

## *Abstract*

This dissertation conveys the findings of a qualitative investigation into EY practitioners' perceptions of the role of pretend play as a facilitator of child learning and development. Having established via a literature review that pretend play is crucial for children's social, cognitive, linguistic and physical development, and noting that policy frameworks often devalue pretend play, the researcher has consulted practitioners *themselves* on these issues. The study conducted semi-structured interviews of a small sample of EY practitioners and a focus group to collect data. Thematic analyses were performed to code data; seven themes emerged. These themes are discussed with reference to prior research findings; far more can be done to empower practitioners, already well aware of the importance of pretend play, to deepen their knowledge of pretend play's role in EY settings; organising more pretend-play related training is one key recommendation made in this respect.

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# Introduction

Play is essential to children's (and indeed adults') lives. Defining "play" in simple, perhaps crude and easily discernible terms is conceptually challenging and empirically problematic. Children's definitions of play are often hugely discrepant compared to adult definitions, for example (Wing, 1995). Play, it has been argued (Vygotsky, 1967), is central to the very consciousness of childhood, since the fundamental process and overarching structure of mind in the child is one characterised by coming to understand the world around him/her via interpretive procedures of cross-checking patterns and meanings (Vygotsky, 1967). Play has at times been crudely defined according to adult-centred notions of silliness, "unrealistic ideas", fantasy and myth, but these propositions are simply evidence that most adults misconceive the importance of play and – moreover – its critical functional role in learning. Nevertheless, despite "play" being a constantly contested and heatedly confusing concept or operationalised practice, the definition assumed here is a child-centred one and boils down to this: play describes children's interactions with their physical environment, their schemas of conceptual explanation, their cognitive pattern making faculties and their social environment which are unstructured and unmediated by adult norms or instructions (Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011). Taken together, this indicates that play is core to learning, since children achieve a degree of coherence between ideas, objects and social realities by engaging in play. This is a broad definition, so the proceeding section highlights key 'types' of pretend play.

We also know that *pretend* play is an integral and innate activity among children. Various forms of *pretend* play distinguish from one another. For starters, pretend play can be an intrapersonal activity, whereby the child is alone and uses his/her imaginary constructs to mimic or replicate a "real" activity and/or a fantasy situation; conversely, pretend play can be a socio-interpersonal activity whereby different children develop a collective subjective imaginary situation; here, they negotiate principles of action and roles, rules and responsibilities of interaction (Fein, 1981). Another important distinction is between materially orientated pretend play and conceptually orientated pretend play. In the former, objects, props and the tangible world of materials are used to symbolise significant items and articles which are central to the play; in the latter, abstracted and conceptual ideas are used in place of the tangible and observable world of materials; here, children may leap over non-existent objects, or throw and brandish non-existent objects into the air. The important point of emphasis here is that symbolic and conceptually challenging thinking emerges as a key benefit/outcome of conceptual pretend play, whilst materially orientated play enables children to realise concepts from empirics (Matthews, 1977). This study seeks to ascertain what EY practitioner perceptions of the role and value of pretend play are; it seeks to know (i) whether and how EY practitioners value and understand pretend play as a key driver of child learning and development; (ii) how EY practitioners already facilitate pretend play in the nursery; (iii) what obstacles to encouraging pretend play they encounter; and (iv) what they feel could be done to improve their capability to encourage pretend play among children as a learning and development tool.

The dissertation begins by reviewing the wider academic and policy literatures pertaining to pretend play; it then presents the methodology of the ensuing study, also discussing the ethical considerations behind it; from this proceeds the findings presented both in transcribed form and as themes briefly highlighted by the researcher; this is followed by a more detailed and analytical discussion of the findings, explored with reference to the prior research literature; finally, the limitations of the study are acknowledged and some iterative recommendations for on-going improvement of pretend play policy and practice are made.

# Literature Review

## *Overview*

This section provides an up to date survey and iterative analysis of the literature pertaining to play, pretend play and the relationship/s between pretend play and learning (both cognitive-intellectual and social-perceptive) as well as child development. These works are largely academic in origin and in terms of audience, but the review herein also links the key findings to the policymaking culture in the UK, the Early Years Statutory Framework (EYFS) and the Nutbrown Review of Qualifications and Training in Early Years (EY) settings. The theoretical and empirical defences of pretend play as a driver of learning are contrasted with the policy trend away from allotting time, space and training to pretend play engagement; this emerging trend, combined with the increasingly data-driven educational role of EY practitioners, forms a necessary rationale for this study, because it becomes vital to know (i) what practitioners do know and perceive about pretend play and learning; and (ii) whether they themselves consider their training and working environment to facilitate the use of pretend play as a learning tool.

## *Parental Involvement in Pretend Play*

There is strong evidence that parents can have an instrumental effect on children's willingness and capability to benefit from, and learn from, pretend play (Melzer and Palermo, 2016). By interacting with their children and crafting playfully the language which is deployed to negotiate and define the nature and interactions within the pretend play scenario, parents can help to boost the complexity and logic of the pretend play and help children conceptualise and practise more complex systems of thought (Fein and Fryer, 1995). It has been argued that because children learn from their primary caregivers when it comes to engaging in and designing pretend play scenarios, parental involvement has the potential to pass on parent skills in this respect to their offspring (Nielsen & Christie, 2008).

In contrast to this argument, however, some researchers have contended that parental involvement can, in fact, hinder the development of creativity and imagination among children (see Farver and Wimbarti, 1995). These arguments posit that children can be hindered in their own abilities to develop scenarios and to engage in symbolic and abstracted thought, because parents may be inclined to lead, conceive and dictate the pretend play (Melzer and Palermo, 2016). Contrary to the notion that parental involvement can facilitate children in making, designing and partaking in increasingly complex systems of pretend play, it is argued elsewhere that parents being dictatorial and decisive in the process in actual fact inhibits the child because he/she is not encouraged to use his/her own critical reasoning faculties but rather to follow and accord with the parents' dictates (Fein and Fryer, 1995).

Parental intervention in role playing can hinder children's development of critical interpersonal and friendship-building skills, not least because by intervening the parents are dissuading the child from engaging in the process of constructing meanings (both introspective and shared) and the process of creating discursively coherent patterns and systems of ideas and roles which

the children use to understand a range of social interactions (Broadhead, Howard and Wood, 2010). 'Play can create sites for cultural production, where children create individual and group identities which are imbued with their own imaginative interpretations and meanings.' (Whitebread et al., 2009: 20). By making role playing scenarios led and managed according to adult decisions and designs, identity formation and the child's confidence in shaping his/her own identity and associations are hampered (Broadhead, Howard and Wood, 2010).

The next section thus draws from a wide range of empirical literature in academia to explore the value of pretend play.

### ***The Value of Play for Child Learning and Development***

Play is evidenced as being vital for child learning and development. As Coffman (2015: 18) has argued, 'play nourishes every aspect of children's development. It forms the foundation of intellectual, social, physical and emotional skills necessary for success in schools and in life'. As Fisher (2008: 140 cited in Moyles 2010: 82) argues, play is important for children's learning and development as it 'naturally encourages cooperation and collaboration, requires the use of fine and gross motor skills and cognitive application. It is pleasurable, but also helps children face pains and sorrow. It is consuming and challenging and motivating'. Bruce (2011) argues that not only is play important but it also supports them in building their confidence as they learn to explore, think about problems, and relate to peers (see also Hutchin, 2013). Play is emphasised in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curricula as a key component. Play and exploration are the combined first items of the three characteristics of effective learning that are highlighted in the EYFS. Bruce et al. (2010 in Hutchin, 2013: 82) state that 'play is an integrating mechanism. Play organises children's thinking's, feelings, relationships and physical body so that everything comes together'. Play provides children with 'opportunities for relaxation and recreation' through imaginary play (Wood, 2013: 22).

### ***Play, Language Acquisition & Cognitive Development***

Robson (2012) argues that play has a positive impact on children's language and cognition. Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) have both outlined theoretical frameworks which link pretend play to language acquisition. Bergen (2002: 2) states that pretend play requires children to transform 'object and actions symbolically, it is furthered by interactive social dialogue and negotiation, and it involve talking, script knowledge, and improvisation'. Bergen (2002) concludes in her meta-study that a high quality of pretend play might support children with linguistic development. Dockett (1998) has pointed to evidence indicating that children involved in shared pretend situations, wherein communication is viewed as an essential part of the play, foster cognitive development more effectively.

By engaging in symbolic representation children develop their capability in terms of abstraction (Robson, 2012). Vygotsky has argued that imaginative play supports children in thinking in more mature ways than does outside play; he stated that 'in play a child always

behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour, in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself' (Vygotsky, 1978: 102). Rogers and Evans (2008) support Vygotsky's ideas; they identify a range of ways in which role play has a positive impact on child learning and development.

Dockett (1998) posits two types of communication that children may use when they are engaged in socio-dramatic pretend play. Firstly, they may use pretend communication; children use this when they talk in their pretend role. When children are doing this, they are taking on the subjective persona of another person, imitating the way they speak, their tone of voice or by using particular vocabulary. What the children are demonstrating is that they have the ability to take on another viewpoint, as they are thinking about how that person may act and what they may say. The second type of communication is referred to as meta-communication, or 'verbal statement'; this is used to explain the way in which the message of the pretend play should be interpreted (Robson, 2012: 145). It conveys the messages that they are engaged in symbolically acting out in play, and it signals and defines the behaviours which are considered symbolically appropriate. Dockett (1998: 113) expands on this notion, and argues that meta-communication serves a vital function as it 'separate[s], in an explicit manner, real from pretend play'. Meta-communication is understood by all the players, even if the 'player steps outside the player frame or outside their adopted role' to provide direction or to amend the rules of interaction. The children are, Dockett argues, always able to distinguish between the real and the imaginary. Meta-communication sets the context and offers guidance and direction 'as to the ongoing nature of the play' (Dockett, 1998: 113).

Jenvey and Newton (2015) argue that another benefit of pretend play is enhanced social interaction with peers; they associate pretend play with children developing social competence, because the negotiations around context and meaning provide children with opportunities to interact, cooperate, offer critique and share. Vygotsky (1978; cited in Else, 2014: 11) developed the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development whereby he argued that communication and interaction with others is crucial for children's construction of new knowledge, and that 'through play children [are] capable of behaving beyond their age, above their usual everyday behaviour'.

The following sections discuss first Vygotsky's theory and then Piaget's counter theory of child development, in terms of play and imagination specifically.

### ***Theoretical Explanations***

#### ***How Children Learn from Play: Vygotsky, Higher Mental Functioning, Self-Regulation and Imagination-Building***

Vygotsky (1978) has influenced theory of play and theorisation of the relationship between play and learning like no other educational thinker. Much recent and longer-standing scholarship owes homage to Vygotsky insofar as his theories and concepts help to explain the cognitive mechanisms by which play becomes a learning activity at different levels of intellectual, social, intrapersonal and physical ability and development. Vygotsky (1978)



generates a cultural-sociohistorical framework for understanding the nature and sub-processes of cognitive development and learning in which natural and bio-driven (independent of environmental) aspects of brain development interact with and mutually affect the processes of acquiring cultural inheritance (learning about his/her society) and interacting with other people to construct idiosyncratic meanings and ideas. Through interpersonal communication with peers, teacher practitioners and caregivers/family, the child is thus construed as restructuring basic and biological brain responses to fit his/her culture and its normative and ritual lifeworld (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky thus refers to “lower” functions of mind (the bio-physical-sensory) and “higher” functions (empathy, symbolic thought, intentional and purposive action-in-the-world and shared understandings of the world).

