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**"I think we should be doing much more play now since COVID...". A study exploring teachers' attitudes towards Play-Based Learning in England.**

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**“I think we should be doing much more play now since COVID...”**

**A study exploring teachers’ attitudes towards Play-Based Learning  
in England.**

Bethany Jackson

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy) in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law.

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## Abstract

Play is the way by which children instinctively discover and learn about the world around them. Play-based learning is a pedagogical approach aimed at supporting and encouraging child-led, needs-led, and interests-led education for children. Currently, it is mandated in the Early Years Foundation Stage in England for children. However, when 5-year-old children progress to primary school, the emphasis on building on this play-based approach has been overlooked in favour of assessment, measurement, and standardisation achieved through didactic pedagogical approaches. This abrupt shift in learning environment coupled with the premature imposition of formal learning has a negative impact on long-term educational outcomes (Margetts, 2007). Additionally, the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on long-term outcomes is an extra cause for concern.

The main aim of this study was to explore the attitudes of primary school teachers towards play-based learning. A secondary aim was to explore their beliefs regarding the impact of COVID-19 on primary school education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Key Stage 1 teachers. The interviews were focused on teachers' attitudes towards, and experiences of, play-based learning, constraints they were subject to, and views regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used to develop common themes and subthemes among the teachers.

The findings indicated teachers understand the role that play has in children's development and an enthusiasm to harness its power in learning. The teachers' priority was the holistic development of well-rounded, happy, and capable children. However, the main constraint faced was the top-down pressure to conform to ideological requirements. Teachers expressed a lack of time, resources and support. This is compounded by a perceived lack of cohesion within schools. The consensus was that COVID-19 presented a golden opportunity for the implementation and expansion of play-based learning. However, this opportunity was spurned.

Conclusions are drawn, along with potential implications of this exploratory study for Educational Psychologists, and recommendations of avenues for future research.

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, thanks to all of the teachers who generously gave up their time to share their experiences and for speaking so openly and honestly. The research would not have been possible without them.

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To Stella, I wouldn't have applied for the doctorate if it wasn't for your gentle (!) nudge in the right direction. Thank you for always believing in me.

To my family, thank you for always encouraging me to follow my dreams and supporting me every step of the way.

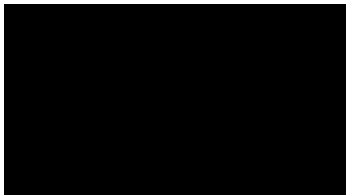
To the Brain family, for providing a second home and keeping me going with endless cups of tea and delicious food!

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## Author declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with or with the assistance of others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Signed:



Date: 29.08.2023

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## List of acronyms

<b>PBL</b>	Play-Based Learning
<b>DfE</b>	Department for Education
<b>EP</b>	Educational Psychologist
<b>EPS</b>	Educational Psychology Service
<b>TEP</b>	Trainee Educational Psychologist
<b>LA</b>	Local Authority
<b>KS1</b>	Key Stage 1
<b>EYFS</b>	Early Years Foundation Stage
<b>RTA</b>	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
<b>TA</b>	Thematic Analysis
<b>SEND</b>	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
<b>OFSTED</b>	The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
<b>BPS</b>	British Psychological Society

# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1. Introduction to the study**

This thesis contains an exploratory, qualitative study examining primary school teachers' attitudes towards play-based learning. It is widely accepted that play is the way by which a child discovers and understands the world. Play is a complex phenomenon, and ideas of play, and the way in which it can be harnessed to enhance learning, will be described thoroughly at the beginning of Chapter 2. Essentially, it is a child-led, needs-led, and interests-led approach to learning whereby the educational professional supports and guides their holistic development. Different attitudes towards it, from academics to governments, will be discussed to gain understanding of where it currently and potentially fits into English early years education.

## **1.2. Rationale for the study**

During the build-up to my doctoral studies, I took on various roles in child education. These ranged from teaching assistant, to learning mentor, to becoming a Trainee Educational Psychologist. Throughout this time, I was interested in children's play and the effect it had on their development. I researched play therapy and would always have some playful resources when interacting with children. From my own research, I became aware that play-based learning is mandated in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England, but that, at the age of five-years-old, this emphasis on play was overlooked in favour of didactic teaching. This seemed to me not only an abrupt, premature shift in learning environment, but also the rejection of a potentially powerful tool for child development.

My additional research led me to understand that academics and practitioners seem to hold play-based learning in high regard, but that the current English policy is guided by unevicenced ideology (Wood, 2019). Compelling evidence that the curriculum is being adopted prematurely is provided by previous research which reported that 90% of children do not achieve all of the EYFS goals. Possibly more worrying is that 50% of children transition from EYFS without having achieved any of the goals (Fisher, 2009). These figures would either suggest goals need to evolve, or there needs to be evolution in the approach to

achieving them, or that the ideology of standardised assessment of five-year-olds is misguided.

Overall, I believe the National Curriculum is mandated at too early an age for the majority of children. The 10% of school-ready learners may experience a smooth transition, but Educational Psychologists have a responsibility to understand the needs of the 90% who are not yet fully prepared. There seemed to be a gap in the literature regarding this transition from EYFS to Key Stage 1 (KS1), and especially the potential for use of play-based learning as a needs-led pedagogy throughout primary school. Additionally, recent studies seemed to ignore the voices of those most capable of communicating any challenges in primary education – the teachers. Consequently, I chose to focus my thesis on exploring the attitudes of, and giving voice to, this under-represented population.

### **1.3. Structure of this thesis**

The primary aim of this study is to explore the attitudes of primary school teachers to play-based learning. The secondary aim was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent school closures due to government lockdowns, affected its implementation. Thus, four research questions were composed:

#### Research Questions

1. What are primary teachers' attitudes towards play-based learning?
2. What are primary teachers' best experiences of play-based learning?
3. What, if any, constraints do primary teachers believe they face which inhibit play-based learning? What, if anything, have they done to overcome these?
4. What changes in play-based learning have teachers noted between pre- and post-pandemic?

Following this chapter, the thesis will be presented over five further chapters. An overview of each will be provided below.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter will commence with a description of the procedure used for the initial discovery of relevant papers from educational databases. The review of the literature is then presented in six further sections:

1. Play and play-based learning
2. English educational policy and play-based learning
3. Practitioners and play-based learning
4. The benefits of play-based learning
5. Critiques of the current English early years education policy
6. The impact of COVID-19

## Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter includes restatement of the research aims and questions. There then follows a description of my own perspectives, position within the study, and rationale for the choice of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) as the method of interpretation. It is then explained why semi-structured interviews were chosen as the means for data-collection. This is followed by a description of inclusion criteria, participant recruitment, and interview procedure. Initial stages of analysis are then explained.

## Chapter 4. Findings

My interpretations of the data collected using Reflexive Thematic Analysis are presented in this chapter. The results are presented as four distinct themes.

1. The purpose of child education
2. How PBL is viewed by teachers
3. Perceived barriers to achieving objectives
4. The impact of COVID

## Chapter 5. Discussion

This chapter contains comparisons between the key findings and the literature. The way in which the themes provide answers to the research questions is discussed and summarised. Further discussions regarding the contribution of this thesis to the research base, a critique



of the present study, implications for professional practice, quality assurance, and potential future research are also included. The section is completed by a description of my own reflexive journey throughout the creation of this thesis.

### Chapter 6. Conclusion

This chapter is a summary of my beliefs concerning this thesis, its place within the current literature, and its potential impact.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter will consist of four sections. Firstly, the procedure used to initially gather research will be described. It will then be explained how this initial search was expanded until sufficient, followed by descriptions of the key studies. Secondly, there will be description and analysis of previous research concerning the definition of play-based learning. This will include discussion of the role of play, differing pedagogies, and attitudes towards the benefits of play-based learning. Thirdly, there will be an in-depth description of the conflicts apparent in the English educational system between practitioners, academics, and policymakers. This will highlight the discontinuity experienced by children when transitioning from the play-based Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) to the policy-led demands of the National Curriculum in Key Stage 1 (KS1). Finally, there will be a section considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of young people and other vital areas of their development.

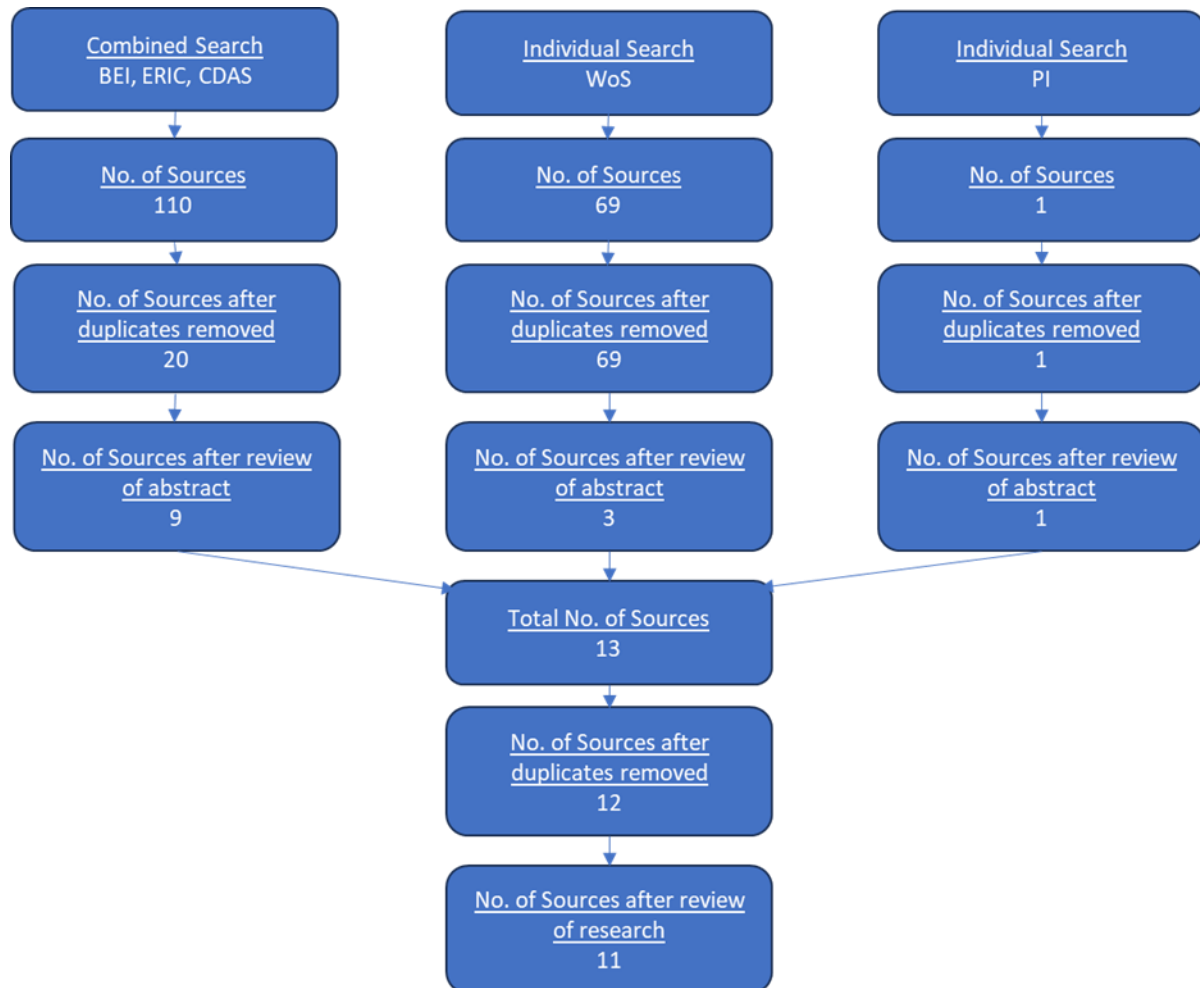
### **2.2. Procedure for literature review**

This section describes my initial search for literature. The procedure was based on principles of a systematic literature review (Cronin et al., 2008). Three separate searches were conducted. The first was a combined search of three databases, 'British Education Index', 'Education Resources Information Centre', and 'Child Development and Adolescent Studies'. Individual searches were conducted in 'Web of Science' and 'PsycINFO'. The combined search was undertaken on 04.11.22 and individual searches were undertaken on 11.11.22. Results of these searches can be seen in Figure 1. A more thorough breakdown of search terms is available in Appendix 9. Additional studies were obtained through snowballing of reference lists.

As can be seen in Figure 1., only eleven relevant sources were identified. This highlights the scarcity of previous research on play-based learning in England. Of these eleven papers, only two specifically examined the state of play-based learning in English primary schools. Others

examined play-based learning in the EYFS framework, outdoor learning, or were critiques of the current English policy.

**Figure 1:** Results of literature research procedure



### 2.2.1. Overview of key studies

The study by Fisher (2022) explored the place of play-based learning in Key Stage 1. Interviews were conducted with headteachers ( $n = 11$ ), but teachers ( $n = 537$ ) were only surveyed. They found that teachers were enthusiastic about implementing play-based approaches in primary schools. However, they were constrained by policy and the attitudes of headteachers. This finding was somewhat contradicted by the results of headteacher interviews which suggested they were open to the advocacy of their own teachers. This study provides a thorough description of the current landscape of English early years education. The findings are interesting due to the apparent contradiction. It reveals the

central state of headteachers as the fulcrum attempting to balance policy requirements with acknowledgement that teachers are perhaps better placed to advocate best practices based on children's needs.

The study by Nicholson (2019) was a small-scale study which compared the beliefs of a single EYFS teacher with a single KS1 teacher. There was agreement about the value of PBL, however there was a tug-of-war over when formal teaching should begin to fulfil requirements of school-readiness. The study also gave a questionnaire to children, the results of which showed a significant drop in enjoyment of education between EYFS and KS1. Again, this study highlights tensions between policy and practice. Instead of collaboration between teachers in different year groups, there appears to be conflict.

The study by McInnes (2019) highlighted how the contradictions between views of play in English policy and those of practitioners lead to confusion in implementation. Eighty children and fourteen practitioners were shown eighteen photographs of various situations. These were differentiated by cues of location, adult presence, and grouping, and participants were asked to categorise them as 'play' or 'not play'. The cue of 'adult presence' was perceived differently by children and practitioners. This was taken further through recognising that play is often constructed by adults, yet the child views the adult's presence as a cue that it is not a time to play. Nuttall et al. (2015) showed videos of children playing with physical toys and related digital applications to a focus group of three teachers. Contradictions were noted between the motivations of practitioners and their levels of understanding. It was argued that more training is required in digital technologies to support play-based learning. Stirrup et al. (2017) observed eighty children and fifteen practitioners in three culturally and socially different early years settings in England. They found that different types of play were valued differently in different settings and that differences in teachers' attitudes and expectations were a reflection of the English class system. They concluded that current English policy does not provide equal opportunities for all.

Other papers focused on outdoor learning. This type of learning has parallels with play-based learning with respect to freedom and being child-led. In Bilton (2020), interviews with a sample of ten EYFS teachers suggested that effective outdoor learning was dependent on the individual teacher's own experiences of it. Kelly et al. (2022) had similar findings through

a survey of thirty early years and Key Stage 1 teachers. There was significant variation found in attitudes towards outdoor and online play. Additionally, they suggested the frequency of outdoor learning and play was in decline and subject to these variations in teachers' attitudes. This decline was mirrored in Prince (2019) which analysed surveys of primary school teachers from 1995 ( $n = 40$ ) and 2017 ( $n = 61$ ). Results suggested that during this period outdoor learning expertise had diminished and called for renewed efforts to promote training. Mart and Waite (2021) compared a Turkish primary school to an English one and noted the impacts of national policies, spatial qualities, and pedagogical values on the freedom of children to direct play.

Finally, two papers were found which gave critiques of current English policy. Palaiologou (2017) criticises policy for over-valuing formal teaching and standardisation at the expense of play-based approaches. Here it was strongly advocated that different measurements of achievement and progress should be developed. It was also suggested that focus should be placed on provision of high-quality educational environments rather than knowledge assessments. Wood (2019) criticises the ideological drive behind current English policy. Special note is made of the unwarranted expansion of the role of Ofsted, and the resultant problems which arise from having a single entity acting as judge, jury, and executioner for all things education-related in England. Both critiques are persuasively framed by academic rigour. The ideological underpinning of policy is questioned for its validity. Furthermore, certain false assumptions are revealed concerning the role of Ofsted and the 'illusion' of the classroom.

