated all aspects of the research process to all participants (Roberts-Holmes, 2014).

It is suggested that observation is a successful method for collecting primary data as part of qualitative methodologies (Roberts-Holmes, 2014; Mukherji and Albon, 2015). Therefore, one method of research I used is observations of children. This method is said to be one of the most ‘…frequently used forms of first-hand evidence collection’ (Roberts-Holmes, 2014, p.95). The ‘unstructured observations’ (Roberts-Holmes, 2014, p.100) were carried out in children’s classrooms as this was a familiar, naturalistic environment for the participants. After analysing my data, I decided not to include the observations in my research as they were not revealing and rich in data.

Through exploring research, it became apparent that researchers interpret social situations in different ways depending on the assumptions, beliefs and values derived from previous experiences (Mukerji and Albon, 2015). Considering this, it became clear that to ensure validity in my research, I should include triangulation (Roberts-Holmes, 2014). For this reason, I chose to conduct ‘semi-structured interviews’ (Roberts-Holmes, 2014, p.133) as my second method to consider the perspectives of teachers and children, as well as my own interpretation.
Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to focus on the research subject but at the same time, be sufficiently flexible to allow the respondent to take the discussion in a different direction or elaborate on points that are important to them (Roberts-Holmes, 2014). Mukherji and Albon (2015, p.151) further highlight the flexibility of this method through suggesting that ‘…the interviewer can clarify what the interviewee is trying to say, and can investigate areas as they emerge’. This method was appropriate for my research as I interviewed Reception and Year One class teachers and children to understand their perspectives. For all of the interviews, I ensured that I used open questions to best suit the needs of the interviewee (Mukherji and Albon, 2015). The interviews with the children were in focus groups for the purpose of encouraging each child to articulate their thoughts and to ensure children felt comfortable and relaxed (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2010; Walker and Solvason, 2015). In contrast, I interviewed the teachers individually to ensure they would share their own perspectives without the limitation of being influenced by others (Mukherji and Albon, 2015).

The choice to involve children in this research was based on my beliefs that children’s perspective of the way they learn is of high importance. The National Children’s Bureau (NCB) support this idea through suggesting that children are ‘…social actors who have a right to be involved in research about issues of concern to them.’ (Shaw, Brady, and Davy, 2011, p.4). During the interviews with children, I provided each child with a drawing template (appendix 11, p.67) for them to complete drawings of their perception of learning in Reception and Year One. I interviewed the children whilst they were completing their drawings to allow them to represent their answers in a different format. Anning and Ring (2004) suggest that children’s drawings can provide a rich insight into children’s thinking and can act as a tool for communication.

Unquestionably, the methods used in qualitative research must be both reliable and valid for me to make appropriate conclusions (Mukherji and Albon, 2015; Walker and Solvason, 2015). I have ensured reliability and validity through accurately representing the voices and experiences of the participants (Roberts-Holmes, 2014).

Ethics
Ethical considerations are particularly important if the research ‘…involves people’ (Arthur et al, 2012, p.35). Considering this, my research has been conducted in line with my ethical protocol (appendix 2) and with careful consideration for the British Educational Research Association’s ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011). Clough and Nutbrown (2012, p.60) highlight the need for ‘…careful thought’ about the permissions sought for research. As a result, I did not begin the research process until I had received the signed consent forms from all participants and the parents.
of the young participants. Children were provided with a child friendly consent form to complete prior to the interviews (appendix 8). This was with regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 1989), as Article 12 states that ‘children have the right to be consulted and taken account of, to have access to information, to freedom of speech and opinion and to challenge decisions made on their behalf’ (Morrow and Richards, 1996, p.91). To begin each interview with all participants, I explained the schedule for the duration of the interview and confirmed that the participants were willing to proceed. I reassured the participants that I would respect their decision to withdraw from the interview at any point. For the purpose of confidentiality, the participants and schools involved in this research have remained anonymous in line with the ethics protocol (appendix 2). For confidentiality and convenience purposes, the schools and participants involved in this research have been given pseudonyms. Furthermore, all research documents have been stored in a data protected location to uphold confidentiality.

Results and analysis

The research findings demonstrate a variation of philosophies between the two participating schools although both schools promote play-based learning in the Reception classes. The classrooms are set up to cater for play-based learning with careful planning and resources. In school 1, the majority of space in the Year One classroom was used for desks and chairs which highlights the pedagogy used by the class teacher to promote formal learning. In comparison, in school 2, the Year One classroom is set up to provide a balance of formal learning experiences and play-based learning opportunities with a large role-play area.