Vygotsky (1978) also links play directly to children’s sense of agency, control (over self and environment), sovereignty over perception and ideas, and their ability to self-regulate their effective learning. It is precisely at the moment of engaging in play that the child, according to Vygotsky, creates and enters his/her own “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1987); in the Zone of Proximal Development, the child is entering a stage of learning (of a particular skill or piece of knowledge) which sees him/her neither being at the stage whereby he/she needs full and total teacher guidance, or at the stage wherein he/she can be said to have dispensed of the teacher (Vygotsky, 1987). By engaging the child in pretend play, the child is encouraged to partake in imaginative and pattern making cognition whereby he/she can scale up his/her grasp of key skills, thus learning to learn (Vygotsky, 1987). Play therefore comprises perhaps the purest stage of educational development – it enables the child to “own” and control his/her own learning (of anything, anywhere). This can be clearly linked back to the evidence that engaging in play can boost confidence and a sense of safety in children (see Guha, 1987).

### ***An Alternative Theoretical Explanation: Piaget’s Three Stages (of Play Development)***

Piaget’s (1962) notion of play-as-learning aligns directly with his wider implicatory framework or spectrum of child development and human cognition; Piaget (1962) therefore maps each form of pretend play behaviour onto accordant stages in thought development. Piaget (1962) differs from Vygotsky in his precept of what play is. Whereas Vygotsky holds that play is intrinsically a learning activity which children engage in to develop skills though at an unconscious level, Piaget argues that play is distinguished from other forms of child behaviour by the fact that it is done simply for pleasure. Piaget’s “stage 1” – the sensorimotor stage of development – the child uses external material objects during adult-led play to separate meaning from action; this is often enacted through activities such as viewing pictures of apples and identifying that they accord with the word “apple”. But Piaget emphasises that this stage is only a formative preparation for “stage 2” in which imaginative competencies come to the cognitive foreground (Lillard, 2015).

Having thus far defended pretend play as a driver of learning, and having framed this against a wider theory of development, the task is now to deepen our understanding of how early years practitioners themselves can build and improve on pedagogies of (pretend) play to facilitate children’s learning. The next section does this.

## ***Early Years Practitioners and the Merits of Pedagogies of Play***

Bodrova and Leong (2007) argue that protracted periods of play (lasting many days) can help children to foster self-regulation of learning, planning skills and memory recall and storage skills. There are many authors – both academic and policy advisers – who have posited that the introduction of purposive pedagogical approaches and methods, geared to symbolic construction and the generation of imaginative systems of rules, can help to stimulate agency in on-going learning among children as young as five or six (Van Oers, 1996). Precisely in the way Vygotsky describes, Van Oers (1996) draws from a wealth of empirical material to show that children who role play, design meaningful symbols and create fantasy or quasi-real life scenarios during play are engaged in a form of semiotic action; Bodrova and Leong (2007) state that such semiotic activities can and should be facilitated (though, as above, not adult-led) by EY practitioners. Some relatively recent policy reviews, including notably the Nutbrown Review of Early Years Qualifications and Training, have indicated that play is to be fostered amply in EY settings, and, indeed, that EY practitioners must “understand” play:

*‘We know that play is fundamental to children’s wellbeing, learning and development, and it is essential that early years practitioners understand, value and support young children’s play in its various forms, from babyhood and throughout their early years.’*

Nutbrown Review, 2012

Despite this clear and poignant argument that play is critical to learning and development, there are several barriers to tangibly implementing play in EY settings; these are discussed in the following section.

### ***Key Barriers to Implementing and Encouraging Play***

Sustaining, encouraging and driving pedagogies of play as coherent and valid aspects of operationalised practice in EY settings is difficult, because of a lack of policymaker clarity as to what play means and how it can be facilitated in actual practice. Bennett, Wood and Rogers (1997) have conveyed the significant challenges that their sample of reception stage teacher participants had encountered in “applying” play as a learning tool / driver and “implementing” the theory they have learned in formal training pertaining to play. Manning and Sharp (1977) noted long ago the absence of clear demarcations between “structured” and “unstructured” play, and “child-centred” and “adult-led” play; some of these confusing tensions may have been resolved somewhat, especially in the case of child-centred play because child-centred provision in education is a theme which has moved leaps and bounds since the 1970s. However, there is still a patent lack of training for EY professionals in terms of the attributes of play, how play interrelates with learning overall, and how practitioners can better orchestrate, facilitate and evaluate play to make it have a learning impact.

*‘It is almost universally accepted within the world of early years education that children learn through play. However, establishing the psychological processes involved, and the precise nature of the learning involved, has proved to be difficult. Play is an*

*extremely difficult phenomenon to define and, perhaps because of its essential spontaneity and unpredictability, has presented significant challenges to researchers.'*

(Whitebread et al., 2009: 40).

The other key barrier to enabling and evolving a pedagogy of play is that policymakers and government officials often have instrumentalised agendas for EY educationalists (Bodrova 2008; Broadhead, Howard and Wood 2010). Structural obstacles to fleshing out a sustained pedagogy of play are often the result of (i) political and ideological interests (for example when Ministers seek to state that their EY agenda is aligned to other Ministries' objectives) and (ii) a growing trend towards high-level policymaker governance over teachers and teaching (see above) (Markström and Halldén, 2009). What this means for practitioners in EY education is that the skills held to be of importance in the profession are being replaced with targets and performance indicators that prove teachers are adhering to these politically infused goals. Hence, for many, the argument made in the Nutbrown review that EY qualifications needed to be more rigorous and the profession more empowered and distinguished is not being heeded:

*'The current early years qualifications system is not systematically equipping practitioners with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to give babies and young children high quality experiences. We must be certain that the two-year-olds receiving the free entitlement are experiencing early education and care of the highest quality possible. This must come from talented, sensitive people with the appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes to support young children's learning and development through exploration and play.'*

Nutbrown Review, 2012

The fact that there are severe barriers to practitioners seeking to encourage pretend play and all forms of play necessitates a further inquiry as to how policy making officials and political agendas may shape and define this situation on the ground level. The next sections relate the barriers that EY practitioners encounter to broader trends in education.

### ***Why is Play Constrained? Policy & Curricula Agendas as Obstacles to Play & Improvisation***

The policy world in the UK seems to formally recognise play (and indeed pretend play) as being a central driver of and function of children's learning (Hutchin, 2013) and yet the contemporary framework for early years education (the EYFS) affords only limited and unexplored reference to precisely how play helps to facilitate learning and – moreover – how practitioners can “use” play to aid and hasten child learning and development (Skinner, 2016). A recent Ofsted (2015) report found that the most effective leaders of the most successful EY providers tend not to conceptualise play as being essentially differentiated from teaching itself. ‘In every playful encounter we observed, adults, consciously or otherwise, were teaching. They were making important decisions about the resources they used and the questions they asked.’ (Ofsted, 2015: 7-8). The report found across the sector that leaders were acutely aware of how young children learn via play and playfulness and how crucial play is for social, cognitive and

emotional development. Adult practitioners in EY settings were reported to have created spaces in which children could engage in imaginative and creative ideational exploration (ref).

As the Ofsted review contends, play is properly construed of as child-centred or child-initiated:

*'In contrast to adult-led activity, child-initiated activity is rooted in play. Children choose where, when and what they want to do; it lasts as long as the activity interests and engages them. Children are free to select the resources and materials they want to use; whether they want to work on their own or with friends; and whether they want to do so inside or outdoors. There is no predetermined outcome in mind. Children are free to engage with the materials provided or those they access themselves from elsewhere in the setting, in any way they wish.'*

Ofsted (2015: 9)

A key factor behind the constraints to improvisation, the encouragement of play and practitioner-led pretend play activities is the overarching devaluation of play in policy discourse – this is discussed henceforth.

### ***The Devaluation of Play in Policy Discourse: An Inhibitor of Teacher Freedom & Competence***

A range of policy interventions and programmes of reform, training, legislation and frameworks for guidance have been launched over the past decade aimed to support EY learning and access to quality EY teaching and care (Faulkner and Coates, 2013; Lloyd, 2015). From Blair's Sure Start programme to the Coalition Government's EYFS, play is frequently referred to in terms of what constitutes quality provisions, and yet prefixes such as "structured" and "planned" are disproportionately attached to the suffix "play" (Lloyd, 2015). Furthermore, play is in practice actually shunned and limited as a legitimate learning process and instrument, partly because there is a distinct lack of definitional clarity as to what "play" is and certainly as to how play informs learning and how practitioners can appropriately encourage and facilitate it (Faulkner and Coates, 2013). Play is thus often devalued by parents and practitioners because policy documents and practical frameworks do not portray it as being relevant to learning needs, child development or the child's future (Faulkner and Coates, 2013). This devaluation of play in policy discourse and documentation in turn devalues the practitioner as a working-knowledge rich resource in the work done with children in EY (Elkind, 2001). EY practitioners often see themselves as intending to understand and empathise with the "voice" of children and their needs via intuition, communication and contextually specific interaction/s (Elkind, 2001).

The alternative model for practitioner approaches to children's learning – one in which the practitioner is trusted and his / her ability to feel their way through ever-changing child learning needs and respond to them accordingly – is a declining reality in EY (Lindon and Trodd, 2016). In this radical version, the practitioner approaches the child with far less preconceived visions of how they need to be taught, what their needs are and what objective the teaching and care has for the child (Roy, 2003). Here the practitioner is freed up to use his / her experience,

working knowledge, emotional sensitivity and communicative ability in order to facilitate child learning in a range of ways, including via pretend play (Roy, 2003). The practitioner in such a radically different system would not be pressed to meet standardised agendas dictated by policymakers, but rather to create spaces, activities and experiences for the children which are to some degree emergent as children's learning needs evolve and themselves emerge. Sadly (in my opinion) the contemporary policy culture and discourse, driven as it is by frameworks of standardised, one-size-fits-all models of child development, and aligned with wider strategic (economically orientated) government interests, are averse to this kind of practitioner approach.

### ***Conclusion: A Gap in the Literature***

I have chosen this topic because (i) there is ample evidence that pretend play is crucial in child learning and development; yet (ii) the policy world seems to neglect, ignore and/or hush this evidence, or at least has done little to honour it by facilitating practitioners in engaging children in pretend play; and (iii) policymakers have, indeed, enacted reforms which have hindered the deployment of pretend play as a learning tool; finally (iv) despite the Nutbrown Review's clear emphasis that skilled, well-trained EY practitioners make for outstanding learning outcomes in children throughout their education, practitioners' own perspectives are seldom if ever considered in terms of pretend play specifically in the wider research. The review of the literature has discerned that pretend play can be loosely defined as children's interactions with their physical environment, their schemas of conceptual explanation, their cognitive pattern making faculties and their social environment which are unstructured and unmediated by adult norms or instructions. The review identified that there may be some gender differences in children's preferences for certain types of pretend play; it also identified that parents play a key role in encouraging pretend play but to a certain extent can serve to constrain its valuable impact on child learning. The review evidenced that there is clearly a strong argument that pretend play is vital for child learning and development, and it framed this in a wider theoretical framework of cognitive and social development. A key finding here was that practitioners are limited and constrained in encouraging pretend play because of government political agendas and policymaking cultures geared to data analysis rather than free and intuitive pedagogies. The review overall has emphasised repeatedly that the strong evidence for play as a driver of learning is not 'honoured' in practice at the policy level, and that therefore practitioners on the ground are significantly held back in facilitating play in EY settings.