## **2.3 Play and play-based learning**

### **2.3.1. Defining play.**

In order to give a satisfactory definition of play-based learning, it first needs to be understood what is meant by play. One definition proposed is that play is instinctive child behaviour that is more concerned with performance rather than outcome (Smith, 2010). However, the concept of what constitutes play is the subject of much research and discussion. It has been noted that the nature of play is varied. Play may range from reflective, solitary, and quiet to active, social, and engaging (Edwards, 2017). The conclusion

is that play is actually a complex phenomenon (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Rogers, 2010; van Oers, 2013).

As stated, play is not homogenous. In discussion around early years education, play might be used to describe everything a child does (Stirrup et al., 2017). Furthermore, it has been asserted that play should be considered inseparable from the child (Palaiologou, 2017). Play contributes to the holistic developmental journey which is undertaken by children. It has been suggested that it is not possible to separate the acquisition of mental function, in terms of learning, from the cognitive, emotional, and physical interactions which shape a child's experience of the world. Circling back to the underlying motivation of play being performance over outcome, play may be better described as an adventure rather than a journey with a specific destination. Each adventure is unique, and the performances involved are the drivers for individual, holistic development. Thus, it has been argued that any attempt to assess play through the lens of adult-oriented criteria is an illusion which ignores the ontological state of play and its motivations as being inseparable from the child (Palaiologou, 2017).

### **2.3.2. Types of play**

The definition of play as the performances inseparable from the unique adventure of each child presents certain challenges. However, attempts have been made to understand the state of those behaviours. In addition to the understanding that there exist numerous natures of play it is important to understand that there are also numerous types of play. One attempt at understanding is to consider childhood development as many 'kaleidoscopes' which consist of intersecting capabilities (Wood, 2019). Using this metaphor, it is not simply the child's own actions which drive development, but also the interactions with education policy, professional knowledge, and the overall systemic environment in which the child exists. This has led to certain terms being used in the consideration of different types of play. These terms include, for example, planned, purposeful play, structured play, free play, and child-initiated activity (McInnes, 2019).

Other research in early years education noted five types of play which occurred in a classroom (Stirrup et al., 2017). In addition to spontaneous movement and practitioner-led physical activity, three distinct types of play were noted. Firstly, there was 'Academic Play'

which consisted of time spent indoors, practising skills using construction toys like Lego or jigsaws or practising role-play. Secondly there was 'Physical Play' which occurred outdoors and involved objects and chases. Thirdly there was 'Work Play' which tended to take place in specific rooms at tables and mainly revolved around learning numeracy, literacy, and understanding the world. 'Academic Play' is child-initiated whereas 'Work Play' is adult-initiated (Stirrup et al., 2017) Aside from the content, it was noted that the engagement of the practitioner was also a defining feature of each type of play. 'This would range from observation of physical play, through discussion and cultivation of knowledge during academic play, to practitioner-led activities in work play. Thus, in an educational setting, there is a further interaction between the child's adventurousness and the boundaries of engagement displayed by the educational practitioner.

### **2.3.3. The value of play**

Previous research suggests there is a consensus that play is a powerful element involved in both promoting the wellbeing of children and in their development towards making sense of the world (Bruner et al., 1976; Edmiston, 2008; Marsh & Bishop, 2014; Opie & Opie, 1969). The challenge facing the educational setting is how to maximise the benefits of play as a developmental tool. Thus, the concept of play is in a constant state of examination and re-evaluation to try to understand what it is and how it may best be applied effectively for educational outcomes (Brooker et al., 2014). One argument is that, as play involves the development of cognitive, social, and emotional resources, maximising opportunities to play is the most effective route to holistic development (Ungar, 2008). This sense of holistic development was described as bridging the gap between the reality of the world and the child's imagination (Vygotsky, 1978).

A more diluted form of this maximal play recommendation is that every style of play has equal pedagogical value and that each style may be used in combination with every other to promote learning (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014). Again, this implies there to be a child-practitioner interaction which occurs during learning. This would then further imply that the unique adventure of the child will be impacted by the attitudes of the practitioners with whom they share their system. Research has focused upon the ways in which the attitudes practitioners hold to play differ, and that there is a general association of valuable play being

aligned with clear learning objectives (Brooker, 2010). The attitudes in this interaction would then be reflected back at the child. Thus, the way in which children learn to play appropriately is not through their own adventurousness, but rather as a received value judgement from the practitioners' differing encouragement for which form of play should be displayed most often (MacLure et al., 2012).

#### **2.3.4. Different views of play in learning**

Play is considered the foundation for both development and learning in early childhood (Wood, 2019). It has traditionally been considered the dominant force for the education of young children (McInnes, 2019). It has been the backbone of programmes for early childhood since the development of kindergarten in the nineteenth century. This has been refined through a variety of approaches developed by education pioneers, such as Montessori, throughout the twentieth century. Even now, both in England and globally, the literature advocates for the importance of play in early years provision (Wood, 2015; Pyle et al., 2017).

From a psychological perspective, research has demonstrated the developmental benefits of play, especially with reference to social skills and language skills (Keenan et al., 2016). Furthermore, there is evidence for the therapeutic benefits of play (Ray, 2011). However, other research suggests the power of play has been idealised (Sutton-Smith & Kelly-Byrne, 1984) which has led to a disbalanced view of the necessity for play in children's development (Smith, 2010). Nevertheless, the current view of early years education suggests play to be a central, enjoyable childhood activity which aids overall development and enhances learning. Research tends to recommend the use of a variety of play experiences for children's learning and that such a strategy tends to be advocated by practitioners too (Walsh et al., 2017).

#### **2.3.5. Play-based learning in the English curriculum**

As discussed, play is fundamental for child development. The importance of play, and a play-based curriculum, is reflected by its inclusion in all four UK policy frameworks (Wood, 2015). However, the complex definition of play acknowledged by academic researchers is not referenced in English education policy (McInnes, 2019). As opposed to the unique adventure



of holistic development, or the collection of kaleidoscopes through which a child understands the world, UK policy views play primarily as an activity to be directed towards achieving educational outcomes.

The English policy view requires play to be planned, purposeful, and structured (Pescott, 2017). This considers play as a child instigated adventure secondary to play planned by practitioners with curriculum goals (McInnes, 2019). This is the first potential conflict for practitioners. Those that understand play as a complex phenomenon which benefits the holistic development of children are then compelled to adopt a narrow view of purposeful play. English policy promotes practitioner-led learning over child-led discovery with outcomes demanded rather than performance encouraged. With these two central pillars of play ignored, the English policy view of 'play' contradicts the academic consensus (Smith, 2010).

### **2.3.6. Outcome-focused English policy**

The English policy view has been influenced by research focused on ideas such as performativity, standards, and effectiveness (McInnes, 2019). The influential studies tend to be government-funded, such as the 'Effective Provision for Preschool, Primary, and Secondary Education' project (Taggart et al., 2015), or Ofsted-led such as 'Bold Beginnings' (Ofsted, 2017). This agenda for effectiveness has been further supported by the Education Endowment Foundation with the production of the Early Years Toolkit (EEF, 2017). This outcome-oriented approach to early years learning has led to play being considered an instrument for performance of the curriculum rather than the behaviour through which a child learns about their world. It has been argued that to assess the play of children in such a functional, administrative manner is an illusion (Palaiologou, 2017).

### **2.3.7. Play in learning**

As discussed, play helps children to discover their world and cannot be disconnected from learning. Therefore, it also cannot be disconnected from teacher practice and policy curricula (Brooker et al., 2014). However, the view that it must contribute to prescribed learning outcomes results in debate about its place in early childhood education (Fesseha and Pyle, 2016; Hunter and Walsh, 2014). These debates involve finding a balance between

freedom and structure, clarifying the role of adults, and the challenge of directing play towards predefined goals (Wood, 2019). International research on early childhood education tends to advocate for integrated approaches which comprise of child-led play, playful learning, and practitioner-led teaching (Brooker et al., 2014; Fler, 2018). Further international study is attempting to place different types of play-based learning on a spectrum (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

## **2.4 English educational policy and play-based learning**

### **2.4.1. The UK framework for play-based learning**

Play is a distinct legislative feature of policy for early childhood education in all four countries of the UK. In England, the framework is known as the Early Years Foundation Stage and applies from birth to the age of five years old (DfE, 2012). In Wales, it is the Foundation phase from ages three to seven years old (Welsh Government 2014). In Scotland there is the Curriculum for Excellence for ages three to six years old. In Northern Ireland it is the Foundation Stage for children aged four to six years old (CCEA 2006). One immediate point of note is the differences in ages for which frameworks apply. In total, over the four territories, play is central to learning from birth to the age of seven years old.

Additionally, there are differences between how play within the curriculum is viewed. As stated, the English focus is on adult-led planned, purposeful play. This concept of play is mirrored in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence. In Northern Ireland, this concept is broadened to include well-planned, well-resourced challenging play with the practitioner responsible for helping children to extend their play. The Welsh view is more child-led and sees play as a vehicle for learning and structure. All four frameworks also consider child-initiated, spontaneous play but the dominant view is that play should be planned and structured. This view is contradictory to the view of researchers that a foundational quality of play is freedom (McInnes, 2019).

### **2.4.2. The differing value of play in UK territories**

The four frameworks in the UK have their differences and are being pulled further in different directions (Wood, 2019). Individual governments are pressuring practitioners via

policy. This results in policy-led ideas of what children should learn, recommended methods of practice, expected goals, and effective assessment. As noted, there is disagreement about when frameworks covering early childhood education should apply. This results in play being valued differently between different frameworks for children aged five to seven years old who are educated in different territories. A recent publication in Scotland has recommended that a transition from a learning framework focused on play will be smoother if play initially remains the main vehicle of learning in the following framework (Scottish Government, 2020). As it stands, English policy dictates that play is no longer such a vehicle for learning at the age of five years old.

#### **2.4.3. The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework**

The curriculum for under-fives in England focuses on seven areas considered appropriate for learning: communication and language, physical development, personal, social, and emotional development, literacy, mathematics, understanding the world including science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and expressive arts and designs (Bilton, 2020). Practitioners are also responsible for teaching in two environments, inside and outside. The parallels between outdoor learning and play-based learning will be discussed later in this chapter. However, one point of note is that research has found teachers to struggle with equating learning in different environments. It is suggested that moving a teaching location outdoors encourages practitioners to focus on best practice (Bilton, 2014).

#### **2.4.4. The concept of 'school readiness'**

One particular problem in England occurs around the transition from the Early Years Foundation Stage. The idea of purposeful education has taken on a more neoliberal attitude as the first stage in a delivery chain of education (Ball et al., 2012). At the age of five, English children are expected to have achieved high levels of school-readiness (Allen, 2011). This results in an attitude which overlooks the child's instinctual desire to discover and replaces it with the requirement that children must be prepared to perform successfully in the test-based culture of primary schools (Robert-Holmes, 2019). This concept of school-readiness is defined in English policy as a child having reached a good level of development by the end of the EYFS (Kay, 2018). However, as stated earlier, it has been found that only 10% of children

achieve all goals concerning school readiness, and 50% achieve none (Fisher, 2009). This would suggest that most five-year-old children are not yet ready for school.

#### **2.4.5. Problems with the concept of 'school readiness'**

Education reforms over the last decade have mirrored the general political landscape with the promotion of neoliberalism. This ideology has continued to dominate debates around best practice in early years education (Moss, 2014). Promoters of this ideology see education as government investment in a society which converts children into learners and subsequently into economically viable citizens (Ailwood, 2003). It places emphasis on the standardised assessment of children. The data are then extrapolated to assess the effectiveness of practitioners which in turn may be judged and assessed in terms of the 'monolithic' concept of quality (Wood, 2019).

It has been suggested that the Early Years Foundation Stage framework is the embodiment of the neoliberal principle of performativity (Rogers & Lapping, 2012). Play in an educational setting is prescribed to be planned and purposeful. This implies that some forms of play are more valuable than others. Again, 'school readiness' is favoured over more expressive, free, and adventurous forms of play (Neaum, 2016).

#### **2.4.6. The transition from Early Years Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1**

A further issue with the concept of school readiness is that it is not achieved by many children (Fisher, 2009; 2022). A report authored by Ofsted, 'Bold Beginnings', noted that a smooth transition from EYFS to KS1 is made more difficult as early years education goals are not aligned with the increased expectations of the National Curriculum (Ofsted, 2017). Additionally, the formerly encouraged building on the EYFS approach to achieve that smooth transition has been abandoned for more formal approaches. Thus, there is an abrupt shift in children's experiences of learning.

The transition has been described as a metaphorical bridge between the EYFS and the first year of formal schooling (Dunlop & Fabian, 2006). It is suggested that this bridge between learning environments should help to foster strong connections between the familiar and unfamiliar to support the child (Huser et al., 2016). One possible measure of a successful

transition recommended in the literature is that the child will feel a strong sense of belonging in new settings (Brooker, 2008).

This transition from a play-based curriculum to a content-based curriculum at the age of five is the first significant shift in a child's education (Howe, 2016). There is wide recognition in the literature that both a child's academic and emotional capabilities may be negatively impacted if not supported during this transition (Bateson, 2013). Policy prescribes the measurement of 'school readiness' as a child considered capable of the transition. However, there is no official measure for whether a transition has been successful.

However, this transition is not a single change. Research suggests that children experience multiple discontinuities between the EYFS framework and the first year of primary school (Huser et al., 2016). These discontinuities exist in learning environment, content of the curriculum, class organisation, and pupil-teacher ratio (Boyle and Petriwskyj 2014; Chan 2012; Dockett and Perry 2012; Yeboah 2002). Yet, the most important difference experienced is in the way they are taught (Fisher, 2009). Overall, research would suggest that the discontinuities experienced by children moving from EYFS to KS1 are too demanding (Ofsted, 2004). This contention about the demands of formal schooling would suggest there to be a lack of metaphorical bridging (Barbett et al. 2011; OECD 2006; Ofsted 2017). The overall result of a lack of support, guidance, and preparedness leaves children open to the risks of an unnecessarily abrupt transition between stages of education (Dunlop & Fabian, 2006).

#### **2.4.7. The conflict between 'play' and 'learning'**

As stated, even though the EYFS framework dictates that teaching and learning must be implemented through play, policy-led pressure has emerged dictating that children must be ready for learning in Key Stage 1 (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012). This has led to conflict for teachers who, despite advocating a play-based pedagogy, are compelled to change this style of teaching to prepare children for transition to primary school (Nicholson, 2019). It has been suggested that such premature exposure to formal education can negatively impact upon academic, emotional, and social development (Margetts, 2007).

This negative impact may be compounded if, as has previously been reported, many children have not achieved the prescribed early learning goals (DfE, 2018; Fisher, 2011). It is implied that school readiness is achieved through early learning goals. Therefore, if those goals are not met, children are being forced into a formal setting prematurely. The completion of these goals results in a child being considered to have reached a good level of development and is the indicator that they are ready for school (Public Health England, 2015). Again, this is important as it has been reported that those classified as such are most likely to find the transition to Key Stage 1 to be a positive experience (Yeboah, 2002).

#### **2.4.8. The downward push of the National Curriculum**

This incongruence between play-based learning and school readiness has resulted in practitioners being involved in a 'tug of war' over which style of pedagogy should be compromised to accommodate the other (Nicholson, 2019). It is suggested that transitions are critical periods in the lives of children so should be approached with appropriate care (Ecclestone et al., 2009). Additionally, it has been suggested that a major contributory factor which may negatively impact children's enjoyment of learning is the pedagogical discontinuity between EYFS and KS1 (Nicholson, 2019; Sharp, 2006). However, policy suggests play is of lesser value than emphasising National Curriculum goals (Palaiologou, 2017). It has further been reported that play is now discouraged in favour of teaching children to 'fill in the blanks' with rote answers (International Play Association, 2014).