Pedagogy

Reflecting upon the interviews with teachers, it is clear that teachers’ individual pedagogy reflects their preferred teaching approach in the classroom (Sandberg and Heden, 2011). Three out of four of the teachers suggested that a balance of pedagogical approach between play-based learning opportunities and formal learning would be most appropriate for children in Year One. This is illustrated in the following extract:

‘I think part of the day should be formal but part of the day should be play-based.’

(Reception teacher at school 1, appendix 12a)

As previously mentioned, teachers are often under pressure to cover academic content in Year One (Brooker and Edwards, 2010; Sandberg and Heden 2011). The interviews demonstrated that
teachers could not always teach with the ‘balance’ of pedagogy they would like, due to the curriculum demands. This is demonstrated in the statement below:

‘I think there needs to be a balance in Year One, but there is a bigger pressure with the National Curriculum, the EYFS is more relaxed.’

(Reception teacher at school 2, appendix 12b)

There is some research that highlights the need for formal learning approaches only in the Year One curriculum (Walsh et al, 2011). The Year One teacher from school 1 promotes formal learning approaches only in his classroom. He suggested that due to the rise in expectations for children in Year One, there is a need for formal learning approaches. He does not believe that play-based learning would support the growing expectations underpinned by the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) (appendix 13a).

Children’s perceptions and drawings
Through interviewing children in both Reception and Year One over two schools, I was able to gain an understanding of children’s shared perceptions of learning approaches. It was clear through analysing the data that the majority of children associated ‘learning’ with teaching and formal learning approaches.

When children were asked to draw pictures of their learning experiences in Reception, the majority of children explained that they were ‘playing’ (appendix 16b). Considering this reflects the pedagogical approach used in the Reception classes at both schools. In contrast, a participant stated their Reception class drawing was them:

‘...sat on the floor with the floor with the teacher, counting using Tinkerbelle.’

(Mollie, appendix 14a)

This demonstrates the child acknowledging the adult’s role within their Reception play-based experiences, supporting the previously discussed idea of scaffolding children’s learning (Vygotsky, 1978). However, when children were asked to complete drawings of their learning experiences in
Year One, the drawings were widely associated with ‘work’ and formal learning (appendix 16b, p.81). This is illustrated in the following extracts from children explaining their drawings:

‘This is a picture of me sat at my table doing hard work.’
(Millie, appendix 15a)

‘This is me doing hard spellings on a test at my table.’
(George, appendix 15b)

The majority of children explained the class they preferred was Reception because of the play-based learning opportunities. Therefore, children have shared their perspectives of ‘…play as extra important.’ (Sanberg and Heden, 2011, p.316). This is demonstrated in the following account:

‘…I like Reception best because we got to play more and do less work.’
(Anna, appendix 15b)

As previously mentioned, not all children learn best from play-based learning experiences (Brooker and Edwards, 2010). Considering this, a participant from the Reception class demonstrated an interest in formal learning through stating:

‘I think I will like Year One best because you get to do lots of hard writing and maths.’
(Chloe, appendix 14a).

This indicates that this participant enjoys being challenged by the formal approaches to learning and prefers the potential formal learning environment in Year One to the play-based environment of Reception.

When the children were asked to compare how they learn in Reception and Year One, a participant stated that:
Through considering these results, it is evident that children have differing preferences on the approach that underpins their own learning. There is a clear pattern of children’s understanding about learning in Reception and Year One. Children have perceived learning in Reception as ‘play’ and not acknowledged the learning that underpins play. For Year One, children have perceived learning as ‘work’. As previously mentioned, a mixed play-based and formal approach may cater for all children’s preferred ways of learning (Sylva et al, 2010). This would be an approach I would consider for my future practice as a Year One teacher.