There is a distinct dearth of literature, however, pertaining to EY practitioner knowledge and awareness of what children learn through engagement with pretend play and how pretend play facilitates learning. Whilst the educational and psychological scholarly communities have empirically validated the notion that pretend play is central to enhanced and improved learning processes (authors) and whilst theorists such as Vygotsky have explained the cognitive-intellectual contribution made to learning by pretend play (authors), little research has linked these inalienable arguments to the policy, practice and curricula of EY practitioners. Studies abound insofar as proving the impact of pretend play activities on child learning in EY; given the established evidence that EY practitioners as a total workforce need to be upskilled and that standardised codes of practice and experience need to be generated and adhered to (Nutbrown,

2012), this gap in the research literature needs to be redressed. I have therefore posed the primary research question: *What are Early Years Practitioners' Perspectives on the Value and Role of Pretend Play in Children's Learning?*

# Methodology

## *Philosophical Considerations: Ontology, Epistemology & Methodology*

This study is grounded upon an anti-realist ontology, and an epistemology which asserts that it is human norms, values, attitudes and motivations which comprise the knowable in social science research (Bryman, 2016). What I refer to as the ‘anti-realist’ grounding of the study means that what the study implicitly considers to be “real” are interpretive and experiential human emotions, cognitions and beliefs (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This study’s background philosophy is therefore not orientated around statistically quantifiable data because collecting such data cannot tell me about the beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of the practitioners who form the sample (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). ‘Realist’ ontology – the opposite notion – claims that the social world and the practices within it that researchers investigate exists outside of these experiential discursively formulated meanings which social science research participants live out (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Anti-realist ontology opts to factor in these meanings as well as the socio-historical and cultural contexts of the research subjects and objects. ‘A fundamental principle of [this] social theory is that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them’ (Wendt, 1992: 396-7). Raw data which can be identified in the statistically utilisable form of objective events and patterns is thus not the orientation of this ontological position; instead, the psychologically and socially negotiated meanings and ideas (in this study, the practitioners’ perceptions of what children learn from pretend play) are the important focus of the analysis (Weber, 2013).

Epistemologically speaking, this study subscribes to the notion of social construction in terms of knowledge; I am interested in exploring the personal and subjective (albeit often socially and collectively formulated) views of the sample of practitioners on how and what children learn from engaging in pretend play. Therefore, the nature of the data I want to collect is not identifiable or worthy of analysis by mere observation nor by questioning participants via a closed-question survey, because these methods will not unearth the kind of knowledge relevant to the study – perceptive knowledge and beliefs (Weber, 2013). I hold the view that through discourses of meaning which are shared, reproduced, and often reified, people in all arenas of social life negotiate and comprehend such meanings (see Berger and Luckmann, 1991). This study is premised on the epistemological grounds that such experiential phenomena are what can really be ‘known’ by social researchers (Berger and Luckmann, 1991).

Methodologically, the present study is inductive in its reasoning and is qualitative in terms of the nature of the data, the data collection process and methods, and the mode of analysis. I am not testing the validity and reliability (Bryman, 2016) of preformulated and set hypotheses in laboratory settings; I am, instead, aiming to keep an open mind towards my subject matter, allowing themes and findings to emerge as they come during the interviews and focus group. I

will aim to be critically reflexive in order to remain aware of how I may influence the data and analyses because of my own subjective background and experiences and beliefs (see section below), but I will also very clearly aim to generate the themes in the data directly from the full range of answers given by the participants (Bryman, 2016). The study in this sense is 'inductive' because it 'inducts' the generalised conclusions from the full gambit of the answers/data rather than closing down topics and themes as variables in order to 'test' correlations etc (which is a deductive approach).

### ***Research Design***

The methodology used in this research study is qualitative. I have chosen to employ a qualitative framework because I want to collect and analyse data pertaining to early years practitioners' intrapersonal perspectives; using this methodological approach will enable me to increase my understanding of early years practitioner perceptions and attitudes towards pretend play. I am eager to obtain and understand the language and meanings which encapsulate the practitioners' views of pretend play, not the statistically significant, numeric kind of data which quantitative research collects. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding individual viewpoints and how these are formed as well as how they drive action (Norlan et al., 2013). Hacker (2001) argues that qualitative research methods provide the researcher with a range of responses to help drill down into depth, as it refers to people's thoughts, attitudes and opinions about a particular issue and detailed investigation of these is facilitated. In terms of criticisms, Atkins and Wallace (2012: 20) argue that qualitative research can be viewed as being 'too subjective' and 'too much based on feelings and personal responses'. Likewise, Nolan et al. (2013) argues that, because of the subjective nature of the research methodology and analytical framework, specific attention needs to be paid to ensuring the reliability and validity of the key findings.

### ***Research Questions***

**Primary Question:** *What are Early Years Practitioners' Perspectives on the Value and Role of Pretend Play in Children's Learning?*

- *What do the practitioners perceive the potential benefits of pretend play to children's learning to be?*
- *What is the role of training in encouraging practitioners to engage children in pretend play?*
- *What do the practitioners already do to encourage play?*
- *What do the practitioners believe can be done to improve the use of pretend play as a learning and development tool?*



## *Objectives*

1. To draw from the wide-ranging theoretical and empirical literature pertaining to pretend play to discern and explore the value and role of pretend play for children's learning.
2. To deepen researcher understanding of whether and how practitioners comprehend and perceive the effect of pretend play on child learning.
3. To collect qualitative data derived from interviews of EY practitioners and a focus group which, upon thematic analysis, provide indicative and iterative findings regarding the above question.
4. To refer back to the academic and policy literatures in discussing these findings so as to build on scholarly knowledge around practitioner understandings of pretend play and learning as linked concepts and practices.

## *Sampling Method*

Fifteen participants have volunteered to partake in the study. These fifteen participants are all early years practitioners. The participants were selected during a room leader training session wherein room leaders from different nursery placements came together, including myself. They agreed to partake in my research study provisionally. The study will provide each participant with an information letter and a consent form prior to conducting the interviews and focus groups. The leaders are from different settings; this will help to boost the validity of the findings.

The sample size is necessarily small because the study aims to drill in-depth into the meanings, concepts and beliefs/norms of the participants (see Holloway and Wheeler, 1996). All participants will be active and qualified Early Years practitioners, working in the same organisation where I am a leader and regular member of staff. I have easy access to this organisation, so the sampling method can be described as 'purposive' sampling.

The method of sampling used here is purposive sampling; the practitioners have been identified as being suited to the study objectives (Endacott and Botti, 2004). This form of contact-based sampling is commonplace in educational research (Sandelowski, 1995). I will approach the participants in person as well as via recorded and formal correspondence to invite them to voluntarily partake in the study. A sample of fifteen practitioners will then be asked to consent to being interviewed, on the premise that I have properly informed them of all facets of the study and the conditions of their participation (Seidman, 2013). The study is suited to having a small sample because of the type of experiential data I want to flesh out from the interviews / focus group (Rubenstein, 1994; Holloway and Wheeler, 1996).

### ***Data Collection Method #1: Semi-Structured Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are used here to collect the data. I have chosen these methods so as to obtain both intrapersonal (interviews) and interpersonally negotiated (focus groups) perspectives on pretend play. Semi structured interviews allow the interviewee space in which to express his/her thoughts and feelings about issues in his/her own terms, without *pre hoc* limitations to their responses being set (Page and Connell, 2012). Kortessluoma et al. (2003: 435, cited in Prior and Herwegan, 2016: 111) argue that these methods are suitable for researchers who want to explore the ‘world of experiences’, including subjective experiences and socially constructed interpretations of events, as well as emotions and feelings. These methods are hence deemed appropriate for this study because they will enable discussion of the practitioners’ past experiences of pretend play and its impacts and benefits, as well as enabling a free and open deliberative process focused around pretend play in general.

The reason for selecting semi-structured interviews for collecting the main body of data is that I wish to ascertain practitioner perceptions and knowledge about what children learn from pretend play, so an extended and relatively open-ended discussion with the practitioners will enable them to speak in their own words and terms (Bauman and May, 2014) about what they think comprises the learning merits of pretend play. The interviews will follow a structured ‘schedule whereby I will initiate certain key questions (see Annex XX) but the nature of the semi-structured interview is such that flexibility will be present, allowing and encouraging the practitioners interviewed to speak freely and on their own referential terms about what they believe children learn via pretend play (Bauman and May, 2014). My role will thus be to facilitate them by posing the questions and then probing them to discern exact meanings, ensure their full perceptions are captured and to ask them to elaborate on their statements (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006).

Clough and Nutbrown (2007) argue that this method also provides interviewees with the opportunity to speak openly. Bryman (2016) argues that another advantage of semi-structured interviews is the informality of the arrangement; this allows a connection to be established between the interviewee and the researcher. One core disadvantage of semi-structured interviews is that they often involve writing notes. It is difficult as a researcher to focus and to conduct the interview and write notes at the same time. As an interviewer I want to build a rapport with the early years practitioners participating in the research, as well as achieving a smooth and natural flow of conversation during the interview. Nolan et al. (2013) have argued that semi-structured interviews can be conversational and thus allow the researcher to create feelings of natural involvement on the part of the participant.

Interviews will be recorded on an audio device; the recorder will be placed proximate to the participant. Interviews will be transcribed by myself. This will enable me to immerse myself in the data and to deepen my understanding of the internal experiences of the practitioners of children engaging in pretend play and how and what they learn from it. The exact process of transcription covers the first stage in Braun and Clarke and Terry's (2012) approach to (thematic) analysis (see below).

In terms of criticisms, O'Hara et al. (2011) argue that one of the demerits of semi-structured interviews is that they are time-consuming for the researcher. They require considerable amounts of time and energy to be conducted, transcribed, coded and analysed. It can be difficult being an early years practitioner and interviewing practitioners, as this involves interfering with the very busy calendar schedule of the other early years professionals. Arthur et al. (2013) argue that another key disadvantage of interviews is that cancellations are common and non-consent is more likely.

### ***Data Collection Method #2: Focus Group***

I will also conduct a focus group to prompt deliberation and sense-check my findings from the interviews. I have chosen to use a focus group methodological instrument to garner collectively construed views about pretend play. Group interviews allow researchers to gather different opinions from individuals within a wider group setting. Arthur et al. (2013) argue that one advantage of the focus group is that it is a quicker way of collecting multiple perspectives about the research topic in an interactive and emotive environment, and this can only be achieved in a focus group. Through discussion and occasionally through dispute, the views and perceptions of the participants are built on further in this group setting. Halcomb et al. (2007: 1008) contend that this strength of the focus group helps to achieve a 'synthesis and validation of ideas and concepts, [through] the involvement of diverse groups of people and access to potentially a large number of participants'. Halcomb et al. (2007:1008) state, however, that focus groups can produce conflicts which result in the researcher handling the group interaction. Especially when sessions are poorly run, or when the researcher is not experienced and highly skilled, focus groups can produce a complex web of non-verbal and verbal responses from the members which can make interpretation and analysis a challenging task. Hopkins (2007) argues that group interviews can often produce poor quality data which result in a reduction of 'the quality of [the] insights overall' (see Arthur et al., 2013: 187).