The transition from EYFS to KS1 has been described as a one-way activity whereby early years practitioners are compelled to change their methods of teaching to satisfy the demands of the National Curriculum (Dockett & Perry, 2014). This seems to be the policy-led solution to curriculum and pedagogical discontinuities (Nicholson, 2019). However, research has shown that this downward push of the National Curriculum is negatively impacting early years education (Alexander 2010; Hood 2013). It has been reported that teachers are attempting to resist this push, but feel powerless against the demands for formalisation before transition (Nicholson, 2019). This would suggest there is a lack of the necessary supportive bridging to maximise successful transitions.

#### **2.4.9. Summary of the state of transition between EYFS and KS1**

During EYFS, several forms of play are encouraged, prescribed, and promoted. These different forms are dependent on assumptions made about children's requirements (Stirrup et al., 2017). Children have the ability to perform their own adventurous play as individuals with agency, yet practitioners impose restrictions which are intended to promote more valuable, purposeful play (Markstrom & Hallden, 2009). However, these restrictions do not seem to be instigated by practitioners. Rather, there are outside influences, such as EYFS expectations and the National Curriculum (Wood, 2007). It is assumed children will understand that academic play is more valuable (Stirrup et al., 2017). However, more research is required into the whether play-based pedagogy, which promotes inclusivity and celebrates different dispositions, ensures each child achieves the standardised National Curriculum outcomes (Nicholson, 2019; Stirrup et al., 2017).

### **2.5. Practitioners and play-based learning**

#### **2.5.1. The child's view of play**

The policy-led assumptions of what constitutes valuable, purposeful play towards school readiness is argued to be a view constructed by adults (McInnes, 2019). It would seem more appropriate to attempt to understand views of children regarding the benefits of play (Theobald et al., 2015). However, there are currently limited, though increasing, examinations of how children view play (Einarsdottir, 2014). At one time it was considered that whatever a child did was play. This implied there was no differentiation in the child's mind between play and non-play activities (DfEE, 2000). Early studies depended on interviews and observations; however, these may be challenging as young children may not have the required vocabulary to communicate answers to a satisfactory degree (Keating et al., 2000; Wing, 1995). Therefore, more recent studies have used photographs and video rather than depending solely on interviews (Pyle & Alaca, 2018). These studies tend to show that children's attitudes to what constitutes play depend upon the physical and social environment (Einarsdottir, 2014). Children tend to use cues such as choice, location, and whether or not an adult is present to differentiate between play and non-play activities

(Howard & McInnes, 2013a). It has further been suggested that children view the scope of play and non-play on a continuum (Goodhall & Atkinson, 2017).

That the presence of an adult changes a child's perception of play should further impact upon teachers' practice. It has been reported that practitioners do not seem to understand their presence as defining. This has also been noted as a factor leading to confusion for practitioners concerning intervention in play (McInnes, 2019). It has been suggested that one solution is to give the child more control over their learning environment, location, and apparatus. However, this may raise extra conflicts between policy beliefs of standardisation and practitioners' experiences of free play (Wood, 2015).

### **2.5.2. Implications of children's view of play for practitioners**

Adopting a different perspective of play could benefit practitioners. It is suggested that it would be beneficial to make less assumptions about children's play and allow them to create their own environment (McInnes, 2019). Similarly, it may lead practitioners to reflect upon their own attitudes towards playfulness and appropriate participation in child's play (Walsh et al., 2019). The promotion of such attitudes should then impact upon early years practitioners' training to broaden strategies towards achieving policy goals. Currently, there is little training to promote understanding of play (Barblett et al., 2016). However, such training has been shown to promote positive attitudes towards play and play-based pedagogy (Jung & Bora, 2015).

### **2.5.3. The complexity of teaching**

Teaching has been described as a complex act (Shulman, 1987). A practitioner is expected to possess not only sufficient knowledge of a subject, but also the knowledge of how best to teach that subject (Bilton, 2020). This complexity is compounded in early years education with requiring sufficient knowledge of how to teach through play. It has also been suggested that there is a mismatch between the rhetoric and reality surrounding play for practitioners (McInnes, 2019). This leads to a struggle to understand, define, and implement the appropriate style of pedagogy (Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014). Thus, there is confusion regarding the potential benefits of play in early years, policy-led ideas of planned and purposeful play, and teachers' own beliefs about the value of play. Tensions are apparent



between the understanding that children learn through play, but that play and learning need to be enacted separately (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

Consequently, it would seem practitioners need greater experience of, and training in, play. It is noted, both in research and government publications, that the practitioner's judgement as to when to intervene in children's play is crucial to the successful implementation of a play-based curriculum (Howard & McInnes, 2013a; Jung et al., 2017; Ofsted, 2015). This is also reflected in research which has reported that uncertainty to intervene is a result of lacking the necessary skills (Hunter & Wash, 2014). The literature would suggest training on play is limited, which leads to limited understanding of play in practice (Howard 2010a; Ryan and Northey-Berg 2014; Barblett et al., 2016). An extension of this issue is that headteachers report challenges when attempting to find teachers sufficiently trained in implementing play-based learning (Robert-Holmes, 2012). But, as previously stated, appropriate training inspires positive attitudes towards play-based pedagogies (Jung & Bora, 2015).

#### **2.5.4. Attitudes of headteachers**

As with teachers, the attitudes of headteachers are also a factor in the successful implementation of play-based learning. This has been reported as a potential barrier to inclusion of a play-based approach in Key Stage 1 (Fisher, 2022). It is suggested that this barrier exists due to headteachers lacking experience of early years education. However, it was also noted that such headteachers professed trust in their staff when adopting play-based practice. As with other practitioners, the key to developing positive attitudes seems to be through training or professional development such as visiting nursery schools and attending lectures on early years pedagogy.

It has been noted that the impact of headteachers on education has escalated since the introduction of the National Curriculum (Fisher, 2022). There is now a greater focus on outcomes rather than processes. This has led to a data-driven judgement of early years teaching (Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2016). This has resulted in headteachers being required to implement whole-school approaches which overlook the needs of younger children (Nicholson, 2019). It was reported that practitioners felt the pressure to comply with policy came from headteachers rather than government mandate (Fisher, 2022).

### **2.5.5. Value positions of teachers**

To navigate the possible conflicts a teacher may face, it has been recommended that they need to understand their own 'value position' (Pollard, 2008). This involves reflecting upon actual practice, consistency, and being mindful of external pressures. An example of such a position concerns attitudes towards risky play (Waller at al., 2010). It was noted that an adult will impose their own decisions on a child's behaviour. The decision to allow risky play is based on whether the adult views the child as competent or vulnerable. There is no allowance for the adventurousness of the individual child. Instead, it is the adult who makes the value judgement on the type of play instigated. Thus, it is the adult's values and beliefs which dictate how children may play (Bilton, 2020). In terms of value position, there is little sense of consistency. It was additionally reported that causal links were claimed between the adult's childhood experiences and their approach as a practitioner.

### **2.5.6. The concept of 'invisible pedagogy'**

Incorporating play into practice can be a challenge (Wood & Chesworth, 2017). However, practice should be built upon play. One possible approach to this is through the adoption of invisible pedagogy (Bernstein, 1973). Here it is recognised that play is the primary medium for children to express themselves. It is also the primary route for learning cognitive, emotional, and social skills. Thus, it was recommended that practitioners should see their control over children as being implied (Bernstein, 1975). For example, they should provide activities but not instruct children which to choose. This leads to children having greater control over area and speed of knowledge acquisition in addition to their own physical movements and social relationships. It is suggested that this type of pedagogy will allow the child to demonstrate its capability to the practitioner through engagement in play. Thus, poorly defined concepts such as 'purposeful' and 'preparedness' may be superseded by more apparent descriptions such as 'busy', 'ready', and 'doing'. This will allow for clearer assessment of progress and potential. There may still be adult judgements of which types of play are more productive, but the choice and freedom to play is under the child's control.

### **2.5.7. EYFS concept of outdoor learning**

The Early Years Foundation Stage government guidance requires the designation of outdoor learning opportunities for children (DfE, 2017). As stated, early years practitioners must be capable of teaching in different environments. From a play perspective, a practitioner's role to guide and support learning may be easier in an outdoors environment (Waite et al., 2013). This is due to the lesser demand to govern curriculum teaching which may negatively impact a child's freedom whilst playing (Dewey, 1963). The EYFS highlights the responsibility for service providers to either make available an outdoor space for play or to ensure outdoor activities are undertaken on a daily basis (DfE, 2017).

However, such outdoor learning is still restricted by policy-led ideologies (DfE, 2012). It remains challenging to use such learning opportunities to promote imagination and freedom (Dewey, 1997). It is abilities such as these which are promoted in early years practice in other territories (Sandseter et al., 2012). Thus, it seems that the English EYFS policy is designed to control rather than encourage freedom (Mart & Waite, 2021). It has been suggested that a main barrier to outdoor learning is the attitude of other education professionals. However, as with other challenges with teaching, greater experience and training results in improved positive attitudes towards outdoor learning in practitioners (Bilton, 2020). Understanding that teaching is already a complex profession, practitioners need help to define and communicate the aims of outdoor education.

### **2.5.8. Parallels between outdoor learning and play-based learning**

Outdoor learning is defined as 'purposeful and planned' outdoor experiences (Institute for Outdoor Learning, 2018). Immediately it is interesting to note the similar language to the EYFS guidance for learning through play. It is a mandated provision intended to support curriculum delivery (Macquarrie, 2018). It is not viewed as supplementary (Nicol, 2014) nor seen as a privilege (Power et al., 2009). It has been suggested it can be combined with all areas of teaching as a regular provision (Dolan, 2015; Stern et al., 2014). Other definitions of outdoor learning focus on attributes such as 'freedom' and 'unstructured' (Kelly et al., 2023; Veitch et al., 2006).

The focus placed on outdoor play in the EYFS would suggest it is an important facet of teaching requiring training and encouragement (DfE, 2021). However, despite efforts to this effect, recent research seems to report a decline in its availability (Parent et al., 2021; Sandseter et al., 2021). It has been suggested that there are a range of factors which have led to this lessening of outdoor provision (Prince, 2019; Waite, 2010). Again, the downward pressure of government policy and the neoliberal ideology of child assessment has led to a narrow focus on the literacy, maths, and science areas of the National Curriculum (James, 2014; Prince & Exeter, 2016). Outdoor adventurous activities have been merged into the physical education curriculum (Leather, 2018). Sometimes, outdoor learning is taught as a subject in its own right (Allison et al., 2012).

### **2.5.9. The benefits of outdoor learning**

To address this decline, there is a refreshed emphasis on developing a better understanding of the benefits of outdoor learning (Prince, 2019). Efforts include the development of models of good practice and raising the perceived value of outdoor learning (Institute for Outdoor Learning, 2018). Research reports outdoor learning to enhance the experience of memorable learning and providing context to extend classroom-based education (James & Williams, 2017; Karpinnen, 2012). It is further reported that these experiences are equivalent to classroom teaching in terms of educational value and are an effective method for curriculum delivery (Macquarrie, 2018; Maynard & Waters, 2007; Merewether, 2017). This form of learning has also been effective for older children towards the end of primary school (Harvey et al., 2017; Quibell et al., 2017).

It is widely reported that outdoor learning is beneficial for cognitive, emotional, and social development (Bilton, 2010). It is beneficial for overall intellectual development (Azlina & Zulkiflee, 2012) and a child's health (Waters & Maynard, 2010). Further benefits have been noted in children's relationships with nature which may be applied to numerous curriculum areas (Waite et al., 2016). It is contended that outcomes are enhanced through opportunities in natural landscapes (Fjortoft, 2004) which encourage children to play and learn (Gibson, 2015). Improvements have been seen in health and well-being (Dyment et al., 2017) and teamwork (Neill, 2008). It is recommended that the importance of outdoor play should not be underestimated (Carrington, 2016).

### **2.5.10. Learning environments matter**

The freedom available outdoors encourages children to shape their own learning (Bilton, 2010). This reflects the aspect of freedom inherent in the concept of play-based learning. Furthermore, the adventurousness of play, and greater freedom associated with outdoor learning, leads to unintended learning experiences (White & Woolley, 2014). The outdoor environment grants extra space and freedom for experiences which help the child to understand and give meaning to the world (Aasen et al., 2009). However, the choice of learning environment remains with adults. Thus, the individual attitudes and values of practitioners will impact the availability of activities (Ernst & Tornabene, 2012). Therefore, it would seem similar attention and investment should be encouraged to designing outdoor environments as is given to the classroom (Leggett & Newman, 2017). One such initiative which has become popular in primary schools is 'Forest School' which has been reported to enhance learning experiences (Cumming & Nash, 2015; Elliott, 2015; Knight, 2013).

### **2.5.11. Barriers to implementation**

A main barrier to the encouragement of outdoor learning is a lack of resources. Headteachers face challenges with funding and tend to prioritise budgets towards formal curriculum activities (Prince, 2019). Again, the downward pressure of policy-led ideologies overcomes well-evidenced benefits. The main resources which are reported to be lacking are time and money. Interestingly, it has been reported that time, especially when linked to expertise, is now the most limited resource (Prince, 2019). Here it was suggested that, due to curriculum pressure, 'new ideas' were foregone in favour of standard, didactic teaching. The ability to successfully implement play or outdoor pedagogies is linked to enthusiasm, experience, and expertise (Remington & Legge, 2017). It is also suggested that teachers should be encouraged to experiment with approaches to the curriculum (Brundrett & Duncan, 2014). This idea of experimentation has been expanded to encourage teachers towards pedagogical transgression in order to challenge preconceived ideas about early years education (Mereweather, 2017). Therefore, again, the recommendation is to encourage practitioners towards professional development (Prince, 2019).

The views of teachers concerning the curriculum is important for the implementation of play-based learning. Similarly, the environments in which learning takes place are critical. These environments must be well-resourced, safe, and accessible. In this way, subjects across the curriculum may be effectively taught (Prince, 2019). Currently, there is interest in individual initiatives which develop upon these ideas. In addition to the already mentioned 'Forest School' (Knight, 2013), others include the Natural Connections project (Waite et al., 2016), 'Grandparents Gardening Week' (Grow to School, 2018), 'Forest Fridays' (Ager, 2018), 'No child left inside' (Oregon Community Foundation, 2012), and 'Every Child Outdoors' (Hunt, 2018).

#### **2.5.12. Early years education as a system**

Play, and the freedom it involves, is critical to development. The level of freedom available is the result of dynamic factors interacting. These include the child, the practitioner, and the environment (Dewey, 1997). Other factors involved include availability of opportunity, resources, and planned materials (Waite, 2013), and teachers attitudes, curriculum interpretation, suitability of locations, a culture of risk-benefit, and initiatives (Prince, 2019). It is reported that English practitioners see outdoor learning as providing greater freedom for children yet expect them to engage in similar activities to those which would be planned and undertaken indoors. This essentially nullifies the extra freedom to satisfy a curriculum-driven focus. Thus, in the English system, play is still under control (Mart & Waite, 2021). One reason given is that play is restricted to minimise the risk of injury (Wyver et al., 2010). However, an important learning opportunity available from adventurous play is risk-management.

Practitioners are influenced by policy-led pressure. It has been suggested that these policies should be revisited to lower pressure on practitioners and encourage greater freedom for child-led learning. Tensions which arise due to practitioner confusion over the breadth of the curriculum may be resolved by considering outdoor learning as an effective pedagogy in its own right (Mart & Waite, 2021).