Children’s perceptions of talk
During the interviews, children were asked which class gave them most opportunity to talk. The participants’ responses provided a variety of perspectives to answer this question. Some children suggested that both classes provided equal opportunity for talk time. However, some children made links between the opportunity for talk and play-based learning, as illustrated in the following extract:

| ‘In Reception, you have to do hard work. In Reception, you get to play.’ |
| (William, Year One, appendix 15a) |

Evidently, the children shared an understanding that Year One did not provide as many opportunities for talking as Reception. Similarly, all children discussed the relationship between ‘work’ and ‘play’ and established that talk was most common during play-based learning in Reception. The following accounts demonstrate children’s perceptions:

| ‘In Reception, we get to do learning and talk at the same time.’ |
| (William, appendix 15a) |

| ‘...you don’t get to do much talking in Year One, you have to get on with your work with no talking.’ |
| (Rhi, appendix 15b) |

| ‘In Year One, you can’t talk because there’s lots of work to do. You can talk more in Reception because there’s less work.’ |
| (Anna, appendix 15b) |
Undoubtedly, this demonstrates the participants’ understanding of the ‘work’ pressures on teachers and children in Year One. Furthermore, this clarifies the limited opportunities that children have to develop their spoken language abilities in Year One, highlighting the need for some play-based opportunities.

**Teachers’ perspectives of spoken language**

During the interviews, teachers were asked to explain their view of play-based learning in supporting early communication. There was a shared understanding between the teachers that play-based learning was effective for developing children’s communication skills, as illustrated in the following extract:

| ‘Play-based learning is **huge** for developing conversation skills!’ |
| (Year One class teacher interview, appendix 13b) |

Two out of four teachers recognised the previously mentioned current concerns for children’s early language development through explaining that children who have not experienced nursery, often do not have the communication skills of those who have. This is demonstrated in the following accounts:

| ‘...Children who don’t experience nursery do not have the communication skills of those that have...I do think [play-based learning] is important for communication skills.’ |
| (Year One class teacher interview, appendix 13a) |

| ‘Some children have never been to nursery so have had very little interaction with other children.’ |
| (Reception teacher interview, appendix 12b) |

These responses highlight that children who have not been to nursery will need extra support with their communication skills. However, this leads me to question whether this support in Reception would be enough for these children? It seems that children who start school with poor early language development would need play-based experiences to promote the development of their
language beyond the EYFS. As previously mentioned, this would be particularly beneficial for children who have backgrounds of poverty (Save the Children, 2014).

Teachers were asked to give their opinion of how a formal approach supports language development. There was a shared understanding between the four teachers that the formal approach to learning was not considered as helpful for language development. This suggests the importance of play-based learning opportunities to develop spoken language.

Additionally, teachers were asked to give their opinion on how play-based learning opportunities would make a positive contribution to developing spoken language in Year One. Two of the four teachers suggested that a role-play area would provide spoken language opportunities. A Year One class teacher gave an interesting answer to this question as illustrated in the following extract:

‘I think this would only be possible if the play was very structured, but then I question – Is that play? You could have the best intentions for play but play is play! I am not saying it is a waste of time but there are more appropriate ways of teaching for spoken language.’

(Year One class teacher interview, appendix 13a)

Through considering previously discussed literature, this perspective demonstrates the difficulty teachers face with defining play (Grieshaber and Mcardle, 2010; McInnes et al, 2011; Wilson, 2015). Furthermore, this extract highlights the contrasting pedagogies of the teachers I have interviewed.

Conclusion

The research conducted here suggests that all teachers had a different understanding of the value of play-based learning, this was dependant on their pedagogy. I believe additional research is required to study the links between play, learning and pedagogy for teachers to develop a better understanding of how these aspects work together (McInnes et al, 2011). Through considering the literature and research in this study, it is clear that adopting a play-based learning approach beyond the EYFS (DfE, 2014) could cause issues for teachers. Teachers are experiencing top-down pressures to cover academic content for children to reach their targets. An example of this would be the compulsory Year One Phonics Screening check. As a result, a formal learning approach is
adopted in Year One with little opportunity for play-based experiences. (Brooker and Edwards, 2010; Fisher, 2011; Sandberg and Heden, 2011).

It is important to note that the two schools that participated in this research are both small, one form entry schools in rural areas. This highlights the limitations of small-scale qualitative research as it is not possible to generalise the findings on a wider scale (Roberts-Holmes, 2014). However, the research has allowed me to develop an understanding of teachers’ and children’s perspectives of play-based learning and spoken language development. In future, I will ensure my practice as a teacher is based on a pedagogy which encourages both play-based learning and spoken language development for Year One children.

Finally, after evaluating the findings and associated literature, I would recommend that School 1 considers implementing a role-play area in the Year One classroom to cater for children’s differing spoken language abilities. Through doing this, the class teacher would provide some play-based learning opportunities for the children to complement a more formal pedagogical approach. This would also provide some continuity for children moving from Reception and support the transition process as they become more used to learning in Year One.

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