However, the benefits of focus groups should not be underestimated. Arthur et al. (2013) argue that research participants may feel strongly about the research topic, and may enjoy discussing it with other participants who share the same or some of their concerns. Some participants may enjoy discussing a topic in a group and may feel more empowered within a group dynamic to answer freely, honestly and candidly about issues. I sincerely hope that the participants in this study derive a sense of confidence and strength from the group setting. I will manage and

mitigate power assertion in the group by one or several individuals, so as to empower all the participants in speaking freely and openly. Arthur et al. (2013) state that a key disadvantage of focus group is that they may not generate data suited to the research questions, and the focus group may discourage some participants from speaking due to low levels of confidence or relational disempowerment in the group. Arthur et al. (2013) argue, however, that focus groups can help the researcher to identify aspects of the interview data (the answers) which may be less valid in the real-world setting of social environments (Arthur et al., 2013).

The focus group will be used following the interviews to sense-check and validate the findings and conclusions I have drawn from the analyses of the interview data. Two core aims underpin this exercise: (i) I aim to engage the participants in a group discussion, whereby they can further elaborate on their individual answers by deliberating between themselves and supporting each other; and (ii) I want to use the second half of the session to develop some ideas, based on the participants' own experiences and arguments, as to how EY staff can learn more about how pretend play spurs child learning, and how improvements can be made so that such staff can facilitate and create space for pretend play in the future, as well as what constrains them from doing so.

I will conduct the focus group on nursery grounds. The first half of the session (which will run for a total of 2 hours) will convey the findings and themes to the participants present and will ask them if they would like to add, amend or delete anything. [Prior to this I will brief the attendants on confidentiality of their answers given, on the 'Chatham House' principle of not referring to what is said outside of the room and session, and on their right to withdraw any statements from official materials I write up for my dissertation.] During the second half of the focus group, I will (i) ask participants how they feel their work and environment could be improved so that pretend play could be facilitated and encouraged more; and (ii) ask participants about the barriers and constraints to they encounter in seeking to encourage pretend play.

In terms of criticisms, Halcomb et al. (2007) and Tolich (2009) have identified some core ethical dilemmas emerging in focus groups. These issues include those pertaining to confidentiality, as well as risks emerging from the collective nature of the method. They argue that during focus groups, it is not possible to provide full and secured confidentiality as all the participants are witness to the discussion. Tolich (2009) argues that these ethical issues can be overcome by informing research participants using information sheets which detail the risks involved in participation, and by the researcher reiterating at the beginning of the focus group that the responses of others are not to be discussed or disclosed outside of the session.

### ***Method of Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis***

This study deploys a simple and procedurally logical mode of analysing the data which results from the interviews and the focus group: thematic analysis. In this approach to analysing and making meaning from the raw data, the core messages, critical affinities in answers given and major points of emphasis made by the participants themselves are ordered and refined into themes (Braun, Clarke and Terry, 2012). ‘An inductive approach to data coding and analysis is a bottom-up approach and is driven by what is in the data. (...) What is mapped by the researcher during analysis closely matches the content of the data’ (Braun, Clarke and Terry, 2012: 58). The interviews will simply prompt and probe participants with broad-sweeping questions such as ‘what do you think the children you work with learn from engaging in pretend play?’ and / or ‘can you describe to me a time you’ve seen and heard a child learning something by engaging in pretend play?’ (see Annex XX); from the answers given, I will use Braun, Clarke and Terry’s (2012) six-stepped approach to thematic analysis to familiarise with, interpret, drill down into and characterise the key opinions and perceptions emerging therein.

Braun, Clarke and Terry’s (2012) claim that this approach enables researcher to engage logically in ‘coding and analyzing qualitative data systematically, which can then be linked to broader theoretical or conceptual issues’ (2012: 58). Their approach has six key steps in it:

Table 1. Six Steps of Thematic Analysis\*

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Process</b>
<i><b>Familiarisation with the Data</b></i>	Here I will immerse myself in the data from the interviews, making notes while listening live to the transcriptions, and I will keep in mind how the participants themselves frame and phrase their experiences of children learning from pretend play.
<i><b>The Generation of Initial Codes</b></i>	Here I will collate and group up my notes into provisional ‘codes’ which will comprise pithy statements that capture the recurring and most valued statements made by the interview participants.
<i><b>Capturing and Developing Themes</b></i>	Here I will identify whether one or a group of codes out of the aggregate whole comprise/s the apparently most important and insightful code/s so that from this/these I can develop themes in the form of ‘key message’ statements. At this stage, the themes are distinguished from the codes because they ‘hone into’ the world of the practitioner/s.

<b><i>Reviewing Initial Themes</i></b>	Here I will cross-reference the themes just identified with the full range of the data; I will critically assess whether I have missed anything out, ignored a crucial theme, under or overplayed a theme, and so on.
<b><i>Defining and Naming Themes</i></b>	This stage will require me to come back to the ‘thematising’ aspect and to refine and distill them so that they directly reflect the priorities and perceptions of the participants and so that they constitute clear expressions of the practitioners’ experiences and beliefs about how pretend play influences learning.
<b><i>Writing up the Analysis</i></b>	At the write up stage, it is important to use the participants’ own words, lexis and phrases in referring to and encapsulating the themes; I will therefore seek to remain critically reflexive so that I do not skew the data by imposing my own phrasing and wording.

\* See Braun, Clarke and Terry, 2012

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Wiles (2013) argues that all research generates ethical issues; some can be predicted before the research commences, but some have to be managed as the research is *proceeding*. This is because ethical challenges are unexpected and as a result of this they can emerge as the research unfolds. Wiles (2013) further argues that by managing ethical issues that emerge in reflective ways and by treating participants with respect, these issues do not need to threaten the integrity of the study. Cohen et al. (2007) argue that ethical concerns should be preserved when interviewing participants. Before conducting this research the participants will be fully informed as to confidentiality and anonymity; they will be informed as to what the purpose of the study is, how the data will be used and stored, what the key benefits and risks of participation are, and that consent is taken on an on-going basis (they can thus withdraw at any point and for any reason). This is done because all academic research needs to comply with ethical standards as embodied in the Research Ethics Code of the university. Pseudonyms will be used in this study to protect the identities of the applicants. Lawton (2001: 699 cited in Wiles, 2013:75) holds that researchers have a responsibility to ensure that ‘the data is collected in a sensitive, ethical and reflective manner’. Before analysing my data, I will ensure that the data are accurately recorded and transcribed. I will do this by using a narrator check, and by meeting with each participant so that they can check the notes and transcriptions and analyses of the interviews as well as my interpretation of their meaning (Arthur et al., 2013).

### ***Obtaining Clearance***

Ethical approval and clearance will be sought by the University Research Ethics Committee; I will also obtain clearance from the Local Education Authority as well as the senior management tier of the nursery itself (and if necessary the board of governors). The study will not commence whatsoever before these clearances have been obtained. I will provide all clearance bodies with the contact details for myself, my supervisor and (in the case of the nursery) the Ethics Committee. The Data Protection Act (1998) will be completely adhered to, and the study will adhere to the eight core principles of data protection therein.

### ***Ongoing Consent and Informing Participants***

The participants will be given a comprehensive letter which contains the full information about the study and its background as well as the terms and role of their participation in it. This sheet (see Annex XX) will ascertain the aims of the study and its core research question, and it will provide a brief and (as far as possible) neutral description of why the study is important and what it can contribute to research and practice in the early years. The letter will then explain that the participants are welcome to consent to partaking but on entirely voluntary terms; that they are free to withdraw from the study at any point, with no negative consequences of any kind being incurred; that the data collected via their interviews will in such cases be deleted immediately and not written up in any form; that their identities will be fully protected and that they will be anonymised entirely, with pseudonyms used in place of their real names; that no information which could help identify them will be in any publicly available reports of the study; that their answers will be transcribed from recordings and the recordings and any notes / transcriptions made about them will be stored in a locked file cabinet and/or in a password-protected computer folder; and that the contents of the deliberations in their interviews and in the focus group session will be confidential unless they pertain to any child or other individual being abused and/or being at risk of abuse. The participants will also be provided with the contact details of my supervisor, and they will be told in clear terms that if they have any concerns or queries they are obliged to inform my supervisor, or any relevant authorities such as the Police or the DfE.

Having asked the participants to read the information letter in full, the participants will sign a consent form which confirms they have read and understood the letter and the contents of it and wish to partake in the study by their own volition.

### ***Reflexivity***

Researchers in all kinds of social science and educational research are positioned in such a way that they have an active and interventional role in shaping the type and nature of the data collected, how it is analysed, and how it is interpreted and discussed (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). In this study, my preconceptions, experiences in life and work and my socio-economic and cultural-religious background will – as in all social research – inevitably influence how I summarise and discuss the results of the study (Bryman, 2016); some of my presupposed beliefs about the value of play, its central role in learning and the importance of practitioner understanding of this will likely play a role in how I interview the participants and how I thematise their responses (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007).

I will use a reflexive journal throughout the study, in which I will note moments when I feel I may be skewing, misinterpreting or inaccurately presenting the interview data, and I will discuss the contents of this journal with my supervisor regularly; by doing this, I will aim to maintain a critical awareness of how (as above) my own conceptual, normative and socio-cultural subjectivity may affect the study and its findings (Cope, 2014).



# Findings

From the thematic analysis, seven core themes emerged which directly corresponded to the questions in the interview schedule and the Focus Group agenda. These are as follows:

- (i) EY teacher facilitation of pretend play
  - a. Children are authentic and creative designers of their own pretend play
  - b. The practitioner participants actively encourage pretend play as a purposive learning activity.
- (ii) Time and Space allowed for Pretend Play
  - a. During interviews, the participants stated that time was adequate.
  - b. During the Focus Group, however, they claimed time is constrained.
- (iii) EY Practitioner Perceptions of the Learning Value of Pretend Play
  - a. The practitioners all viewed pretend play as crucial to learning.
  - b. The participants highlighted the value of pretend play in aiding cognitive, social, emotional, physical and especially linguistic development.
- (iv) Aspects of Development most Aided by Pretend Play
  - a. As above, language acquisition emerged as a crucial benefit of engaging children in pretend play.
  - b. 'Confidence' was a recurring construct; confidence was said to be significantly boosted by engaging in pretend play.
- (v) The most Effective Activities in Pretend Play
  - a. The participants all felt that the type of activity was not important – all pretend play forms are helpful for learning.
  - b. This points back, again, to the crucial role of children themselves as creative agents in designing and conducting pretend play.
- (vi) Parental Involvement
  - a. The interviewees and focus group attendants contended that receiving more knowledge about parental involvement in pretend play would be very welcomed, and that overall parental involvement is a good thing.
- (vii) Training in Pretend Play
  - a. During the interviews the participants claimed that training was either unnecessary or was adequate anyhow.
  - b. In the Focus Group, however, extensive and critical debate was engaged in which highlighted the inadequacy of pretend play training and the lack of clarity around pretend play in the EYFS.
- (viii) Improving Outcomes by Facilitating Pretend Play
  - a. The fundamental message here was about planning: that practitioners and nurseries should dedicate time and resource to planning and enabling pretend play spaces and activities.

The proceeding section conveys these results in more detail, using direct interview and Focus Group quotes to back up the thematic analyses:

***Theme 1: EY teacher facilitation of pretend play***

The interview participants voiced two identifiable sub-themes when answering question (2); these were (i) children are their own designers and instigators of pretend play – they are creative and show initiative without prompting or activity-design by the EY teachers; and (ii) the EY teachers expressed at this point that where and when they do facilitate and encourage pretend play among the children they work with, they do so because it is a highly valuable way for children to improve their understanding and abilities and to learn about their ‘surroundings’.