## **2.6. The benefits of play-based learning**

### **2.6.1. Modes of play-based learning**

Similar to children's experience of play, play-based learning is also suggested to be best described as existing on a continuum (Wood, 2014). Here it is described that play-based learning exists as three modes. 'Mode A' is child-initiated and child-led and pursuant to their own interests. 'Mode B' is still child-led but adults guide this play to build on their interests. 'Mode C' is adult-led with intended outcomes resulting in little freedom of choice for children. It is suggested that children move easily between modes and the practitioner should use their experience to observe when to implement each respective mode. It is claimed that this conceptualisation is consistent with research suggesting children's interests are formulated from their bank of knowledge. This knowledge is reflected in curriculum areas of which teachers have the sufficient knowledge to teach (Chesworth, 2016; Hedges & Cooper, 2016; Hill & Wood, 2019). The continuum of three modes has been expanded to five in other research (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

### **2.6.2. Benefits of play-based learning**

Play provides opportunities for children to develop integrated knowledge in multiple fields through free choice of activity (Palaiologou, 2017). Play is a behaviour which is flexible, beneficial, based on intrinsic motivation, and values performance over outcomes (Smith, 2010). Research shows play to be beneficial for learning (McInnes et al., 2009,2010; Howard & McInnes, 2013b), and that when a child is placed in a playful environment, they show enhanced performance in problem-solving tasks (McInnes, 2019). Children also show greater wellbeing and demonstrate more playful behaviours such as relaxation, physicality, motivation, and engagement. This supports the contention that it is the playful approach which is important for development rather than the actual activity (Bundy, 1993). It has further been suggested that the cues children use for play are adaptable depending on context (Goodhall & Atkinson, 2017).

It has further been reported that high-quality play-based learning has a positive impact on future learning (Sylva et al., 2004). PBL allows practitioners to mobilise the increased motivation and engagement towards desired areas of learning (Bennett, 1997; Howard,

2010b). Simultaneously, the child will be developing their holistic development via greater cognitive, emotional, and social competency (Whitebread et al., 2012). Essentially, there is a vast amount of literature which has suggested there to be many benefits to play-based, developmentally appropriate pedagogies in early years education (Stirrup et al., 2017). Children learn by leading their own play and by collaborating in play which may be guided by adults. It is prescribed that practitioners must respond to a child's interests to guide learning (EYFS, 2014). Additionally, early years education practitioners consider play to be vitally important for the development of children's learning (Cannella & Viruru, 1997). Consequently, questions must be asked as to why English policy overlooks academic research and practitioner experience in favour of an ideology.

## **2.7. Critiques of the current English early years education policy**

### **2.7.1. The neoliberal school readiness agenda**

In England, a trend has developed which advocates for the play-based framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage to be directed towards achieving school readiness (OECD, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). Policy indicates that the primary objective of EYFS is to produce high levels of 'school readiness' for all school children (Allen, 2011). This redirection considers early years as the first stage of preparation for children's performance in primary schools (Ball et al, 2012; Roberts-Holmes, 2019). School readiness is defined in England as when a child achieved a 'good level of development' by the end of EYFS (Kay, 2018). In the EYFS (2021) guidance, this is prescribed to be the standard that children must attain before year 1 to ensure they will cope with formal learning and demands of the national curriculum, However, many children do not achieve this level. Attempting to achieve school readiness through the vehicle of play has been described as oxymoronic (Kagan & Lowenstein, 2004). Recent developments in the EYFS (2021) have changed the early learning goals away from play-based approaches towards preparation for formal learning. The intention of this change is to smooth the transition between EYFS and KS1. Both the 'Development Matters' (DfE, 2020) and 'Birth to Five Matters' (Early Education, 2021) exist as non-statutory guidance for teachers to use within the EYFS year to help them support the development of the early learning goals in children. Despite the vast amount of academic research available, there is now a culture of continual assessment based on policy-prescribed standardisation against



which progress is measured (Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2016a). This has led to practitioners feeling conflicted. Their child-centred values and play-based approaches are seemingly confirmed by policy principles yet are assessed in terms of a standardised school readiness agenda (Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2016b).

Consequently, play is disappearing from classrooms (Palaiologou, 2017). The concern is that play and playfulness have been hijacked in order to satisfy mandated requirements concerning literacy and numeracy in the name of standardised testing (Palaiologou, 2017). Another, more academically framed, concern is that the disappearance of play from classrooms limits the ability to study play in classrooms. The prevailing view of play is that it spontaneously emerges from children, and that it should not be limited to standardised measures, and more ecologically valid classroom observation is required. However, if play disappears, this will prevent examination of how exactly play might be used to enhance education (Bodrova et al., 2013). Essentially, practitioners understand the value of play, but government pressure limits their ability to benefit from it (Kelly et al., 2023).

### **2.7.2. Contradictions apparent in English policy**

It has been argued that English policy attempts to harness the benefits of play while simultaneously suppressing its availability to children by imposing controls focused on desirability and outcomes (Wood, 2015). At first sight, English policy seems consistent with the literature. It attempts to improve the quality of education for young children through play-based learning and talks of finding a balance between child-initiated and adult-led play (DfE, 2017). The seven areas of learning outlined are considered equally important in supporting a rounded approach to child development (DfE, 2021). However, contradictions appear when examining phrases like 'planned, purposeful play'. This has been argued to reduce the nature of play to an activity to be measured against a standard. It is further argued that this ignores fundamental aspects of natural play (Palaiologou, 2017). This problem of standardisation has been further compounded with the introduction of additional assessments such as the 'Integrated Review at Age Two' and the 'EYFS Profile' (Department of Education, 2014a, 2014b). Policy pressures for standardised assessment undermine the written principles prioritising play-based learning. Similarly, it disregards the

imaginative, instinctive, and voluntary aspects of play which have been shown to be critical factors in development (Burghardt, 2011; Rogoff, 1993)

The Early Years Foundation Stage provides a model of an 'imaginary learner'. It sets out seventeen early learning goals and specifies ideal ages at which a child should attain knowledge of each (DfE, 2021). This assessment style categorises children as either 'normal' or failing (MacLure et al., 2012). Quality and effectiveness are measured through achievement of these early learning goals which results in a judgement that a child has reached a 'Good Level of Development'. A byproduct of this conceptualisation of assessment is that the role of Ofsted has expanded from inspection to providing guidance on 'good' and 'effective' practice (Wood, 2019). It has been argued that asserting play to be the platform on which standardised assessment becomes possible is paradoxical. It ignores the fact that play and playfulness are developmental achievements in themselves, and that there is variation between children (Palaiologou, 2017). It also fails to recognise the benefits of play as an activity which affords opportunities for a child to interact with, and make sense of, the world around them, including opportunities for unintended learning. Overall, it is argued that play promotes intrinsic development and therefore cannot be measured meaningfully against external goals (Palaiologou, 2017).

### **2.7.3. The role of Ofsted**

A byproduct of the current English ideological policy is that the role of Ofsted has expanded beyond inspection. It has now become central to the culture of assessment, measurement, and standardisation against national figures. Their remit now includes judging and reporting on the quality of education and reporting on overall effectiveness. This focuses upon achievement of pupils, quality of teaching, leadership and management, and behaviour and safety of children which are subject to classifications from 'inadequate' to 'outstanding'. Thus, they have become the sole arbiter of the effectiveness of English education. They have also become a source of knowledge concerning best practices for desired outcomes.

### **2.7.4. Problems with Ofsted as a source of knowledge**

Analyses of Ofsted publications report concerns that, in spite of a lack of reliability, trustworthiness, or any other checks on integrity, these documents carry political and social

weight (Wood, 2019). One such publication, 'Teaching and Play' (Ofsted, 2015), has further been described as a document which urges conscription and complicity through coercion. Another such publication, 'Bold Beginnings' (Ofsted, 2017), has been similarly criticised for using circular discourse based on policy-led evidence. Consequently, Ofsted has been accused of coercion in order to advance ideological policy agenda to reinforce intended outcomes (Kay, 2018). To combat this approach, practitioners and researchers have been urged to contemplate the systems within which they are working. Further research is required into the neoliberal ideal of conformity and how to challenge and deconstruct policy and its effects (Wood, 2019).

These publications result in uncertainty about the state of play in England. Ofsted recognise that play is important to child development, but the opportunities for it are now suppressed for policy-constructed ideals such as goals, outcomes, and standards. These ideals have been described as a 'fantasy' (Wood, 2019). The 'imagined learner', already an exceptional student (Fisher, 2009), has a future mapped out for them, and it has now become the practitioner's responsibility to divert all their resources to constructing this fantasy. There is no acknowledgement of the complexity of play or the complexity of teaching. Similarly, the complexity of research in the field of play-based learning is overlooked in favour of over-simplified concepts in publications which lack validity. In contrast to Ofsted, valid research offers up potential perspectives which may aid practitioners in professional development through alternative views of their roles which are inherently social, relational, and equitable.

## **2.8. The impact of COVID-19**

Due to the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, its recent beginnings and ongoing status, there is little research available on its lasting effects. Early in the pandemic, the seriousness of the situation for education was addressed by the United Nations. They urged governments to prioritise education to minimise any potential impact on children's outcomes (UN, 2020). However, COVID-19 has severely disrupted education, especially with regards to the transition between EYFS and KS1 (Bakopoulou, 2022). As previously stated, transitions are critical moments for children which may affect their long-term learning and wellbeing (Nicholson, 2019).

Impacts of the pandemic on early years education were noted in many areas. However, the most negatively affected were language, social development, physical development, and independence (Fox et al. 2021; Tracey et al. 2022). Further research suggested 76% of schools reported children needing greater support when entering school (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021). It was recommended that adjusted curriculums should be introduced to give greater support to this cohort of children (Bakopoulou, 2022). The same author further recommended that the transition from EYFS to KS1 should not be treated as a standardised process. This reflects previous findings that each child's transition is unique dependent on their own diverse experiences (Margetts, 2013).

One further point of note was the effect of the pandemic on practitioners. It was recommended that the emotional wellbeing of teachers should also be a priority. Recommendations were made which involved clearer guidance, greater opportunities for professional development, and the provision of support networks for collaboration on best practice. These recommendations reflect previous findings with respect to the benefits for teachers of training and collaboration (Jung & Bora, 2015).

## **2.9. Chapter Summary**

Play is the foundation for development (Wood, 2019) and the dominant force for child education (McInnes, 2019). Play should be utilised by educational professionals to enhance children's learning (Walsh et al., 2017). Play is also instrumental in promoting understanding of the world and wellbeing (Marsh & Bishop, 2014). Each child's development is a unique adventure (Palaiologou, 2017) with kaleidoscopic potential (Wood, 2019). Play is complex (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009), teaching is complex (Shulman, 1987), and play-based learning enhances a multitude of capabilities (Stirrup et al., 2017).

However, English policy insists on standardisation. Reliance on assessment and measurement reduces education to a data-driven judgement of teaching (Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2016). It asserts the existence of a standard, school-ready five-year-old 'imaginary learner' who, from previous evidence, would appear to be an exceptional student. Children are measured against this idealised model and, unsurprisingly, the majority of them are judged to have failed (Fisher, 2009). However, governmental judgement that a

child is not ready for school is no barrier to them receiving formal, didactic teaching for which they were judged unready. Transitions are critical points in children's lives and should be well-supported (Eccleston, 2009). However, the discontinuities are apparent in many domains (Huser et al., 2016). The transition from EYFS to KS1 is too abrupt (Fisher, 2020).

English educational policy is inconsistent with academic research concerning play-based learning. The imposition of ideological standards has resulted in the diminishment of evidence-based practice. Play-based learning is a potentially powerful tool adaptable to child-led, needs-led education. However, this tool seems to have been discarded due to top-down pressure on practitioners. The following chapters of this thesis will attempt to shed light on why this is happening.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Chapter Introduction**

This chapter will comprise of an in-depth description of the method through which I chose to conduct my research. First, I will set out my overall aims for the research, and the research questions I formulated to achieve these aims. Secondly, I will describe the development of the study, and the personal motivations which drove me to conduct it. Third, I will describe my own beliefs, in terms of epistemology and ontology, which led me to conclude that Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) would be the most effective method for extracting the most meaningful data and enlightening findings. I will then justify this choice with respect to overall aims and alternative methods. I will then describe the recruitment of participants, and the procedure surrounding the online semi-structured interviews conducted to gather the analysed data. To end with, ethical implications, including informed consent, confidentiality, and minimisation of risk will be discussed, as these were over-arching considerations throughout the methodological process. Similarly, I will discuss my beliefs with respect to my own reflexivity as a researcher in terms of protection from harm, power imbalance, privacy, and data protection.

This chapter will be written in the first person due to the subjective nature and requirements of Reflexive Thematic Analysis. It has been suggested that thematic analysis (TA) is a 'method' rather than a 'methodology' (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). The implication here is that, instead of being a precisely pre-planned route, TA allows and encourages the flexibility, subjectivity, and adaptability of the researcher to plot their own course towards achieving their goals. Consequently, there is a responsibility on the researcher to reflect upon, and critically analyse, each decision in the research journey.

### **3.2. Overall research aims and research questions**

The present study is a piece of qualitative research aimed at exploring attitudes of teachers towards play-based learning by giving a voice to their beliefs and experiences. It was designed to allow insight into teachers' considerations of their pedagogical role, their experiences of play-based learning, their understanding of how a play-based approach fits

within the current English National Curriculum, and any differences they have noted in play between pre- and post-pandemic.

As previously stated, the literature provides an evidence base for the benefits of play for learning (e.g., Howard & McInnes, 2013). Additionally, play-based learning has been shown to be beneficial for the development of non-academic qualities such as sociability, communication, and understanding the world (Keenan et al., 2016). Furthermore, the European, play-based pedagogical systems highlighted as exemplars of child development have been rejected by English policymakers in favour of a more American notion of school-readiness (Robert-Holmes, 2019). As it currently stands, it has been suggested that the transition from the play approach in EYFS to the didactic academia of Year 1 is too abrupt (OFSTED, 2004) and too great a culture shock (Fisher, 2020).

Therefore, the motivation of the study is to unravel the causes of this abrupt pedagogical discontinuity. I decided to gather data by interviewing those most capable of describing the current situation: primary school teachers. I decided against interviewing children as they are too young and inexperienced to fully communicate the problems faced. Therefore, I chose to interview Key Stage 1 teachers as they are the education professionals who work most closely with children most affected by the abrupt change in educational style.

Additionally, teachers are the population most responsible for implementing the prescribed teaching style to achieve goals set by policy, headteachers and SLT. Such teaching methods might conflict with the teachers' personal beliefs (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Previous research concerning teachers has mainly focused on surveys as a medium for data collection (e.g., Fisher, 2022). I believe this is a gap in the literature which might be addressed by gaining richer data through in-depth exploration of teachers' beliefs.

My aspirations for this study are that it will help to understand teachers' experiences of play-based learning and to examine their views on best practice. It will highlight constraints within the English system and how these impact upon both teachers and students. Such findings may prove useful or enlightening as to what works well within schools and possible avenues for improvement. The ultimate aim is to establish themes which recur among different teachers from different schools which may provide knowledge of the state of play-based learning across Key Stage 1.

Consequently, to investigate these issues most effectively, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are primary teachers' attitudes towards Play-Based Learning?
2. What are primary teachers' best experiences of Play-Based Learning?
3. What, if any, constraints do primary teachers believe they face which inhibit play-based learning? What, if anything, have they done to overcome these?
4. What changes in Play-Based Learning have primary teachers noted between pre- and post- pandemic?

### **3.3. Development of the study**

Qualitative research conducted from a constructivist, interpretivist standpoint is necessarily subjective. Thus, it involves personal reflection and understanding of personal motivations. This section will describe my own personal experiences which led to the development of this specific study. As outlined previously (see 1.2. Rationale for the study), I previously held roles as a Teaching Assistant and Learning Mentor. These both involved the promotion of child wellbeing through the facilitation of play. These interactions occurred mainly during unstructured time or on the playground. I was able to see first-hand how play helped children to acquire and develop skills. However, I was interested in how these learning elements of play might be transposed to the classroom. I also developed an interest in play therapy and, during pastoral work, would use puppets and toys to aid learning and other social skills. I believe these strategies promoted engagement and allowed children to explore the world at their own pace and in their own chosen directions.

Later, in my role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), I was initially involved in early years learning. Here, I was able to observe a play-based curriculum and witnessed how this was beneficial to children's learning. As my work as a TEP continued, I was exposed to other environments in which older children were expected to learn. It struck me that, from Year 1 onwards, adherence to the National Curriculum meant that teaching became formal very quickly. To me, there seemed to be no smooth transition between reception stage of the EYFS and Year 1. I was curious as to why the benefits of play-based learning I had witnessed



in early years were discarded so abruptly. Thus, I became interested in whether my perceptions as a TEP moving between schools were ones which teachers might share.