In terms of pretend play being a natural, creative drive in children themselves, Participant 1 stated that:

*‘I wouldn’t say I encourage children to engage in pretend play, as they are naturally involved in pretend play. I only set out activities and children will create their own play, which involves in pretend activities.’*

Part. 1

Participant 3 made a similar statement:

*‘I don’t encourage pretend play, because children are naturally engaged in pretend play activity.’*

Part. 3

Participants 8 and 6 concurred:

*‘I only plan and set the activities and let them create their own play.’*

Part. 8

*‘We just go along with their pretend play.’*

Part. 6

Many participants were vocal about the *second* theme – that they actively encouraged pretend play for learning purposes:

*‘Pretend play is really important for their learning and development.’*

Part. 2

*‘Children learn so much by participating in pretend play.’*

Part. 4

*‘Children are not only pretending by they are actually learning about their surroundings.’*

Part. 6

*‘Pretend play is important for children learning and creativity development.’*

Part. 9

*'You will see one year old using Lego as a phone.'*

Part. 5

Facilitation and encouragement of pretend play appeared, overall, to be engaged in by the interviewees, but it was emphasised that the children were the main agents in pretend play activities:

*'Most children are engaged in pretend activity. However, I do sometimes create my own pretend story.'*

Part. 10

### ***Theme 2: Time and Space allowed for Pretend Play***

The unanimous opinion expressed by the interview participants was that there *is* sufficient time allotted to pretend play for the children they work with; only one participant had a slight element of reservation about this, but nonetheless stated that overall time dedicated to pretend play is adequate for children. This runs counter to the general arguments within the academic literature, and this contradictory finding is discussed in the next section. During the Focus Group, the participants expressed opposing views, clarifying that time was not always available for engaging children in pretend play (see below).

*'There is enough time allocated to pretend play as the early years is based on play anyways.'*

Part. 1

*'I think there is enough time for pretend play, however, I feel like we practitioner we sometimes stop the children when they are engaged in pretend activities by telling them to tidy up as its lunch or tea time.'*

Part. 2

*'The early years curriculum is based on play, so I do think they have enough time to, as children will use pretend play in any activity.'*

Part. 6

*'I think there is enough time allocated to children pretend play.'*

Part. 7

*'The early years is a play based curriculum.'*

Part. 8

*'Yes, enough time is allocated in children play.'*

Part. 10

During the Focus Group, however, the participants projected a *different* message, claiming that constraints such as having a large number of children to care for could make pretend play time very limited:

*'If there are a lot of them then I won't have enough time and space to engage in their pretend play.'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 1

*'Sometimes we can be too busy tidying, planning and ensuring the children are safe that we don't have time to sit around and watch the children in their pretend playing.'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 2

### ***Theme 3: EY Practitioner Perceptions of the Learning Value of Pretend Play***

The EY practitioner participants (both interview and Focus Group) all – without exception – held that pretend play is instrumental in children's learning and development. The participants clarified that pretend play had a strong function in helping children to acquire language more effectively, and that children developed their socio-emotional skills significantly through pretend play.

In the Focus Group, one of the participants expressed that they had learned through EY practice that pretend play was more crucial to child learning than they had anticipated:

*'I honestly thought pretend play was pointless when I first start working within the early years, however, being early years practitioner has made me realised that children are not only engaged in pretend play but they are actually learning.'*

Participants 8 and 9 voiced the key role of pretend play in aiding language skills:

*'It helps children with their language development, and also supports children with their social development.'*

Part. 8

During the Focus Group, one participant stated that:

*'There is no doubt, pretend play is important for children learning and development. It helps children develop in different areas, particularly language. This is because children may participate with other children who may be more in advance in terms of language.'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 3

To this statement, another Focus Group participant claimed that:

*'Pretend play [does] help with language development, however, it also supports children with their social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development.'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 2

In an interview, participant 9 made a similar statement:

*'It helps them develop in (...) problem solving, language, intellectual, emotional, creativity and social development.'*

Part. 9

One of the interview participants gave an empirical example of how children had used pretend play to improve their grasp of English:

*'I have (...) observed 2 years old who' spoke little English learned his colours by pretend the crayons were racing cars, it's amazing what children learn by engaging in make belief play, his language has also improved.'*

Part. 2

Participants 3 and 4 were clear that pretend play has evident learning value for children in a wide range of developmental areas:

*'Pretend play has much benefit for children development, one of the most common one is that children learn from those that are more competent.'*

Part. 3

*'There are many aspects that children develop by engaging in pretend play, for example they develop social, emotional and physical.'*

Part. 4

The social and interactional nature of pretend play and its role in helping children to learn more effectively was discussed at length by participant 1.

*'One aspect that I have observed throughout my years of working with children is that, when children are engaged in pretend play, they learn new concept, whether this is learning new language or learning about their social world. It is like they exchange knowledge as they share their own knowledge and understanding about the themes with their peers.'*

Part. 1

#### ***Theme 4: Aspects of Development most Aided by Pretend Play***

Language acquisition, social and emotional comprehension and competence, and confidence, emerged as the aspects of child development which pretend play most aided. In discussing pretend play's role in boosting language development, participant 5 went on to link this to children's development of empathy and their social skills:

*'Pretend plays definitely support children with their language development, however, pretend play also gives them the opportunity to understand other state of mind, for example whether one is feeling sad. There are many ways that pretend play can support*

*children with their learning and development, I have only listed one but pretend play also helps with cognitive, emotional, social and physical development.'*

Part. 5

Participants 7 and 8 concurred, with both participants emphasising the important concept of *confidence*:

*'It helps children with their confidence, and helps children with their language and social development.'*

Part. 7

*'Language development, develop social skills, helps the children with their confidence, cognitive and physical development.'*

Part. 8

Whilst the important role of pretend play in enabling children socially is not new, this emphasis on confidence as a key construct is perhaps an interesting addition to the language present in the literature to date; this is discussed further in the next section.

### ***Theme 5: The Most Effective Activities in Pretend Play***

In terms of which activities made pretend play the most effective for helping children learn and develop, the participants often stated that all types of activities were effective; participants 1, 2 and 7 may have offered some critical insight into why this universal belief across all participants was the case: this points back, again, to the crucial role of children themselves and of their own mental capabilities in engaging with pretend play without prompt or facilitation. Children, they felt, showed themselves as able to make and perform a pretend play scenario during pretty much any activity.

*'I think that outdoor activities works best in my opinion, as children are constantly exploring, and creating their own pretend story.'*

Part. 1

*'Any activities, children will create their own pretend using anything.'*

Part. 2

*'children will create their own pretend play out of all activity.'*

Part. 7

### ***Theme 6: The Value of Parental Involvement***

All ten *interview* participants stated that they believed parental involvement in children's pretend play activities is a positive thing, and that parental involvement can actually help the children in their ensuing development and learning.

*'By parents being involved in their child pretend play will support them with their language, social and emotional development.'*

Part. 10

*'[It can] help the children with their confidence.'*

Part. 9

Participant 8, among several others, stated that there are no perceived drawbacks to parental involvement in pretend play:

*'They will develop language development, cognitive, emotional and social development. No there are no drawbacks.'*

Part. 8

This finding contradicts some of the evidence emerging in the literature review, which raised the issue of parents overly planning and organising children's activities, causing a depletion in the effects that child-led activity can have on creativity development. A notable methodological error may have caused this finding, which is discussed in the next section.

In the Focus Group, moreover, one participant was very clear that understanding how to encourage parents to engage more effectively with their children's pretend play activities is important:

*'[It would help to know] how we can support parents to engaged children in their pretend play at home. I think it would be nice if parents could engage children in pretend play at home.'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 3

A second Focus Group member agreed and added to this statement:

*'We can probably observe their child and sees what he/she is interested in and the areas he need help with. Inform the parents and tell them what they enjoy in terms of pretend play and how she/he could help their child.'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 5

### ***Theme 7: Training in Pretend Play***

In terms of whether the participants had experienced direct training in how to encourage pretend play, and whether training was adequate or more was needed, the results were mixed. Some participants were clear that they had not received any formal training directly pertaining to pretend play:

*'I have not received any in terms of pretend play.'*

Part. 8

*'I don't think I have received any based on pretend play.'*

Part. 7

Several of the interview participants argued, however, that training in EY settings is adequate, with one participant (number 6) saying that training pertaining to pretend play specifically is unnecessary:

*'I haven't received any. I think there is adequate training in the early years.'*

Part. 2

*'I haven't received any. Yes there is [adequate training]. Especially within the early years.'*

Part. 5

*'I don't think we need it anyway it's just common sense really.'*

Part. 6

These findings are not in line with some of the literature findings and the arguments put forth in the Nutbrown Review; this is discussed further in the next section.

During the Focus Group one participant did, however, refer to the EYFS and said that they found it disappointing that pretend play does not feature more:

*'It is really disappointing that the early years foundation stage does not emphasis the important of pretend play in the early years.'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 5

Another Focus Group participant claimed that:

*'I think we are actually underestimating the value of pretend play and so does the statutory framework for the early years foundation stage.'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 2

And, finally, a third Focus Group member stated that:

*'I think for those that are new in the early years setting [training] will probably benefit them as they will develop understanding of what pretend play is and its value.'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 4

This was best substantiated by one participant in the Focus Group who highlighted that the EYFS is unclear as to what it expects practitioners to do in terms of facilitating pretend play:

*'The most important theme for me is what does the statutory framework for early years expect from us when children are engaged in pretend play? What is our role?'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 1

Later in the Focus Group, the participants began to retract their interview statements about training, honing in on why training is in fact needed:

*'There should be more training given when it comes to pretend play as some practitioners are undervaluing the importance this has on children learning and development.'*

PART (FOCUS GROUP). 5



## ***Theme 8: Improving Outcomes by Facilitating Pretend Play***

The overwhelming message from the participants in terms of what nurseries can do to improve developmental outcomes for children by engaging them in pretend play was that child-centred, well-planned activities geared specifically to bettering children's development and aiding their learning were the key to doing so.

*'[The nursery should] provide them with the right resources to engaged them in pretend play activities.'*

Part. 1

*'Planning activities [that] the child enjoys [is best].'*

Part. 3

*'Planning activities that the child enjoys in their pretend play to support them with their learning and development.'*

Part. 4

*'Planning activities to help with the child learning and development.'*

Part. 10

*'Planning activities out of the child's own interest.'*

Part. 9

The findings of this study demonstrated relative consistency with the major arguments and findings put forth in the wider academic and policy-related literatures; some critical divergences occurred when using the two different data collection methods, with many interviewees expanding on, or even contradicting, the answers they had given when they took part in the Focus Group. These discrepancies will be discussed in the subsequent 'Discussion' section.

Overall, participating in the Focus Group especially helped the participants to reflect on the value of pretend play, and one made this explicit in saying that:

*'I have only starting to learn from this discussion that I should observe my key children in their pretend play, as I honestly didn't give much attention to when children were engaged in pretend play.'*

This was a key value added of this study: raising awareness and critical reflection among the participants as to the value of pretend play and its crucial function in driving children's learning and development. The findings of the present study confirmed that pretend play is perceived by EY practitioners themselves to be instrumental for children's learning; the study found that – upon reflection and engagement in Focus Group dialogue – the EY practitioners felt that training pertaining to pretend play could be improved, that understanding how to enable parental involvement would be beneficial, that the EYFS is unclear as to what is expected of practitioners in terms of pretend play, and that more time may be needed to be allocated to

pretend play activities. To conclude, the sample of EY practitioners showed a high level of awareness of the importance of pretend play for child learning and development, and – despite contradictions between the interview results and the Focus Group discussions – the practitioners did, in the last instance, feel improvements to policy and practice were needed to make pretend play a more effective and empowering form of EY activity.

## *Discussion*

This section discusses the findings of the present study as they relate to the wider body of academic and policy literatures; it ascertains whether the findings were congruent with, inconsistent with or slightly differentiated from, the broad and general arguments and empirically based findings of previous studies.

The study herein identified that the EY practitioners interviewed viewed children as authentic and creative designers of their own pretend play and they highlighted the value of pretend play in aiding cognitive, social, emotional, physical and especially linguistic development.; this suggests that children have an intrinsic drive to engage in pretend play, and that EY practitioners are well aware of the developmental value of pretend play for the children they work with. Van Oers (1996) has argued that the introduction of purposive pedagogical approaches and methods, geared to symbolic construction and the generation of imaginative systems of rules, can help to stimulate agency in on-going learning among children as young as five or six (Van Oers, 1996). As we have seen, Fisher (2008: 140 cited in Moyles 2010: 82) also argues that play is crucial for children's learning and development as it 'naturally encourages cooperation and collaboration, requires the use of fine and gross motor skills and cognitive application'. This study asked: 'What are Early Years Practitioners' Perspectives on the Value and Role of Pretend Play in Children's Learning?' and the thematic analysis has shown that EY practitioners interviewed here are conscious of the fact that applying these 'pedagogical approaches' is to the benefit of the children they work with. The Nutbrown Review has indicated that play is to be fostered amply in EY settings, and, indeed, that EY practitioners must "understand" play. The present study suggests that they do.

In terms of the practitioners' view of the benefits of pretend play for children's learning, this study showed that the sample of EY practitioners did perceive pretend play as crucial to learning, and the participants highlighted the value of pretend play in aiding cognitive, social, emotional, physical and especially linguistic development. Robson (2012) has stated that play has a positive impact on children's language and cognition, whilst both Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) have outlined frameworks which link pretend play to language acquisition. Furthermore, Dockett (1998) has argued that children involved in shared pretend situations, wherein communication is viewed as an essential part of the play, foster cognitive development more effectively. This study asked: 'What do the practitioners perceive the potential benefits of pretend play to children's learning to be?'. The participants in the present study evidenced a high level of awareness of these learning benefits, and they referred to each aspect of development – social, cognitive, emotional, physical, linguistic etc. – during both the interviews and the Focus Group. This study also asked about the aspects of development most helped by pretend play. Language acquisition emerged as a crucial benefit of engaging children in pretend play as perceived by the participants. Researchers have formerly claimed that children use language during symbolic play to define and conceptualise situations and people and thus because pretend play requires children to enact a subjective transformation verbally to peers it aids language development (Robson, 2012). Vygotsky (1978 cited in Robson, 2012) has stated that by representing one thing as another in pretend play, children create 'pivots'

which separate the meanings of objects from their status as real objects. By engaging in these symbolic representations children develop their capability in terms of abstraction (Robson, 2012). The practitioners interviewed herein showed a high level of awareness of the importance of pretend play for language acquisition and development.

‘Confidence’ was also a recurring construct; confidence was said to be significantly boosted by engaging in pretend play. Bruce (2011) argues that not only is play important but it also supports them in building their confidence as they learn to explore, think about problems, and relate to peers (see also Hutchin, 2013). The researcher herein argues that ‘confidence’ may be a ‘core concept’ around which the range of learning benefits of pretend play could henceforth be discussed in the research literature and policy materials. It strikes the researcher that confidence – being a fundamental driver of socio-economic and personal success and thriving – captures and precedes all these developmental aspects. Coffman (2015: 18) has argued that ‘play nourishes every aspect of children’s development. It forms the foundation of intellectual, social, physical and emotional skills necessary for success in schools and in life’. The participants seemed to converge with this argument, asserting the value of pretend play in all these respects.

When asked about the value of parental involvement in children’s pretend play, all ten interview participants stated that they believed parental involvement in children’s pretend play activities is a positive thing, and that parental involvement can actually help the children in their ensuing development and learning. From previous studies there is evidence that parents can have an instrumental effect on children’s willingness and capability to benefit from, and learn from, pretend play (Melzer and Palermo, 2016). By interacting with their children and crafting playfully the language which is deployed to negotiate and define the nature and interactions within the pretend play scenario, parents can help to boost the complexity and logic of the pretend play and help children conceptualise and practise more complex systems of thought (Fein and Fryer, 1995). It has been argued that because children learn from their primary caregivers when it comes to engaging in and designing pretend play scenarios, parental involvement has the potential to pass on parent skills in this respect to their offspring (Nielsen & Christie, 2008). These findings run contrary to the present study’s results. Several researchers have contended, however, that parental involvement can, in fact, hinder the development of creativity and imagination among children (see Farver and Wimbari, 1995). These arguments posit that children can be hindered in their own abilities to develop scenarios and to engage in symbolic and abstracted thought, because parents may be inclined to lead, conceive and dictate the pretend play (Melzer and Palermo, 2016). Further research is needed in this particular respect.

During the interviews, the participants stated that the time and resource allocated to pretend play activities is adequate. During the Focus Group, however, they claimed that time is constrained. This discrepancy may be due to the possibility that when in the interviews the participants were more nervous, and they may have not reflected on this beforehand; hence, when the group gathered for the Focus Group, they (arguably) may have had a greater opportunity to reflect on the argument that time is constrained. Lindon and Trodd (2016) have

argued elsewhere that EY practitioners lack the time and planning time to orchestrate free and open pretend play sessions; the Focus Group results of this study confirm that this may be the case in the perceptions of the EY practitioners interviewed. Roy (2003) has promoted the freeing up of practitioner time to use their skills to help children to learn via engagement in pretend play (Roy, 2003). The EY practitioners in this study appeared to reverse their initial statements on this topic, arguing throughout the Focus Group that time is limited for pretend play.

This study also asked about practitioner training in terms of pretend play. During the interviews the participants claimed that training was either unnecessary or was adequate anyhow. In the Focus Group, however, extensive and critical debate was engaged in which highlighted the inadequacy of pretend play training and the lack of clarity around pretend play in the EYFS. The previous research body has indicated that EY practitioner training modules, the EYFS, and Continuing Professional Development programmes for EY workers over-emphasise the importance of structured learning to the detriment of pretend play (Faulkner and Coates, 2013; Lloyd, 2015). This study posed the research questions: (i) What is the role of training in encouraging practitioners to engage children in pretend play? And (ii) What do the practitioners believe can be done to improve the use of pretend play as a learning and development tool? The findings here suggest that more training in organising and facilitating pretend play would be welcomed by the EY practitioner participants. The statements in the Focus Group especially confirmed this practitioner perspective.

Finally, when it came to understanding practitioner perspectives on how to improve the use of pretend play as a learning tool specifically, the fundamental message from the participants centred around planning: the practitioners felt that the nurseries should dedicate time and resources to planning and enabling pretend play spaces and activities more, and that having this time would benefit the children in engaging in pretend play for developmental purposes. This finding links back to the Nutbrown Review’s argument that clear validity of pretend play as a driver of learning is contrasted with the policy trend away from allotting time, space and training to pretend play engagement. This, furthermore, is recollective of the arguments occurring in the wider literature that policymakers and government officials often have instrumentalised agendas for EY educationalists which constrain the time spent on facilitating pretend play (Bodrova 2008; Broadhead, Howard and Wood 2010).

***Implications / Recommendations***

The following policy and practice recommendations emerge from this study’s findings and the discussion herein. Table XX presents the relevant finding on the left and the correlate recommendation on the right:

<b>Finding</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
Practitioners feel that children are critical agents in initiating, organising and exacting pretend play scenarios.	Nurseries and curricula designers should enable practitioners to create free, open-ended spaces within an allocated time frame to allow children to build this sense of agency and authorship over their playtime.

<b>Finding</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
Practitioners felt that they wanted to better understand the role of parental involvement and how they can encourage parents in this.	Nursery training documents, NVQ curricula and high-level policy documents such as the EYFS need to specifically outline what kind of parental involvement is helpful in ensuring pretend play is a valuable learning method, and practitioners should be taught how they can best enable parents to do this.
<b>Finding</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
Training in the theory and practice of pretend play as a developmentally significant activity for children was felt to be inadequate and the practitioners perceived there to be a lack of clarity in the policy frameworks about pretend play, its role in learning and EY teaching and care and how to facilitate it.	The EYFS needs to make absolutely and precisely clear what pretend play is, how it aids child learning and development, what best practice constitutes in terms of practitioner involvement in pretend play, and where practitioners can go to learn more about pretend play and best practice in stimulating it.

### ***Limitations***

During the processes of data collection and analysis, as well as during the review of the literature, the researcher makes clear admissions of certain methodological limitations and errors and some interpretive biases. To begin with, the interviews were very brief and therefore there was a limit to the extent of the data collected; this was partly evidenced by the fact that during the Focus Group the participants expanded on, elaborated and often changed or revoked their answers from the interviews. This failure to collect more data from the interviews was likely due to two key factors: (i) some of the interview schedule questions were not sufficiently open-ended and did not necessarily spur discussion and responses from the interviewees; and (ii) the researcher did not probe and spur on the interviewees when short and abrupt answers were given because this was her first time conducting academic, formal interviews and she was slightly nervous and reserved in doing so. Moving forwards, the researcher would like to investigate this topic in more detail by interviews, ensuring that the schedule is extended and more facilitative of deliberation and that the researcher is more forthright in spurring on elaborations by the interviewees.

Secondly, in the literature review phase, the researcher acknowledges that she may have overly focused on authors and studies whom / which she knew and agreed with. Effort was taken to engage critically with counter-arguments, but the researcher acknowledges that this still comprises a bias in the construction of her argument in favour of pretend play as a highly valuable learning tool.

Finally, during the transcription and thematic coding phases, the researcher became aware that she was – to a certain extent – prioritising the recording of data which conveyed perceptions that were congruent with her own values and beliefs. To redress this interpretive / methodological error, the researcher used her reflexive journal to record, specifically, answers and statements which were explicitly opposed to her views or her expectations vis-à-vis the data and findings. This helped considerably and is evidenced above in the findings, especially around parental involvement and training adequacy, but the researcher acknowledges this as a potential limitation to the validity of the study.

## Conclusion

This study set out with the objective of discerning and analysing EY practitioner perceptions of pretend play and its value in terms of children's learning and development. Having reviewed the literature to date pertaining to pretend play as a facilitator of learning, theories which explain the role of pretend play in aiding child development, and key barriers to the initiation of pretend play in EY settings, it was ascertained that there was a dearth of research into practitioner perspectives specifically. The study thus interviewed a sample of EY practitioners known to the researcher, and followed the interviews up with a focus group workshop to discuss (i) how practitioners viewed pretend play as a learning enabler and whether they recognised it as a key development facilitator for children; (ii) what the practitioners did to enable pretend play; (iii) what the practitioners' understandings of related factors such as parental involvement was; and (iv) what the practitioners felt could be done to allow them to initiate and facilitate pretend play more and better in the future.