An over-arching concern during this period was the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect this may have had on children. During September 2021 I had a conversation with a headteacher and early years lead about this impact. We had noticed how children were role-playing their experiences of COVID. Around this time, in October 2021, I became aware of the BPS 'Time to Play' (2021) guidance. Here it was suggested that research showed that, despite being crucial to children's wellbeing and social development, play had actually decreased in schools. Apparently, this was the result of a government policy to recover after the pandemic. The BPS, however, advocated for a re-evaluation of children's priorities in schools. They suggested that play should be prioritised to promote and protect the mental wellbeing of children in school.

In March 2022, I formulated my first research proposal. I initially considered a single case-study, but realised I wanted to examine as wide a range as possible of experiences. Similarly, I had initially intended to gather the experiences of children through observation and mini-interviews. However, I recognised that the literature had previously focused on collecting children's views. I also realised that children would probably not possess the language skills to articulate their concerns. This, coupled with ongoing COVID-19 policy uncertainty, resulted in me turning my focus towards teaching professionals. Initially, I believed gaining the beliefs and experiences of headteachers and SLTs may be enlightening. However, I recognised that this may be too detached from providing insight into the developmental and learning progress of children. Consequently, I chose to conduct in-depth interviews of Key Stage 1 teachers. These professionals work most closely with the children for whom the change from EYFS play-based learning to the didactic strategies of Year 1 may be too great a culture shock (Fisher, 2020). Additionally, these teachers may be most aware of this change in teaching style and, perhaps, feel most conflicted about it.

In May 2022, I formulated my second research proposal. I decided on the definition of play-based learning I would use throughout the study. I confirmed that the population of interest would be Key Stage 1 teachers with four years or more experience. These were chosen due to their proximity to those affected by the change in learning style, plus they would be able to provide insight to the pre- and post-COVID differences. Online semi-structured interviews

were chosen for their ability to provide rich data and the relative ease with which they can be conducted. Reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) was chosen as the method for data analysis due to its ability to formulate themes and recognise patterns whilst giving voice to the population of interest with regard to the topic under investigation.

### **3.4. Overview of methodological perspective**

To conduct and communicate research effectively, certain perspectives and assumptions need to be clarified. Research is driven by the values, beliefs, and motivations of a researcher. Thus, it is imperative that a researcher recognises their own position as part of the research process. Similarly, for other researchers to fully understand any findings or conclusions, they must first understand the perspective underpinning a piece of research. This perspective is generally referred to as the research paradigm. It is the lens through which one views the world. This, in turn, impacts upon the methods by which the researcher attempts to discover and share knowledge about the world.

The research paradigm is a structure which promotes certain perceptions and beliefs while demonstrating awareness of the different theories and practices available in scientific research (Cohen et al., 2017). These beliefs are based upon ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). The concept of axiology is also fundamental (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Consequently, different types of research are based on different sets of beliefs, perspectives, and methods.

#### **3.4.1. Research Paradigm**

There are many possible research paradigms due to the different theoretical perspectives which may be adopted. However, it has been suggested that these paradigms fall into three main categories; positivism, interpretivism, and critical theory (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). Critical theory tends to address questions concerning social, political, and economic factors (Kincheloe et al., 2018). Any such questions are beyond the scope of the current study. Positivism assumes there to be an objective reality, knowledge of which is gained via systematic empiricism (Creswell, 2013). Alternately, Interpretivism assumes reality to be subjective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This perspective considers knowledge to be gained through giving voice to people's experiences. The current study is concerned with

understanding the experiences and attitudes of teachers with respect to play-based learning. Thus, my research paradigm is interpretivist.

### **3.4.2. Qualitative Framework**

The interpretivist paradigm tends to employ qualitative methods, including interviews (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). The present study is intended to explore qualities in the beliefs and attitudes of teachers. Exploring qualities is the realm of qualitative research. This study is not concerned with quantities, nor are there hypotheses to be tested, both of which tend to involve quantitative research. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The same authors suggested that the route to effective qualitative research depends on the state of four philosophical perspectives: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology.

### **3.4.3. Ontology**

Ontology is concerned with beliefs about the nature of reality itself. It has impact on every area of reality and is heavily reliant on language itself (Peck & Mummery, 2018). Similar to the different types of research paradigm, ontological perspectives depend on beliefs as to whether or not people alter the state of reality. Essentially, it must be questioned how reality really happens (Denzin, 2008). It has been suggested that there are three main ontological perspectives: objectivism, constructivism, and realism (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

Objectivism is the viewpoint that social phenomena exist independently. Thus, they are not founded upon specific human interaction (Bryman, 2016). This would suggest reality of such phenomena is not strictly subjective, and the role of research is to reveal patterns which may be replicated between people (Oliver, 2014). Alternately, constructivism is the viewpoint that reality is constructed by people's experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The role of the researcher as a subjective fulcrum is critical. An alternative to the two mentioned is realism which states reality exists irrespective of human interaction. This suggests there may be factors which cannot be observed or sensed, but which affect social reality (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

The aim of the current study is to give voice to the experiences of teachers. This voice will be based on a sample of teachers' experiences and realities. These are subjective

descriptions which vary due to the differences between teachers, schools, and children. The way to uncover this knowledge is through recording their statements of their own beliefs. The way to analyse these statements is through my own understanding and interpretation. Thus, my ontological position is constructivism.

#### **3.4.4. Epistemology**

Epistemology is founded upon ontological beliefs (Sale et al., 2002). As my ontological perspective is constructivism, I believe that people construct the realities from their experiences (Gray, 2017). Epistemology is concerned with that which constitutes knowledge of the assumed reality and how a researcher can receive that knowledge (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Thus, certain epistemological standpoints reflect the ontological beliefs concerning the reality that is being explored. The epistemological perspective which best mirrors the foundation of constructivism is subjectivism. For the purposes of this study and its subject matter, there is a need to give voice to the different meaning teachers give to their individual experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Epistemology refers not only to the nature of knowledge, but also how it may be acquired and communicated (Cohen et al., 2017). This has consequences for the methods to be used. The ontological perspectives of objectivism and realism are reflected in the epistemological perspectives of positivism and realism. Both tend to concern themselves with objective knowledge based on observation and sensation (Denscombe, 2017) and would tend to be explored using quantitative methods. Conversely, subjectivism considers knowledge to be constructed from communication of personal experiences (Oliver, 2014).

The subjectivist approach considers the participation of people necessary for knowledge. It is created through the continuous interaction of a researcher and participant (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The present study is concerned with the experiences of teachers, and the knowledge is created through expression of their subjective accounts. My role as researcher is to document, understand, and interpret their accounts, and to encourage self-reflection to crystallise the knowledge created.

### **3.4.5. Axiology**

Axiology concerns itself with the study of value judgements, aesthetics, and ethics. The very existence of this thesis is a consequence of my drive to undertake it due to the value I believe it has. Consequently, a researcher must remain consistently mindful of such personal convictions on the validity of their research (Cohen et al., 2017). Any preconceptions, biases, and beliefs may impact upon research. This is referred to as the 'knowingness' of the researcher (Braun & Clark, 2019). They suggest constant engagement is required in the evolution of the research rather than it being a pre-set course.

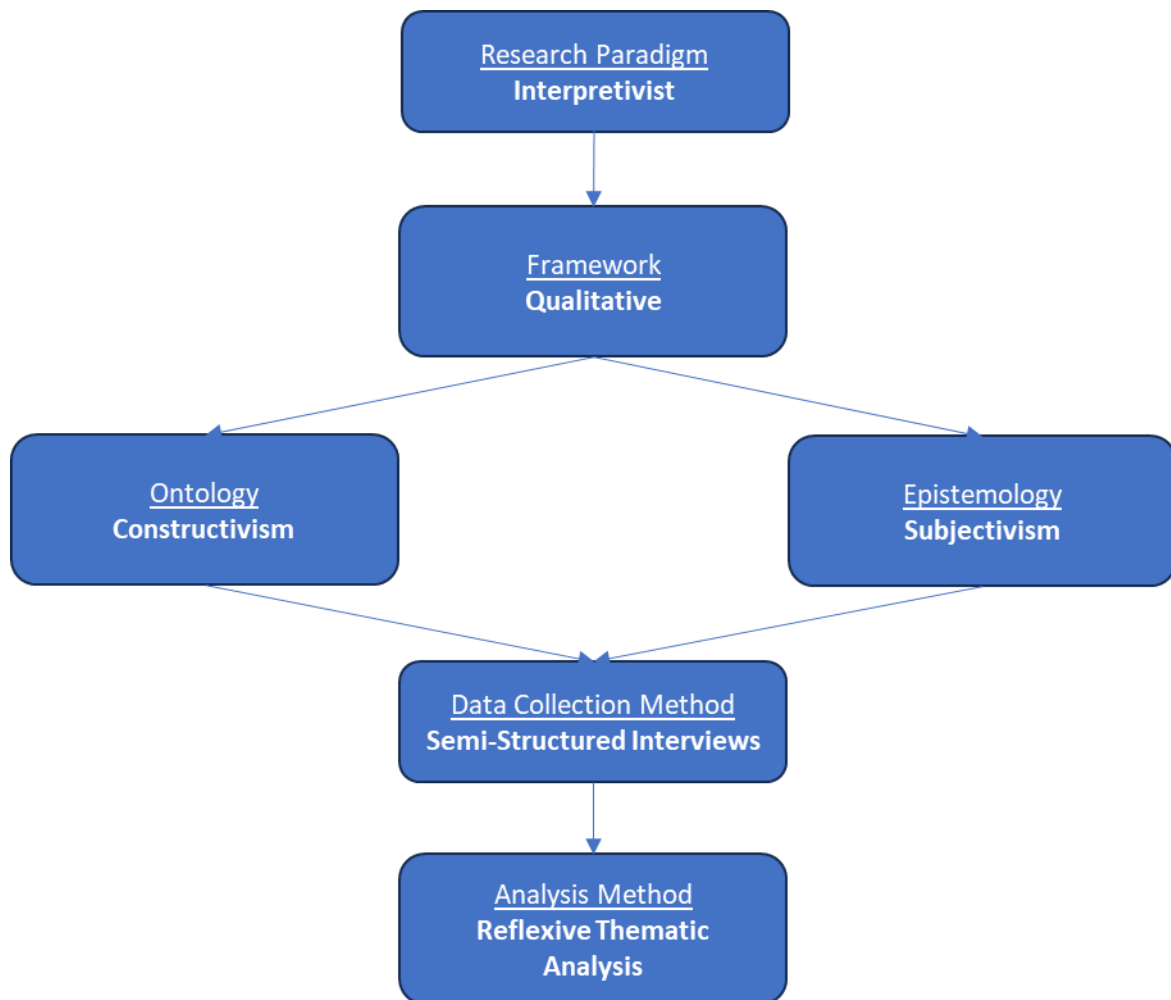
### **3.4.6. Reflexivity**

Understanding and acknowledging the axiological impact of decisions based on values is important. However, there must also be strategies to control any impacts. One such strategy is the use of reflexivity (Willig, 2013). This requires researchers to reflect on their interpretations, but also recommends reflection as a potentially valuable tool in the development of insight and knowledge. For example, my previous experience of working in schools pastorally and in a play-based role on the playground led to my choice of topic. However, it is this experience which has also been informative as to the potential power of play-based learning in an overwhelmingly didactic educational system. My subjectivity is not necessarily a confound, but a source of richness (Gough & Madill, 2012).

### **3.4.7. Methodology**

Once reality, knowledge, and values are determined, methodology is concerned with the best way to gather, analyse, and communicate that knowledge. It is my decision to use an interpretivist research paradigm, with an ontological perspective of constructivism, and an epistemological perspective of subjectivism. I am working within a qualitative framework and understand my axiological responsibility to be reflexive. These perspectives and responsibilities led to the choice to employ the method of Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

**Figure 2:** *Research paradigm and methods*



#### **3.4.8. Individual Values and Position as a Researcher**

Before I began work on this thesis, I reflected upon my core beliefs concerning the topic under investigation. I held beliefs about the crucial developmental role of play, how this was incorporated into school life, and my perceived importance of play-based learning for children’s development. I also held beliefs about what year-groups I felt it could benefit, as well as personal views on the current government stance in England and the role of the National Curriculum. For example, I believed that there was a lack of opportunity for play-based learning in primary school.

I understand that my research has been influenced and shaped by my personal values and the impact of my professional experiences. I felt that schools would be negatively impacted by the pressures from the government. I thought that teachers may feel they have limited control over what they are teaching and how much PBL they can incorporate into their lessons. I was concerned that, in England, there would be limited opportunities for PBL once children progressed into Key Stage 1. I also thought that the COVID-19 pandemic would have a detrimental effect on children's interactions and relationships. I thought that schools may push even harder for academic progress due to uncompromised standards.

In order to help me to develop potentially informative research questions, and create a relevant interview topic guide, I partly relied on my previous experiences of play-based learning from my work in primary schools. My prior knowledge influenced what I felt was important to include to enable participants to share as much of their experiences as possible whilst still allowing me to address the research questions. In accordance with my constructivist perspective, I am aware that my constructs may affect my analysis of data and interpretation of findings. Therefore, I followed a structured approach to TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This included reflection on my role as a researcher as recorded in my reflexive account (see chapter 5).

#### **3.4.9. Disciplinary, personal, and professional reflexivity**

It has been suggested that a researcher should be conscious of three main areas of reflexivity: disciplinary, personal, and professional (Gough, 2016). Disciplinary reflexivity includes the perspectives assumed, noted above, which guide the approach to the discipline from a philosophical foundation. Similarly, as noted above, personal reflexivity requires an understanding of the subjective motivations which bring research into existence. Professional reflexivity requires not only appreciation of my own professional experience and background, but also my current role as a professional researcher.

One of my main concerns was interpersonal dynamics. I was conscious that there should be a balance between my position as 'the professional' and their position as the participants. In accordance with my constructivist principles, it was my intention to give voice to these people. Thus, my approach was to utilise more responsive questioning rather than asserting

a line of questioning to be followed (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). I created an interview topic guide which consisted of the four main questions to be asked on one side, but then complemented by other questions which would hopefully promote a deeper explanation of the issues under investigation. The order of the questions was dependent upon the direction in which the participant chose to guide the interview through their responses. I think this encouraged a sense of joint ownership of the conversations, rather than an interview based on power imbalance. I also ensured I showed equal appreciation for any views expressed, whether or not they were aligned with my own.

I was also wary of a participant believing there to be demand characteristics. I consciously avoided airing any of my own opinions during the interviews. It was also very important to me that questions were as open-ended as possible. I was keen to impart that there were no right or wrong answers. To confirm this approach with participants, I made sure they were aware and comfortable with the point of the interviews being to share their experiences and give voice to their interpretations. Their comfort was also paramount due to the medium through which interviews were conducted. As I was using remote interviews, I made sure to use eye contact and active listening such as nodding and smiling. I was also conscious of telling them that sometimes I may be reading or writing while they were answering. I believe building rapport was crucial in order to obtain the richest data possible.

### **3.5. Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

The aim of this thesis is to gain an understanding of teachers' attitudes towards play-based learning. These attitudes are subjective and will have been formed as a result of a particular teacher's values and beliefs. Investigation of such matters is best approached through a qualitative framework using interviews composed of open questions which allow a person to describe what is most important to them (Yauch & Steudel, 2003). For the present study, data were collected via online semi-structured interviews. I produced an interview guide to ensure the questions I had formulated were all asked; however, the order was dependent upon the direction in which the participant guided the conversation.

As stated, I understand my position as an interpretivist researcher requires reflection upon my own beliefs and biases while analysing the conversations with others. My attitudes and



experiences are the driving force behind this thesis but must be controlled when interpreting the data. Due to the personal reflection required, the method I chose as most appropriate for analysis is Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

### **3.5.1. Other approaches considered**

This thesis aimed to uncover patterns and similarly held beliefs between people in similar situations. When attempting to identify such patterns there are various methods which may be used (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). These methods include Qualitative Content Analysis and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

Qualitative Content Analysis relies on the use of a codebook (Schreier, 2012). Indeed, if coding reliability is conducted, it has been suggested there is little difference to TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). However, this reliability would require assessment by more than one researcher. As an interpretivist researcher, I understand that part of my role is to bring richness to the interpretations by way of reflecting upon my own experiences. Thus, I did not consider Qualitative Content Analysis to be an appropriate method for developing findings.