The results of the thematic analyses of the data showed that awareness of pretend play's role and value in child learning was high among the sampled practitioners, and the practitioners felt that more could be done to educate them and parents about the importance of pretend play. The respondents clearly respected children as key agents in pretend play initiation and organisation. These results were discussed with respect to prior research findings, and three key recommendations for on-going reform in this area were made.



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# Appendices

## APPENDIX 1: ETHICS CLEARANCE FORM [FINAL VERSION – ACCEPTED]

1. Give the proposed title of your project/dissertation

*Exploring the Value of Pretend Play in Early Years Settings: A Qualitative Investigation into Practitioners' Perspectives.*

2. Give a brief summary of your proposed project/dissertation

In this dissertation I aim to explore what early years practitioners perceive children to be learning by engaging in pretend play. I want to discern the ways that early years practitioners perceive pretend play to facilitate learning and in what ways it does so. The literature review has evidenced the clear benefits to learning and development of engaging in pretend play. The study will also look from a policy and practical viewpoint, seeking to collect data from which recommendations for best practice can be formulated. The study enquires how early years practitioners are already encouraging and organising pretend play activities, and it will identify ways to improve such interventions.

The study will use qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Semi-structured interviews and a focus group will be used to collect the data. Using these methods will enable me to ascertain the experiential feelings and perceptions of the practitioners in terms of the learning value of pretend play.

The study will use thematic analysis to flesh out key themes/codes from the data. It will then discuss the findings in relation to the wider literature.

3. Provide participant information (estimated number and age, )

Fifteen participants have volunteered to partake in the study. These fifteen participants are all in-work early years practitioners. The participants were invited to partake during a room leader training session on 25<sup>th</sup> of April. Where room leaders from different nursery placements came together, including myself. They agreed to partake in my research study provisionally, pending further information and on-going consent.

The participants are all over the age of 18. They are sound of mind and are not considered vulnerable persons.

#### 4. Describe briefly your methodology (design, procedure, methods, instruments)

The methodology used in this research study is qualitative. I have chosen to employ a qualitative framework because I want to collect and analyse data pertaining to early years practitioners' intrapersonal perspectives; using this methodological approach will enable me to increase my understanding of early years practitioner perceptions and attitudes towards pretend play. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding individual viewpoints and how these are formed as well as how they drive action (Norlan et al., 2013). Norlan et al. (2013) argue that qualitative research methods provide the researcher with a range of responses to help drill down into depth, as it refers to people's thoughts, attitudes and opinions about a particular issue and detailed investigation of these is facilitated.

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups are used here to collect the data. I have chosen these methods to obtain both intrapersonal (interviews) and interpersonally negotiated (focus groups) perspectives on pretend play (Bloor et al., 2001). Bloor et al. (2001: 4) claim that 'focus groups can (...) throw light on the normative understandings that groups draw upon to reach their *collective* judgements'. In terms of the interviews, Gill et al. (2008) claim that the semi-structured interview 'allows for the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the research[er]' (2008: 291). The interviews will cover issues which pertain to (i) what the practitioners already do in terms of encouraging pretend play; (ii) what they perceive the role of pretend play in learning to be.

The semi structured interviews (see Appendix 2) will be conducted during a weekend, where I will meet each participant separately in the nursery ground where I work. The manager will be informed as to specific dates, rooms used and times. Arrangements will be made with the participants as to which day and time they are available (to suit them). The interview phase will take four to six weeks. This is because most of the practitioners participating are full time staff and have family commitments too. The focus group interview will also be held at the weekend. The focus group will be held in my formal work place, as my manager has granted me permission to conduct a focus group interview in the safe setting and this will take place on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> September at 11am. It will last two hours (see appendix 4 to view transcription of the focus group).

I will conduct the focus group on nursery grounds. The first half of the session (which will run for a total of 1 hour) will convey the findings and themes to the participants present and will ask them if they would like to add, amend or delete anything. Gibbs (1997: 4) argues that 'a particular ethical issue to consider in the case of focus groups is the handling of sensitive material and confidentiality given that there will always be more than one participant in the group. At the outset moderators will need to clarify that each participant's contributions will be shared with the others in the group as well as with the moderator'. Therefore prior to this I will brief the attendants on confidentiality of their answers given, making clear the principle of not referring to what is said outside of the room and session, and clarifying their right to withdraw any statements from official materials I write up for my dissertation. During the second half of the focus group which will take 40 minutes, I will (i) ask participants how they feel their work and environment could be improved so that pretend play could be facilitated

and encouraged more; and (ii) ask participants about the barriers and constraints to they encounter in seeking to encourage pretend play.

This study deploys a simple and procedurally logical mode of analysing the data which results from the interviews and the focus group: thematic analysis. In this approach to analysing and making meaning from the raw data, the core messages, critical affinities in answers given and major points of emphasis made by the participants themselves are ordered and refined into themes. The thematic analysis process used here will follow the framework developed Braun, Clarke and Terry's (2014); they posit that social researchers doing thematic analysis should deploy a six-pronged procedure for inductively identifying core themes and emerging messages by coding the interview data and cross-checking the codes with the transcriptions. Braun, Clarke and Terry (2014) claim that this procedure 'offers a way into qualitative research that teaches the mechanics of coding and analyzing qualitative data systematically, which can then be linked to broader theoretical or conceptual issues' (Braun, Clarke and Terry, 2014: 58).

5. Will you be using an instrument (e.g. a questionnaire) that requires author's permission or special training? If so, give details of steps you have taken to obtain these.

I will not be using instruments that require permission or special training.

6. Is ethical approval required from another source? (e.g. NHS- Governing Body) If yes, what steps have you taken to arrange this?

No, ethical approval is not required from another source.

7. Does the project require Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) clearance? If yes, what steps have you take to arrange this?

This research project does not require Criminal Records Bureau clearance.

8. Describe how potential participants will be identified, approached and recruited:

Qualitative studies of this kind are well suited to small sample sizes (Ritchie et al., 2013). The method of sampling has been purposeful sampling. This group has been specified in advance of the study according to certain criterion (Oliver and Jupp, 2006). As above I will approach the participants in person during a continuing professional development programme and will obtain their provisional participation. I will be contacting them via recorded and formal correspondence (email) to invite them to voluntarily partake in the study. A sample of fifteen practitioners will then be asked to consent to semi-structure



interview and focus group, on the premise that I have properly informed them of all facets of the study and the conditions of their participation

9. How will you ensure that participants are able to give their informed consent?

The concept of informed consent and its role in qualitative research is premised on respect for autonomy (Denscombe, 2014). This notion requires that participation is voluntary and participants are fully conscious of any benefits or potential risks that participation in the study may mean for them or others. The notion of ‘on-going’ informed consent indicates that participants must be aware that they can withdraw from the study at any time without any negative results ensuing (Denscombe, 2014).

The participants will be given a comprehensive letter which contains the full information about the study and its background as well as the terms and role of their participation in it. This sheet will ascertain the aims of the study and its core research question, and it will provide a brief and (as far as possible) neutral description of why the study is important and what it can contribute to research and practice in the early years (Ritchie et al., 2013). The letter will then explain that the participants are welcome to consent to partaking but on entirely voluntary terms; that they are free to withdraw from the study at any point, with no negative consequences of any kind being incurred. The participants will also be provided with the contact details of my supervisor, and they will be told in clear terms that if they have any concerns or queries they are obliged to inform my supervisor, or any relevant authorities such as the Police or the DfE.

## **APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

1. How would you *define* pretend play?
2. Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?
3. Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?
4. Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?
5. What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?
6. What activities work best?
7. What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?
8. Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?
9. How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?
10. How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?

## APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTIONS

**Interview 1; James** (The name used on the interview has been changed due to confidentiality).

**11. How would you *define* pretend play?**

I would define play as activities that the children enjoy doing.

**12. Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?**

I wouldn't say I encourage children to engage in pretend play, as they are naturally involved in pretend play. I only set out activities and children will create their own play, which involves in pretend activities.

**13. Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?**

Yes they do. There is enough time allocated to pretend play as the early years is based on play anyways.

**14. Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?**

One aspect that I have observed throughout my years of working with children is that, when children are engaged in pretend play, they learn new concept, whether this is learning new language or learning about their social world. It is like they exchange knowledge as they share their own knowledge and understanding about the themes with their peers

**15. What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?**

Language and social development.

**16. What activities work best?**

I think that outdoor activities works best in my opinion, as children are constantly exploring, and creating their own pretend story.

**17. What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?**

It will help them with their social skills.

**18. Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?**

I think it would have an effect on those children that are not social. I don't think it will have an effect on the children as they are engaged in pretend play activities with adults (early years practitioners).

**19. How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?**

I haven't received any training to be honest. There is not enough training about pretend play.

**20. How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?**

Is to provide them with the right resources to engaged them in pretend play activities.

## **Interview 2; Stacy**

### **How would you *define* pretend play?**

Spontaneous activities.

**1. Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?**

Yes, I do. Pretend play is really important for their learning and development.

**2. Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?**

I think there is enough time for pretend play, however, I feel like we practitioner we sometimes stop the children when they are engaged in pretend activities by telling them to tidy up as its lunch or tea time.

**3. Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?**

Yes I do. I have also observed 2 years old who' spoke little English learned his colours by pretend the crayons were racing cars, it's amazing what children learn by engaging in make belief play, his language has also improved

**4. What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?**

Language, social, cognitive and emotional development.

**5. What activities work best?**

Any activities, children will create their own pretend using anything.

**6. What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?**

I think it will help the children with their social and emotional development.

**7. Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?**

It will help the children with their confidence, and self-esteem. I don't think there are any drawbacks. We are there to interact with the child in their pretend play.

**8. How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?**

I haven't received any. I think there is adequate training in the early years.

**9. How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?**

Provide the right resources.

### **Interview 3; Priya**

**1. How would you *define* pretend play?**

Activities the child has chosen out of their own choice.

**2. Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?**

No I don't encourage pretend play, because children are naturally engaged in pretend play activity.

**3. Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?**

Yes, there is plenty of time for children to engage in pretend play.

**4. Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?**

There are many ways in which pretend play supports children development. I would say in all the areas social, emotional, intellectual, and physical.

**5. What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?**

Pretend play has much benefit for children development, one of the most common one is that children learn from those that are more competent.

**6. What activities work best?**

Any activities.

**7. What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?**

It has a lot of benefit, one example is that it will help the children with their confidence.

**8. Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?**

Yes, it helps children with their social development. It gives them the confidence to socialise with their peers. I don't think there is any drawbacks.

9. **How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?**  
No. Yes I do.
10. **How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?**  
Planning activities the child enjoys.

#### **Interview 4: Molly**

1. **How would you *define* pretend play?**  
Activity that the child choses out of their own interest.
2. **Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?**  
Yes, I do, because children learn so much by participating in pretend play.
3. **Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?**  
Yes. Yes there is.
4. **Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?**  
Yes. There are many aspects that children develop by engaging in pretend play, for example they develop social, emotional and physical.
5. **What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?**  
Language, cognitive, language, emotional, social and physical development.
6. **What activities work best?**  
Any.
7. **What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?**  
It has a lot of effect on their learning and development.
8. **Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?**  
Yes, social development. No.
9. **How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?**  
Haven't received any. Yes.
10. **How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?**  
Planning activities that the child enjoys in their pretend play to support them with their learning and development.

## Interview 5; Phoebe

**11. How would you *define* pretend play?**

Spontaneous activities

**12. Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?**

Pretend play is natural, it comes naturally. You will see one year old using lego as a phone.

**13. Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?**

The early years curriculum is based on play, so I do think they have enough time to, as children will use pretend play in any activity. For example, using the play dough to signify a dinosaur.