As an interpretivist researcher, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis might seem a more appropriate methodological approach. It aims to shed light upon personal experiences with the subjectivity of the researcher being considered critical (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). However, this approach focuses upon understanding an individual rather than the collective beliefs of multiple people. This methodology is also tightly constrained to theory which guides all interviews, participant recruitment, and data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Thus, reflexive TA was considered better suited to my research.

### **3.5.2. Justification for Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

The current study aims to investigate the views of primary school teachers regarding play-based learning. Reflexive Thematic Analysis can be used to explore research questions concerning experiences, influences, and beliefs. It is a method for identifying patterns within data which may then be described in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). However, it is critical not to oversimplify statements from participants in order to make them fit together.

TA allows an interpretivist researcher the room to ‘thickly describe’ phenomena from an individual’s point of view (Creswell, 2009).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis may be considered an inductive approach to data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). It allows for the more organic evolution of data collected into codes and then themes. Thus, the subjectivity and interpretation of the researcher is the spark which drives their development. The goal of Reflexive Thematic Analysis is to use it ‘knowingly and reflexively’ (Braun & Clark, 2019). Thus, it is a critical, continuous process to understand how my research values might inform my practice. Similarly, I must continuously remain vigilant of my position as a researcher and how I am reflecting upon the description of data.

### **3.5.3. Conducting Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

Reflexive Thematic Analysis is a flexible, interpretive approach to qualitative data analysis. The first step is to create codes which are then developed into themes. The reflexive approach encourages the researcher to play an active role in the production of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Firstly, codes are produced from transcripts of conversations which reflect the researcher’s interpretive analysis of patterns of meaning across a dataset. These patterns of meaning are influenced not only by the data themselves, but also the underlying theoretical assumptions of the research, and the skill and engagement of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Once codes are created, they are clustered around core concepts as interpreted by the researcher. These concepts constitute themes. However, these themes do not exist until created by the researcher through a process of active discovery (Braun & Clarke, 2016). The reflection and interpretation encourage a cycle of engagement with the data in order to produce rich descriptions.

### **3.5.4. Strategies for qualitative data collection**

There are a variety of approaches possible for qualitative research including surveys, focus groups, case studies, and semi-structured interviews (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Surveys may be used to investigate the beliefs of a large number of participants; however, they are less effective at gathering in-depth information (Denscombe, 2017). This data collection strategy has been used in previous research concerning play-based learning (e.g., Fisher, 2022).

However, the aim of my thesis is to explore the beliefs of teachers in as rich detail as possible. This element is also a gap in the literature. Pre-constructed surveys would not allow participants to guide the data, nor would it allow me to delve deeper into any unanticipated ideas and beliefs.

Focus groups allow for collection of richer data than surveys. The group dynamics and conversational medium encourage in-depth exploration of ideas. However, one noted challenge is safeguarding confidentiality when discussing sensitive topics (Morgan, 2002). Attitudes to play-based learning might be considered sensitive, and thus might be muted, due to the conflict that exists with current educational guidance and practices. Conversely, focus groups might also be problematic for participants, as a group, expressing too much enthusiasm through group contagion and demand characteristics. It has previously been noted that enthusiasm for play-based learning has a positive effect on its implementation (Fisher, 2022). As a reflexive researcher, I am aware of the need to control an environment and interactions in order to collect the truest data with the utmost ethical integrity.

A case study was similarly excluded as an option. It would have been possible to develop an in-depth understanding of beliefs, but only from a limited perspective. I believed it was more important for my thesis to be able to provide more generalisable findings. I also believed it would be important to compare and contrast beliefs resulting from different settings and from different teachers with different experiences, if they were to arise.

I chose to use semi-structured interviews as I believed it was most important to encourage the participant to crystallise their own thoughts and beliefs. Allowing conversations to be driven by the interviewee enable them to uncover what was important to them. It has been suggested that semi-structured interviews are ideal for the exploration of complex thoughts and experiences (Denscombe, 2014). I believe that the most enlightening answers may be reached through considered discussion, and this would be the best data for this thesis.

My research aims to explore the attitudes and experiences of primary school teachers with play-based learning. These are possibly beliefs which the participants themselves have never reflected upon. I believe these types of interviews are the most appropriate method considering my ontological and epistemological perspectives as a researcher. I devised a collection of open questions which I could map on to my research questions. I was aware

that the interviews may be a journey of discovery for both myself and the interviewees, so was prepared to adapt the order of questions to suit each interview. I was also prepared to use other questions to clarify their thoughts and statements. I believed this would add richness to the data.

### **3.6. Method and Procedure**

The research is of a qualitative design relying on semi-structured interviews of teachers as the method of data collection. Currently, there is little research which focuses on an in-depth understanding of teachers' views of play-based learning in the English classroom. Additionally, research has focused on the EYFS rather than Key Stage 1 when the National Curriculum becomes prevalent. I believe primary school class teachers are best placed to describe and communicate how children are affected by the abrupt changes in education.

#### **3.6.1. Recruiting Participants**

I decided participants could be from any area of England and should meet two inclusion criteria. The first criterion was that they were currently working in Key Stage 1. The second criterion was that they had worked in Key Stage 1 for a minimum of four years. The reason for this second criterion was to ensure they each had experience of working in that setting both pre- and post-pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the lockdown periods, had a fundamental effect on the way in which education was imparted. These would also impact other developmental capabilities. Ongoing examinations of the effect of COVID-19 are an important addition to the current research literature.

#### **3.6.2. Recruitment Procedure**

I undertook four cycles of recruitment due to difficulties encountered when searching for participants. For ethical reasons, I did not recruit from schools I was in contact with through my doctorate-required placement. I believed this may constitute a conflict of interests as they may confuse my identity as a Trainee Educational Psychologist rather than a researcher.

Phase 1 (September 2022): Initially, I contacted the headteacher of every mainstream primary school in the local authority with which I am on placement. I accessed their details through the service database, with permission from the principal EP. I included details of my study in the email to the headteachers (see appendix 7) and asked if they were happy for their teachers to take part. The headteachers acted as the gatekeepers to my participant group. In the email, I sent an information sheet for school staff and an expression of interest form to pass on to teachers. I included my contact details and explained that the headteachers or teachers could get in contact if they had any further questions. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, I did not inform the headteachers if any of their teachers agreed to take part. I also ensured that the teachers knew that the headteachers wouldn't be informed. Once the teachers returned their expression of interest forms via email, I responded by sending out the consent form. Once I received the consent form, and the participant was happy to continue, I organised a virtual interview on Microsoft Teams at a mutually convenient time. In the instances where I didn't receive emailed consent in time before the interview, I received verbal consent at the start of the interview.

Phase 2 (October 2022): In response to Phase 1, I received three replies from headteachers who said they would pass the details on to their teachers. I also received five replies that said they were not able to facilitate my research at this time. As there were still schools who had not replied, I sent out a reminder email. At this stage, I gained ethical approval to include SENCOs in the emails to headteachers. Again, I was able to find their contact details through the LA database. This prompted three more schools to get in touch and tell me that they would pass it on to their teachers. I also had one teacher send an expression of interest form. I followed this up with the consent form and booked in my first participant interview.

Phase 3 (December 2022): Due to difficulties with recruitment, I gained ethical approval to widen my search to any local authorities within England.

Phase 4 (January 2023): I gained ethical approval for EPs in other local authorities to provide SENCOs in their schools with my research information sheet. The EP was not then told whether any of the teachers from their patch of schools took part in the study, to ensure anonymity. In response to this approach, I gained six additional participants.

My original aim for sample-size was six participants. I am happy to have exceeded this. As stated, early issues with recruitment seemed to be centred on headteachers acting as gatekeepers. The standard reply would state that teachers were already too pressured by their workload without being requested to add more. However, once interest was shown, the difficulties with recruitment were more centred on logistics. Certain interviews were rearranged due to participant commitments. The study suffered no dropouts.

### **3.6.3. Information Power**

It has been suggested that Thematic Analysis can be used for variable datasets. This means there are no specific requirements with respect to sample size (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). It has further been suggested that the nature of the research aim should be the driving force behind the flexibility of sample size (Elliot & Timulak, 2005). The focus should be on the quality of appropriate data rather than the quantity (Malterud et al., 2016). This quality is referred to as information power. The same authors recommended five variables which may impact information power. The first is study aim which may be rated from narrow to broad. The second, sample specificity, may be rated from dense to sparse. The third, established theory, may be considered applied or not. The fourth, quality of dialogue may be strong or weak, and the fifth, analysis strategy, may be single case or cross-case. My analysis of how these five variables were reflected in my considerations of sample size and information power may be seen in Table 1.

It was suggested that ratings of information power should be reappraised for accuracy during the data-gathering process (Malterud et al., 2016). I took the chance to reappraise these ratings after the first three interviews. The participants were all providing a large amount of high-quality data. Each participant gave in-depth, considered answers to all questions irrespective of their teaching experience. Due to this higher-than-expected information power, I was satisfied with having seven participants and made no attempts at further recruitment.

**Table 1: Analysis of information power**

Information Power Variables	Rating	Reasoning
Study Aim (Narrow or Broad)	Narrow	The research looked specifically at teachers in Key Stage 1 rather than across numerous year groups and key stages. The study aim is therefore narrow as it explores a specific demographic and topic.
Sample Specificity (Dense or Sparse)	Middle	The inclusion criteria resulted in a sample with specific characteristics. However, these were only linked to area of work and experience. Other characteristics were not controlled as they were considered beneficial for the generalisability of findings.
Establish Theory (Applied or Not)	Middle	Previous research has considered teachers' perspectives. However, in-depth interviews have rarely been used, the research is from countries outside of England, and tend to focus on different year group. This thesis also aimed to expand understanding of teachers' perspectives pre- and post-pandemic.
Quality of dialogue (Strong or Weak)	Strong	The aim of this research was to develop an in-depth understanding of teachers' views through semi-structured interviews. Thus, I was intent on creating a strong level of communication and interaction between myself and the participants.
Analysis Strategy (Single case or Cross-Case)	Cross-Case	Thematic analysis was chosen as the method of analysis capable of managing rich data. The intention was to detect themes among participants rather than an in-depth narrative of each participant.

### 3.6.4. Participant information

A total of seven teachers from different primary schools were recruited to participate in the study. The sample comprised of six female teachers and one male teacher. The experience

of the teachers ranged from four years to eighteen years. The teachers taught a variety of subjects. Pseudonyms have been used below to protect anonymity.

Participant A- Amelia: Eleven years' experience teaching years 1 and 2 including six years as Key Stage 1 lead.

Participant B- Bob: Year 1 teacher for four years. Previously worked for eleven years in reception. Also had experience in the voluntary sector as a community development worker and organising after-school play sessions.

Participant C- Claire: Four years' experience as a year 1 class teacher.

Participant D- Debbie: Seven years' experience as a Key Stage 1 teacher.

Participant E- Ellie: Ten years' experience as a Key Stage 1 teacher. Experience as Deputy Head

Participant F- Faye: Ten years' experience as a Key Stage 1 teacher. Early Years practitioner trainer, experience on SLT, and Post-COVID wellbeing lead.

Participant G- Grace: Fifteen years' experience as a Key Stage 1 teacher. Experience in large primary schools in deprived areas as well as smaller village school. Also responsible for a range of coordinator roles.

### **3.6.5. Data Collection through online semi-structured interviews**

Teachers' views are subjective, and following my perspectives as an interpretivist researcher, I chose semi-structured interviews as the medium for data collection. This method allowed me to develop open questions to explore their beliefs as fully as possible. The flexibility of the method and adaptability in the order of questions encouraged the participant to talk about what was important to them. However, to ensure all questions relating to my research questions were covered, I developed an Interview Guide (see Appendix 8). Some interviews followed a similar order of questioning, during others I used my discretion to adapt the order to fit in with what the participant was sharing. I used my professional judgment to know when to do this in order to gain as much relevant information as possible.



In order to develop appropriate and open-ended interview questions, I consulted previous literature. Brinkmann and Kvale (2017) provided useful information in terms of the structure of the interview questions. It was recommended to consider the wording to enable participants to talk openly and freely. I used key phrases to elicit open communication such as 'tell me about a time when...' and 'what do you feel...'. I also mapped the interview questions on to my research questions by spending time thinking about how best to word questions to ensure participants were given the opportunity to freely express their thoughts, but also directed in terms of topic (e.g. to address research question 4, talking about COVID). I also found the work of Bearman (2019) helpful in terms of how best to write semi-structured interview questions. In particular, it prompted me to start with 'easier' topics and only moving on to potentially 'more difficult' areas once rapport had been built. For this reason, I chose to ask the COVID related questions towards the end of the interviews, unless it came up naturally in responses to earlier questions.

Another key consideration when planning for my interview stage was thinking about the online aspect and how best to navigate this. I consulted work by Saarijarvi and Bratt (2021) who looked into the differences between online and face-to-face interviews and provided key tips when conducting online interviews. One of the biggest considerations was ensuring both myself and the interviewee were both in a safe, quiet environment where other people would not be able to hear us. I also ensured I opened the link in advance of the interviews to ensure I had a stable internet connection. During the interview, I followed tips from Saarijarvi and Bratt (2021) such as ensuring I was mindful of my tone of voice, the use of non-verbal cues such as nodding and smiling, and allowing a pause between talking so we didn't talk over each other. I also ensured each participant understood the process of being audio recorded and that anything they spoke about would be kept confidential and anonymous.

### **3.6.6. Conducting online semi-structured interviews**

Each interview was semi-structured and recorded with the consent of the participant. Each interview was conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams. Each interview was recorded using the Microsoft Teams record function.

Previous research has suggested that technological innovation has been beneficial to the way in which research may now be undertaken (Braun et al., 2017). Real-time personal interactions are possible, with greater convenience for participants, and the benefit of giving them more control over their environment to make themselves comfortable rather than being in a lab setting. Another reported benefit, which I believed to be advantageous in developing high quality data for this thesis, is that the duration of interviews tends to increase if conducted online (Jenner & Myers, 2019). I anticipated that each interview would last approximately one hour. The durations of the actual interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour and 30 minutes.

### **3.7. Analysis**

The recordings of each interview were fully transcribed to create the dataset. As stated, I chose Reflexive Thematic Analysis as the most appropriate method for developing findings. It should be understood that, as my research aims to give voice to a sample of teachers' views and beliefs, the findings will not be perfectly replicable. However, I anticipate that the themes generated will have generalisability. Additionally, I have reflected on the process and my interpretations from my perspective as a researcher in my Researcher Journal (see Appendix 1).

#### **3.7.1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process**

The process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis has been suggested to consist of six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). These phases are better considered to be guidelines rather than rules. The phases are:

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Generating initial codes

3. Generating initial themes
4. Reviewing and developing themes
5. Refining, defining, and naming themes
6. Producing a report

### **3.7.2. Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data**

This phase involves immersion in the data. It includes general reflection, initial reactions to unexpected data, and emotional responses. This phase may begin with the data-collection itself (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors recommend the researcher conducts any interviews themselves, and that the act of transcribing that information is vital. For this research, I conducted all interviews myself. Initially, I familiarised myself with the data by listening back to the recordings. The first playback required active listening, so no physical notes were made, but mental notes were made of initial reactions. The software used, Microsoft Teams, is able to produce a written transcript of the interview. Nevertheless, I produced my own transcript from the interview recordings and checked this against the automatically produced one to ensure it was an accurate reproduction of what the participants had said. This was an opportunity for further familiarisation. I also used this part of the phase to produce notes on my initial reflections and reactions. This was also a chance to identify any trends or topics within the data (for an example see Appendix 1). Through reading and re-reading the transcripts I was able to examine assumptions of what was actually happening with the data. Such active engagement with the data supported Phase 2 of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis process.