**14. Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?**

It is very important. Children will develop their knowledge about the world by engaging in pretend play.

**15. What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?**

Pretend plays definitely support children with their language development, however, pretend play also gives them the opportunity to understand other state of mind, for example whether one is feeling sad. There are many ways that pretend play can support children with their learning and development, I have only listed one but pretend play also helps with cognitive, emotional, social and physical development.

**16. What activities work best?**

All activities

**17. What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?**

It will support the children with their social development. It will also help the children with their confidence to interact with their peers.

**18. Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?**

It has much benefit as it will help children with their self-esteem, language, intellectual, emotional development. There are no drawbacks.

**19. How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?**

I haven't received any. Yes there is. Specially within the early years.

**20. How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?**

Providing all the resources the child needs.

## Interview 6: Isla

**1. How would you *define* pretend play?**

Play is activity that the child has chosen out of their own interest.

**2. Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?**

Yes, I do. Children are not only pretending by they are actually learning about their surroundings.

**3. Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?**

Yes they do. I think there is enough time allocated to children pretend play.

**4. Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?**

Yes it indeed is. It helps them to understand their surroundings.

**5. What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?**

There is so many areas that pretend play helps children with their learning and development. One of the example are language, intellectual, social and emotional development.

**6. What activities work best?**

Every activity

**7. What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?**

It supports the child with their confidence.

**8. Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?**

By parents involving in their child pretend play helps the children with their social development, and language development. No there are no drawbacks.

**9. How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?**

I have not received any training about pretend play. I don't think we need it anyway it's just common sense really.

**10. How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?**

Probably by planning activities the child enjoys in their pretend play.

## Interview 7: Anna

**1. How would you *define* pretend play?**

I might be wrong but in my opinion play is activities the child has chosen out of their own will, that the children enjoy.

**2. Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?**



No. Children are always engaged in pretend play activities, we just go along with their pretend play.

- 3. Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?**

Yes. Yes, it is.

- 4. Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?**

Yes, in many ways.

- 5. What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?**

It supports them with their language, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

- 6. What activities work best?**

All activities, children will create their own pretend play out of all activity.

- 7. What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?**

It helps with their social development.

- 8. Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?**

It helps children with their confidence, and also helps children with their language and social development.

- 9. How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?**

Ehm, I don't think I have received any based on pretend play. Yes I do.

- 10. How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?**

Listening to the children, and knowing what the child interest is and planning activities based on the child interest. Through pretend play we know what the child understand about the world and the areas they need help with.

## **Interview 8: Olivia**

- 1. How would you *define* pretend play?**

Activity the child has chosen freely.

- 2. Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?**

No. Most children are engaged in pretend play, I only plan and set the activities and let them create their own play.

- 3. Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?**

Of course they do, the early years is play based curriculum.

4. **Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?**  
Yes it is. It helps children with their language development, and also supports children with their social development.
5. **What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?**  
Language development, develop social skills, helps the children with their confidence, cognitive and physical development.
6. **What activities work best?**  
All activities.
7. **What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?**  
It will help the child with their confidence.
8. **Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?**  
They will develop language development, cognitive, emotional and social development. No there are no drawbacks.
9. **How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?**  
I have not received any in terms of pretend play. Yes.
10. **How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?**  
Having all the resources the children need.

#### **Interview 9: Emma**

1. **How would you *define* pretend play?**  
Play is activity the child has chosen out of his/her own interest.
2. **Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?**  
Yes, simply because pretend play is important for children learning and creativity development.
3. **Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?**  
Yes. Yes.
4. **Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?**  
It helps them develop in all areas. An example is, problem solving, language, intellectual, emotional, creativity and social development.
5. **What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?**

They will develop language, emotional, social and intellectual development. Children will learn new skills by interacting with more skilled peers in their pretend play.

**6. What activities work best?**

All activity.

**7. What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?**

Help the children with their confidence.

**8. Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?**

There are no drawbacks, simple because we as an early years practitioner are there to engaged with the child during pretend play. The benefit however is that children will develop social and language skills.

**9. How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?**

Nothing, I haven't received any. I don't think there is adequate training as pretend play is just common sense.

**10. How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?**

Planning activities out of the child own interest.

## **Interview 10: Mariam**

### **How would you *define* pretend play?**

Spontaneous activities that the child has chosen out of their own interest.

**1. Do you encourage the children you work with to engage in pretend play and, if so, why?**

Yes, and no. Most children are engaged in pretend activity. However, I do sometimes create my own pretend story to engaged the children. For example pretending I am hungry and the children will make me pretend food.

**2. Do the children you work with, in your opinion, get to enjoy pretend play enough? Is enough time allocated to pretend play in your opinion?**

Yes they of course do, otherwise they wouldn't be engaged in pretend play. Yes, enough time is allocated in children play.

**3. Do you think pretend play is an important element for children's learning and development? If yes, in what ways?**

Yes, it helps children with their language development.

**4. What aspects of child development and which components of their learning do you believe are the most positively influenced by children engaging in pretend play?**

Social, emotional, intellectual and language development. Children also learn by interacting with children that are more skilled in terms of language.

**5. What activities work best?**

Outdoor and indoor play.

**6. What effect does it have on the children when parents involve themselves in pretend play?**

It will help the child with their confidence to interact with other peers.

**7. Are there benefits to this? And are there any drawbacks?**

By parents being involved in their child pretend play will support them with their language, social and emotional development.

**8. How much training have you received in terms of pretend play and its importance in EY? Do you feel this is adequate training?**

None. I don't think we need any training in terms of pretend play.

**9. How can the nursery get the best outcomes for children out of engaging them in pretend play?**

Planning activities to help with the child learning and development.

## **APPENDIX 4: FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPTION**

Open question for discussion: is pretend play important for you and the children you work with?

### **Priya,**

There is no doubt, pretend play is important for children learning and development. It helps children develop in different areas, particularly language. This is because children may participate with other children who may be more in advance in terms of language.

### **James**

I agree with Priya, pretend play is important for children development, it aid language acquisition as the children interacting with other children who are more skilled.

### **Emma**

What both of you have missed out not only does pretend play help with language development, however, it also supports children with their social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development.

### **Olivia**

As well as pretend play helping children in those areas, it also helps children with developing understanding of their world, as well as creativity and problem solving, and negotiation skills as they need to negotiate with who play who.

### **Anna**

I honestly, though pretend play was pointless when I first start working within the early years, however, being early years practitioner has made me realised that children are not only engaged in pretend play but they are actually learning. Through pretend play we could actually understand what the children knows and how we as an adult can support them.

### **Isla**

I agree with Anna, one disagreement is that we can't listen to our key children all the time, this may because we are too busy. Secondly, by adult observing the children pretend play, they may feel intimidated. Like the other have mention, pretend play does support the children with their language, cognitive, social, emotional, creativity and problem solving skills.

### **Phoebe**

It is really disappointing that the early years foundation stage does not emphasis the important of pretend play in the early years. I am so happy that you are doing your research in pretend play, as pretend play is so important in my opinion. Through pretend play children interact with other children who may be more advance in terms of language, and this will support the children to learn new words, it helps help children with social skills, they will

learn to negotiate, it will help them with cognitive and emotional development. Another point is that children will develop understanding of theory of mind.

### **Stacy**

I was going to mention theory of mind, but phoebe has already mentioned it. Children will definitely develop theory of mind and they will become less egocentric. I have seen 2 years old who thought about other feelings during pretend play.

Like the other have stated pretend play also helps children with language development, social, intellectual and emotional development.

**Everyone has stated that they have not received training on pretend play, do you think early years practitioner should receive one?**

### **Mariam**

No, I don't think we need any.

### **Molly**

I don't agree with that, as I think we are actually underestimating the value of pretend play and so does the statutory framework for the early years foundation stage.

### **Phoebe**

I think we should be provided with training, so that we can learn how to support children and extend children learning by engaging in pretend play. Yes, we may not be able to observe every child pretend play, however, it will be nice to learn and develop understanding on how we can extend children learning by observing them in pretend play. Or simply what our role as early years practitioners are to support children with their pretend play.

**Isla**

I am not sure whether to say yes or no to training. I have worked in early years for 5 years and didn't need training to understand pretend play. However, I think for those that are new in the early years setting will probably benefit them as they will develop understanding of what pretend play is and its value.

Like Phoebe has said it will also be nice to learn how to extend children's learning by observing them in their pretend play.

**Have I / we missed anything important out?**

**James;**

Ehm, probably how, we can support parents to engaged children in their pretend play at home. I think it would be nice if parents could engaged children in pretend play at home.

**Olivia**

How, can we do that? It is brilliant idea by the way.

**Phoebe;**

We can probably observe their child and sees what he/she is interested in and the areas he need help with. Inform the parents and tell them what they enjoy in terms of pretend play and how she/he could help their child.

**James;**

I think that's really clever, I have learned through this focus group that parents' involvement is really important and that we should encourage parents to support children in their pretend

play at home. We should therefore plan tasks the child enjoys and parents could do those activities with their child on the weekend.

**Which theme/s is/are the most important for me to note?**

**Isla**

The most important theme for me is what does the statutory framework for early years expect from us when children are engaged in pretend play? What is our role? I personally think we should have more training in terms of pretend play as we all have different perspectives on this view. Most are probably confused on what to do when children are engaged in pretend play.

**Emma;**

I personally agree, as there should be more training given when it comes to pretend play as some practitioners are undervaluing the importance this has on children's learning and development.

**Olivia;**

I have only starting to learn from this discussion that I should observe my key children in their pretend play, as I honestly didn't give much attention to when children were engaged in pretend play. However, I now understand that I can actually see what the children knows and how I can extend them with their learning. I therefore think that there should be training given to early years practitioners.

**Does the current EYFS framework enable you to get the most out of pretend play for the children you work with?**

**Molly;**

No, because, there isn't much about pretend play.

**Olivia**

There isn't much about pretend play and only talks about play in general.



**Is your training and your own professional learning relating to pretend play adequate?  
Do you feel you could learn more about it to improve your work with children?**

**Stacy;**

No, not when I first started as I had my degree in business studies. My manager asked me to do level 2 in child care in which I agreed. I think I could learn more about it by undertaking my level 3 in child care. I will start in it hopefully in September.

**James;**

Yes, as I did level 2 in child care. I have also recently completed my level 3 which has expanded my knowledge about the early years. I am not sure if I am ready to learn more as I am not ready to do degree yet.

**Mariam;**

Yes, I have level 3 when I started working in this setting. I am planning to improve my knowledge by undertaking degree hopefully 2019. I enjoy learning and expanding my knowledge.

**What could be done to ensure pretend play benefits children and their learning?**

**Mariam;**

Planning

**James;**

Defiantly, observing and planning.

**Olivia;**

Listening to the children play and planning activity based on their interest.

**Molly;**

Observation, observation and observation and then planning activities and see the areas the child need more help with.

**Do you have enough time and space to engage the children in pretend play?**

**Isla;**

Ehm, this is really difficult I would say it depend on the ratio of the children. If there are a lot of them then I wont have enough time and space to engage in their pretend play.

**Stacy;**

I agree, it honestly depend on the number of children we have. As sometimes we can be too busy tidying, planning and ensuring the children are safe that we don't have time to sit around and watch the children in their pretend playing.

**Emma;**

Yes, I do have enough time and space to engage in children pretends play. I always make time for each of my key children and ensure that I spend time with them on their play so I know what they like and what their weaknesses and strength are.