### **3.7.3. Phase 2: Generating initial codes**

Codes are the fundamental building blocks from which themes are developed (Byrne, 2022). They are meaningful labels which capture the essence of data segments. It has been suggested that it should be possible to gain a sense of the dataset from codes alone (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The two types of coding suggested by the same authors are semantic coding and latent coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Semantic coding aims to provide a descriptive interpretation of what was said, whereas latent coding attempts to provide an interpretation of the underlying meaning of statements. Constant reflection on my research

questions was necessary to ensure they were being answered. I used both types of coding throughout each part of the generation phase. There was no limit to the number of possible codes, however it was ensured that each code applied to more than a single data segment (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Initial codes were created alongside the transcripts which were highlighted for interesting points, given a participant code, and a brief description in line with semantic and latent coding (see Appendix 10 and 11).

#### **3.7.4. Phase 3: Generating initial themes**

A theme is described as a pattern which captures something important about the data in relation to a research question (Braun & Clark, 2006). They combine clusters of similar codes which are relevant to the research undertaken. Again, the number of potential themes is driven by the data so there is no prescribed limit. The development of themes is an active process; they are created rather than found (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). To this end, the authors recommend the creation of a thematic map which may be used as a type of jigsaw ensuring all research questions are answered as fully as possible. Initially, I used Microsoft Excel to create tables of clustered codes. These clustered codes were then colour coded by the overall theme I initially detected. These initial themes were then mapped on to my research questions (see Appendix 12).

#### **3.7.5. Phase 4: Reviewing and developing themes**

Themes should be distinct concepts developed from sufficient data. It should be apparent what constitutes a theme and where that theme's boundaries lie. Themes should also portray aspects of the dataset and the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). An initial issue encountered was over-fitting of themes to research questions. This resulted in problems concerning repetition and indistinctness. Thus, it became important to be able to see the whole dataset at different granularities. I became more adept at zooming out and zooming in to ensure themes were satisfactorily constructed. This resulted in a cycle of clustering and declustering concepts, both in colour-coded Excel sheets and physical notes until I was satisfied that each theme was well-defined. Examples of this process can be seen in Appendix 12 and 13.

### **3.7.6. Phase 5: Refining, defining, and naming themes**

Themes were organised and named in a manner consistent with a more lateral interpretation. I decided the underlying meaning was more descriptive than literal reproductions. This is consistent with my role as an interpretivist researcher. Consequently, I recognise that this is a highly subjective process and took steps to reflect upon my analysis to ensure impartiality. The previously described cycle of clustering and granular reappraisal was continued until a collection of distinct, meaningful themes was completed. During this process certain sub-themes became apparent (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Similar to overall themes, these sub-themes had an individual, distinct focus as part of the over-arching theme. Each theme and sub-theme were named to provide an understandable, communicable word or phrase which, I believe, encapsulated the data within.

### **3.7.7. Phase 6: Producing a report**

Themes are intended to provide a clear overview of the meaning underlying the data collected. A report detailing themes should be produced so that it is interesting, concise, coherent, and non-repetitive (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). The order of themes should create a narrative of the information provided and extracted. The researcher should explore the meaning of the data rather than merely describing the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This report is essentially presented in the following sections of this thesis.

## **3.8. Ethical considerations**

My research was originally approved in April 2022 by The University of Bristol's School for Policy Studies Research Ethics Committee. Throughout my research I have adhered to the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) as well as the BPS Code of Human Ethics Research (2014). Additionally, I have been vigilant to adhere to these codes when addressing any specific ethical issues that may have arisen during the course of this research. This was a considered part of my cycle of reflection which underpinned every aspect of this study. This is apparent in my resubmissions for ethical approval during the different phases of my participant recruitment process. Thus, original approval was granted in April 2022, further approval in November 2022, and final approval in January 2023.

### **3.8.1. Informed consent**

Informed consent is part of the principle of 'respect' outlined in the first principle in the BPS 'Code of Ethics and Conduct' (2018). It states that the participant should receive adequate information on which to base their choice to freely consent. To this end, before interviews were conducted, each teacher was provided with an information sheet describing the research and an expression of interest form (see Appendix 4). Each set of documents explained that all participation was voluntary, and that all data would remain anonymous and confidential. Each participant was also given my contact details if they had further questions. Before each interview, I restated that their participation was voluntary and that they had a right to withdraw and that they gave their consent. I also explained the confidentiality in which the interview data would be archived.

### **3.8.2. Confidentiality and anonymity**

A first principle of the BPS 'Code of Human Research Ethics' (2014) is to respect the privacy of individuals. This is mirrored in the principle of 'respect' outlined in the BPS 'Code of Ethics and Conduct' (2018). It has previously been suggested that confidentiality and anonymity may not be enough when using quotes in reports (Allmark et al., 2009). One particular problem which I thought may arise is that, as some of the local authorities in which my research took place are small, there might be a chance that employees might be recognisable from their statements. Thus, at the start of interviews I would inform participants of the potential limits of confidentiality. Similarly, I ensured no potentially identifying words or information were used in any quotes. The use of Microsoft Teams could also prove problematic (Lobe et al., 2020). At the start of each interview, I checked with all participants that they gave consent to the interview audio being recorded. During the interviews it was technically possible that somebody else could access the interview via an online link, but this never happened. Once recorded and transcribed, the interviews were saved automatically to the university's secure One Drive which is password-protected. It is my responsibility to ensure this remains accessible by only me. All participants were given a pseudonym. Any identifiable features mentioned were redacted. All the information provided by the teachers was treated as confidential and stored in accordance with GDPR.

### **3.8.3. Minimising risk**

The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) makes clear that research may have risks of harm, discomfort, or stress to human participants. These risks may arise from the discussion of potentially sensitive topics, including impacts on employment. At the start of the research, I did not think that gaining teachers' views on play-based learning within their schools would be a sensitive topic or difficult to talk about. I found this to be the case in most of my interviews, where the teachers were open and honest and seemed to enjoy talking about their experiences. However, in a few of the interviews, I noticed that there were some harder topics that came up. For example, there seemed to be tensions between the teachers' beliefs and systemic constraints. I also got the sense, in a few of the interviews, that some teachers felt hesitant to speak in a way which might be perceived as being negative towards their schools. To reduce these feelings of discomfort and minimise the risk, I reiterated that there are no right or wrong answers, and it is purely about their personal experiences. I also made sure that at the end of every interview I allowed time and space for the teachers to ask questions or to discuss anything they felt they had not had the chance to. I also felt that some of the teachers were worried that information would be passed on to their schools. I re-emphasised that all data, participant information, and any identifiable features would be anonymised, and pseudonyms would be used. I also reassured them that their headteachers were not aware whether or not they had agreed to take part. In case teachers were also concerned about any 'reputational risks' by talking honestly about their experiences, I reiterated that I would not include any specific details about schools.

### **3.9. Researcher reflexivity**

Being reflexive as a researcher involves continuous evaluation of the central position we hold in the process (Berger, 2015). The position requires introspection regarding the way in which it may impact participants, data, and interpretation (Kalu, 2019). As stated, the very existence of this thesis is a result of my own experiences, drives, and beliefs. These all influenced my choice of play-based learning as a phenomenon for investigation. My identity as an interpretivist researcher means I have been continually conscious of my thoughts toward the topic, but also intent on using my professional insights to yield the most

meaningful findings. This cycle of introspection has been reported to be crucial for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Such a researcher becomes an active creator of knowledge rather than a passive observer of phenomena.

It has also been suggested that reflexivity may be considered ethically superior as the introspection leads to a more accurate account of the meanings of the beliefs expressed by participants (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This is achieved through three phases of interaction with the dataset (Berger, 2015). Firstly, for each participant, I transcribed precisely what they had said. Secondly, I developed interpretations of their words and their underlying meanings. Finally, and most importantly, I developed cycles of examination of these interpretations combined with cycles of introspection of my own thoughts and beliefs in order to give the richest accounts of the interviews. To support me as a reflexive researcher, I maintained a log of initial thoughts, developed ideas, and subsequent reflections throughout the phases of analysis (see Appendix 1 and chapter 5).

### **3.10. Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I have provided a detailed account of the strategy employed to provide the most meaningful findings. I stated the overall aims of the research and research questions to be answered. I described the personal motivations which guided the formulation of this piece of research and my own perspectives as a researcher. These were then considered in order to establish semi-structured interviews as the best medium for data collection and Reflexive Thematic Analysis as the most appropriate methodology for analysing data sets. The phases of participant recruitment were described and the importance which information power played in the required number of participants was reported. The six phases of my Reflexive Thematic Analysis were then outlined. My route to ethical approval was described and the vigilance with which I took ethical guidelines into account during the entire process was discussed. Finally, the importance of the constant cycle of examination and introspection required for successful Reflexive Thematic Analysis was highlighted.



## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Chapter Introduction

This chapter will present the findings of the present study. Data were collected via transcripts of seven interviews with teachers. These were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis resulting in the creation of five themes. Each theme, and the respective subthemes within them, will be explained in detail.

#### 4.1.1. Overview of themes

Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used to create themes from the collected responses of participants. These themes were created with acknowledgement of the research questions to be answered. Each theme and subtheme were developed from multiple participants while ensuring each were distinct in content (Braun & Clarke, 2021b.). The four research questions resulted in the creation of four main themes:

##### 1. The purpose of child education

Subtheme 1a - Education is greater than knowledge

Subtheme 1b - Perceptions of the curriculum

Subtheme 1c - The role of the practitioner

##### 2. How PBL is viewed by teachers

Subtheme 2a - Defining PBL

Subtheme 2b - Perceived advantages of PBL

Subtheme 2c - Best experiences of PBL

##### 3. Perceived barriers to achieving objectives

Subtheme 3a - Managing limited resources

Subtheme 3b - Managing external resources

Subtheme 3c - Standardisation prioritised over unique child

Subtheme 3d - The curriculum needs to evolve

##### 4. The impact of COVID

Subtheme 4a - The impact of COVID on holistic development

Subtheme 4b- The impact of home-learning

Subtheme 4c- The catch-up agenda

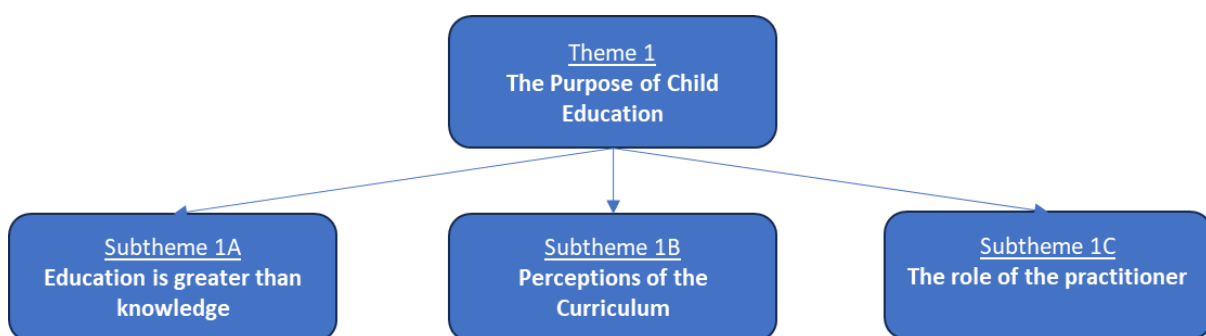
Subtheme 4d- A golden opportunity for PBL

Each theme and the corresponding subthemes will be discussed in detail. Quotations from across the seven interviews will be used to illustrate the findings. These will be considered as part of the discussion chapter, along with considering how the themes address each research question. The themes will also be contextualised concerning the research discussed in the literature review chapter.

## 4.2. Theme 1: The purpose of child education

This theme captures the attitudes of teachers towards what they believe primary school education should achieve. The first subtheme reflects teachers' attitudes that there are greater goals for education than the transfer of knowledge. It captures their views prioritising the range of capabilities they believe children should develop at school to equip them for life. The second subtheme considers the objectives of the current curriculum and whether it is fit for purpose. The final subtheme involves reflection on the multi-faceted role that teachers must fulfil as agents contributing to the educational system.

**Figure 3:** *Theme 1 and subthemes*



### 4.2.1. Theme 1 Subtheme A: Education is greater than knowledge

A consistent belief shown by teachers interviewed was that school is not simply about knowledge acquisition. There are many other skills, capabilities, and resiliences which are

developed throughout the course of schooling. Some thought an additional purpose of education is to develop individuals who have self-efficacy, to ensure they can transfer these skills into their wider life when they leave education:

Debbie:        ... *the main reason for education is independence.*

Ellie:            *It's about giving young people the tools they're going to need to succeed in life.*

Others felt another focus of education should be to teach holistic capabilities:

Faye:            ... *we have to teach them how to be resilient or how to persevere or how to use trial and error to resolve something.*

Grace:            ... *helping children be the best that they can be and overcoming any barriers ... giving them a range of skills so that when they are old enough, they can take on the world...*

#### **4.2.2. Theme 1 Subtheme B: Perceptions of the curriculum**

Subtheme 1B aims to demonstrate the differences in opinions between practitioners regarding the best approach to learning across different year groups. An incongruence can be seen between what teachers feel should happen and the realities they are facing. One facet of this subtheme highlights teachers' views about what changes are required with the wider system and within schools to promote a more balanced curriculum and an extension of PBL past EYFS. Additionally, this subtheme confirms that most of the teachers felt academia and ideological educational outcomes are prioritised over more holistic capabilities. The final aspect reflects teachers' views on the expectations that education places on children, and whether they feel this is adequate preparation for later life. Contradictions are revealed between the beliefs of the teachers and pressures from the government, curriculum, and wider systems. There are recurring reports of a lack of freedom and a dissonance between how teachers would like to practice and the reality of what is demanded. This is compounded by the stark difference noted between the amount of PBL in EYFS and KS1. The teachers had strong views about the year groups in which they felt PBL

should be encouraged. However, it was clear that the teachers felt they had minimal control over this. Teachers also voiced unhappiness with the abruptness of the transition from EYFS approaches, for which they blamed top-down pressures.

There were mixed views amongst teachers regarding the freedom and autonomy they felt over their teaching style and content:

Faye: *We are constantly getting outsiders... scrutinising everything we do... [Y]ou think you have the freedom, and then you don't really. You have to stick to a certain thing.*

Faye also felt there was a contradiction between theory and practice:

Faye: *... the curriculum... becomes almost like a tick list of what you have to do. There is all this support that says, 'Ohh, go with the child's interest', but the reality is that you can't necessarily do that.*

Similarly, Debbie described feeling restricted by the curriculum content and consequently unable to teach in a way that aligned with her beliefs:

Debbie: *... I think being able to have autonomy over how we teach things would be very helpful, but generally these things need to be approved and signed off.*

In contrast, other teachers felt the opposite. They spoke fondly of their individual school approach and were happy with their level of freedom. This would suggest that attitudes to the curriculum are heavily dependent on leadership:

Amelia: *My head gives us a lot of trust. As long as we're covering everything we need to cover, we can do things that are magical...*

All teachers spoke about their frustrations with PBL being linked primarily to EYFS and only occasionally to KS1 or above:

Amelia: *... the children have less opportunities... to use their play to embed their learning. There's just no time to do that now, even for our Year Ones.*

Bob: *... by the time you get to midpoint Year One, I think [PBL] is filtered out pretty much. And by time you get to Key Stage Two, it's non-existent.*

The teachers felt the system needed to change to allow for PBL to continue within children's education:

Faye: *... it's the Key Stage One side that needs to evolve....*

Some schools continued PBL into part of Year 1 to help children transition, but it was still felt that it wasn't enough. Teachers also had to make it more curriculum-focused from mid-Year 1 to prepare children for didactic teaching styles:

Grace: *I would say EYFS is play-based the whole time. Year One is very much a kind of hybrid.*

Claire: *It is a bit longer in the beginning... an hour and a half. And then, by the time they come up to the end of the year, it's more about 45 minutes, half an hour...*

The lack of PBL in other year groups was attributed to the structure of the curriculum and the shift to more didactic teaching styles. Most of the teachers disliked the abrupt shift in teaching style from EYFS to the National Curriculum:

Ellie: *... some schools had lots of play-based learning in Year One, but that's all been stripped cause we've gotta get Year One children ready for Year Two. We've gotta get Reception children ready for Year One. Reception is not a platform to get them ready for year one. Reception is its own entity. And if you don't have a strong EYFS lead and a strong leadership team who believe in that, that's going to be really tricky*

Grace: *So definitely led Year One with an EYFS kind of mindset, but then... we start to then do more formal learning... so that they're ready for when they come to Year Two. And in Year Two... it is very much they all sit at the table and they have to do their work.*

Amelia: *I guess it's easier in a way in early years because it's part of their curriculum.*

There is a clear conflict between how teachers would like to practice and the reality of their practice due to systemic demands:

Bob: *... you're cramming their heads full of learning all the time. It's very formal, but particularly now we've got to term 3, it's only gonna get more formal from here on in. I don't use play as a teaching tool anymore in Key Stage 1 at all.*

#### **4.2.3. Theme 1 Subtheme 1C: The role of the practitioner**

It was consistently reported by participants that teaching is a multi-faceted role. Each facet of the role is adopted when faced by a child's needs at any particular moment. This reflective subtheme echoes the previous subtheme that education is greater than knowledge.

Similarly, a teacher is not merely an agent for the transfer of knowledge, but a supporter and enabler for child education.

Teachers emphasised their responsibility to be adaptable:

Debbie: *I think it's about how you can motivate someone... by making it something that's fun and reinforcing for the child.*

Grace: *... children should have some autonomy and decision making in what they're learning.*

One teacher provided an example of the thought process for best practice:

Bob: *... [I] watch what they make and then think, 'OK, well, you're trying to construct at this, that and the other, but you haven't yet learned how to join two materials yet, or... your scissor control is poor. And so I will provide you with further opportunities to explore that, or I would explicitly teach you how to use scissors, or I would explicitly teach you how to join this tube to that box. Or I would provide you with some double sticky tape that you've not had*

*access to before, because I think that would really help you to make the thing that you're making.'*

Another common thread that emerged with all the teachers was their self-image and how they viewed their role within school and, more specifically, within PBL:

Amelia: *... more of a facilitator. And then more of a guide, as a coach as opposed to a 'I'm right and you're not listening and learning from me' perspective.*

Faye: *We are there to teach them all the different things. So, there is an element of the teacher-directed and explicit teaching as well as providing enhanced provision that they gradually are exposed to opportunities.*

Similarly, others spoke about a mixed approach between adult-directed and child-led, depending on the individual and the specific context:

Bob: *... and that's kind of a professional judgment that I make: that that play is actually better off without me because, as soon as I get involved, I can shape and mould that play. And that detracts from the child's own playful intentions and outcomes... My role is just to enhance it.*

Claire: *A nurturer. To just help children progress, but in all areas.*

Some of the teachers spoke about their role within PBL as being an encourager and highlighted that the type of input from the adult would change depending on whether the child was 'playing' or engaging in 'PBL':

Claire: *As an adult I might say, 'Oh, this is amazing. But let's go back because we can add to this.'*

Ellie: *Watch, facilitate, support, particularly when the children find things tricky... You're there to support. You're not there to tell.*

Others spoke about their role in terms of acting as a facilitator:

Debbie: *... it has to be teacher-led in terms of trying to get to the right, specific outcome, but it has to be student-led in terms of how you get there.*

Ellie expanded on her earlier point of the teacher being an encourager and spoke about the importance of facilitating the experiences for the children:

Ellie: *I think we often talk too much, and we tell children things, and I think you're there as a facilitator. We need to let children learn quietly and then we can model and narrate.*

The teachers spoke further about the importance of the adult modelling for the children:

Faye: *... particularly the ones who most need play-based learning because, actually, they're not ready for formal teaching. Whereas if they become part of the play... then it just becomes a really natural scenario of actually you're still giving them the knowledge..*

Grace: *Usually, you would have an initial input... And then it's very much, let's stand back and watch and then go in when we need to.*

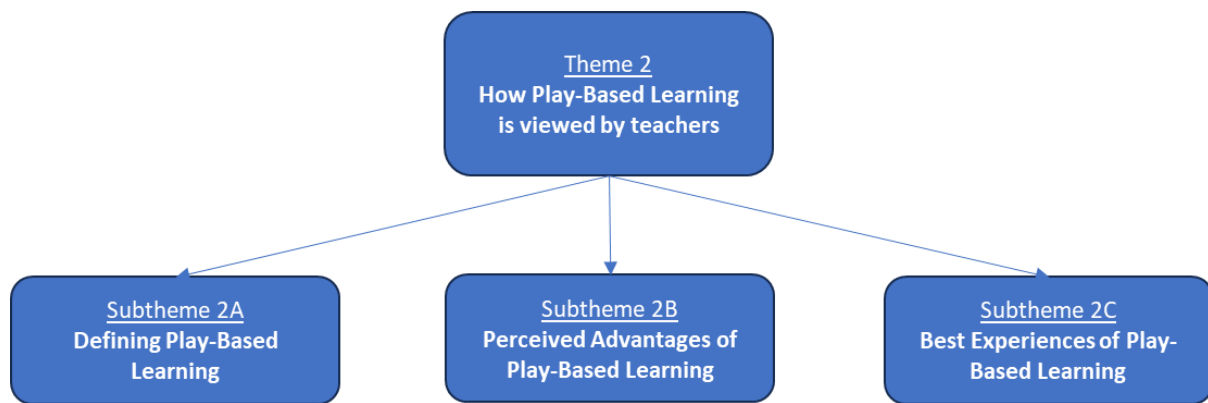
### **4.3. Theme 2: How PBL is viewed by teachers**

Theme 2 aims to capture teachers' perceptions of the potential impact of PBL for KS1.

Qualities which are apparent in PBL are gathered in Subtheme 2A. One of the overarching qualities discussed was the flexibility for PBL to be child- and needs-led. The teachers also felt that PBL was fun and engaging for children as it evolves from their own interests. It enables children to have autonomy and a sense of agency without them consciously being aware that they are learning. Subtheme 2B highlights the breadth of skills the teachers felt are enhanced by PBL, for example, problem solving, autonomy, and social communication. Theme 2C also provides the teachers' best experiences of PBL and showcases practical examples of PBL in action.



**Figure 4: Theme 2 and subthemes**



#### **4.3.1. Theme 2 Subtheme A: Defining play-based learning**

All teachers had specific ideas about what PBL meant to them. There was some variation in definitions and beliefs that it could be seen as a continuum. Some had play backgrounds and struggled with the concept of PBL within education due to it not being in alignment with their personal beliefs:

Bob: *Play for me is open-ended. It's driven by the child, and then teaching play; it's just the opposite of that. It's just trying to have a fixed outcome, but you're chucking a few toys at it.*

Debbie: *... you're kind of just pushing them in the right direction. But, at the same time, they're also pushing themselves in the right direction. So again, you are focusing a bit more on their independence because it's not just a teacher telling you this is what you need to know, this is how you pass an exam. It's allowing you to find out those things for yourself with the prompts of the teacher...*

Grace: *Definitely going with the children's interests, letting them have some independence and some choice...*

#### 4.3.2. Theme 2 Subtheme B: Perceived advantages of play-based learning

Many of the teachers felt one of the biggest advantages of PBL was its ability to be tailored to the individual child's needs and abilities:

Bob: *I think play-based learning tends to value children's own journey and social development and personal development...*

Debbie: *... it allows us to learn from that child of what they're interested in and how we can engage them more in the classroom. ... [I]t's dependent on the needs of the child...*

Others praised PBL for the creativity that can be utilised. It can be linked directly to things children enjoy and with which they will be engaged. The teachers reflected that PBL is much less restrictive than the National Curriculum:

Amelia: *... we run more like a thematic approach to the curriculum...*

Similarly, the teachers felt that it was their responsibility to ensure they provided the best play-based experiences for children. They would utilise space, resources, their expertise, and their knowledge of each child's context:

Ellie: *We've got a huge learning garden and it's set up beautifully. And the children just need to be free. And they are amazing. But it's giving them those opportunities to do that.*

Faye: *You have to know the children extremely well because they are all play-based learning, but they are all learning at different levels... so you'll know what that target is for that child.*

All of the teachers spoke about the variety of qualities that can be enhanced through PBL. There was a consensus amongst the teachers that the priority should be children's wellbeing and developing a well-rounded individual:

Claire: *So, obviously, education is important... But making sure they're happy and learning life skills and social skills and how to manage emotions and the world is probably my bigger one.*

Some of the other skills the teachers felt PBL developed were social communication, interaction, and emotional literacy:

Amelia: *... play-based learning gives the children an opportunity to practice their vocabulary, their communication skills, their social skills, their empathy.*

Ellie: *Sometimes we just need to strip it back... We just do too much and it's getting that balance right and that's really tricky.*

Similarly, Claire provided examples of ways she used different resources and ideas within PBL to encourage the development of social skills:

Ellie: *Role-play as well... they do so many different skills just from playing with the dolls house, of social interaction and sharing with a friend.*

Practical and 'real world' skills along with the ability to relate concepts to help aid children's understanding were also spoken about as an advantage of using PBL:

Amelia: *... to be able to share, to be able to problem solve, to be able to work together as part of a team, all of these things come, I think, through play-based learning.*

Faye: *... and that's where play-based learning really comes into its own because, yes, I might teach it in a maths lesson... but until they've then applied it when they're being a shopkeeper, or they're outside in a garden centre role-play, or... trying to divide something up between their friends for a game that they've actually used it and applied it. That's the only way that it's gonna be embedded in their long-term memory.*

Bob spoke about the benefits of PBL towards developing children who take ownership of their experiences and learning. He also contrasted this with children in later stages, where he felt they then lost these qualities due to didactic pedagogy:

Bob: *I used to feel that I have these incredibly independent, headstrong, sassy little four-year-olds... And by the time they get to Year Two or Three, it's just sat there like good little children doing their fitting in.*

Others spoke about how the demands of the curriculum for core subjects could still be met well by PBL. This could constitute a chance for the perceived dichotomy between PBL and formal learning to be reduced:

Ellie: *... big part of every curriculum from primary right up to secondary is reading and writing. Actually, by letting children do their play-based learning, you are giving them the tools to become great story writers... And children are confident to make mistakes in play.*

Teachers also spoke about the importance of carefully planning teaching input for play to ensure children are getting the best experiences:

Amelia: *It's not just a case of like, 'Oohh, everyone get the toys out and play'. You have to have planned quite critically actually, for the experiences for the children, and had to think about the vocabulary behind it as well, where it would fit within the curriculum as well.*

#### **4.3.3. Theme 2 Subtheme C: Best experiences of PBL**

Grace gave an example of using PBL with a child in Year 3 who had arrived from Ukraine and wasn't managing to access the curriculum or achieve age-related expectations. PBL was described as being a successful transition point for him:

Grace: *... at the moment we are just wanting him to feel safe and happy, which is where play-based learning is so crucial.*

*... when the children can choose what they want to do and have a bit more freedom, you can sometimes see skills that, maybe if it's too prescriptive, you wouldn't notice.*

*It is the only thing that we have seen him actually show some joy at, and some engagement in.*

One teacher commented on how a single play-based activity covered all areas of the curriculum. Engagement and enjoyment were enhanced which resulted in excellent work:

Faye: *... because they had fully been involved in everything, they were so passionate about it. So, they really were engaged in it and wanted to do it. And their writing was incredible because they had so much to say about it.*

Similar practical examples of PBL in action were provided by the teachers across their respective schools:

Ellie: *I think I've got loads of examples. ... there had been an incident with one of the little boy's families with the police. And they were really worried about the police... So we decided to make a police role play area to change how they were seeing it because he had seen the police come to the house and take Daddy. ..., he was then telling his friends things like, 'The police are bad'. And we thought, 'How do we help them to understand they're not?' Well, through play, of course. So, me and my teaching assistant set up a huge police role-play area on the Monday. Because all of this was going on on the Friday, I actually think we came in on the Saturday to do it. So, on the Monday, those children were in playing with it.*

*The mum came in, we showed her, because also she was really upset, and by the end of the week their whole thought process around the police had changed. And then we got the PCSO to come in and visit, and then they looked at their role-play station. And I thought we couldn't have just had the PCSOs come in talking. Those children needed to understand. We had photographs and equipment, and the PCSOs lent us some equipment, and that for me was perfect. Those children learnt by doing, by seeing that the police are okay.*

Ellie also identified what the different children in her class struggled with academically and found a way to create play-based learning experiences to help develop the skill in a fun and engaging way that didn't feel like learning:

Ellie: *... boys didn't like writing, so, we put out whiteboards and pens for the Grand Prix station. They absolutely loved it. And they were writing. I thought, 'You couldn't have done that in a 'formal lesson'' (used air quotes with her fingers).*

Similarly, Faye provided a practical example of teaching a skill and increasing children's knowledge through the use of storytelling and role-play:

Faye: *... we were doing traditional tales and so they had everything set up for Goldilocks. And so rather than just again reading the story and then getting them to write about it... they all acted it out. They all took it in turns. We had the different size props, and they had all the different equipment.*

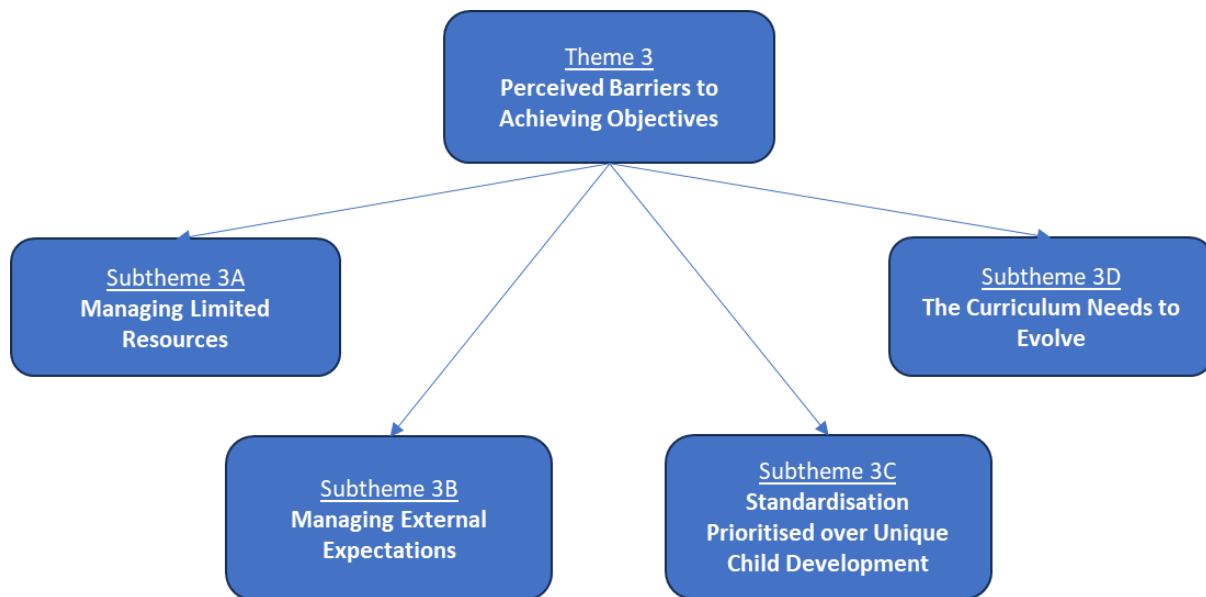
*... their maths language was incredible because they were then having to make the comparisons of different sizes... and the children who actually had really struggled with mass and, like, capacity, they were then having to measure things out and they were making the porridge and they were comparing the chair sizes and all of that happened through play-based learning that they were really experiencing it.*

One teacher spoke specifically about an individual child who was in Year 2 but needed a PBL approach due to additional needs and not managing with 'formal learning':

Grace: *... you've got a child with severe need and it really helps.*

## 4.4 Theme 3: Perceived barriers to achieving objectives

Figure 5: Theme 3 and subthemes



### 4.4.1 Theme 3 Subtheme A: Managing limited resources

A consistent theme across the data was the need to manage limited resources. For schools to run efficiently, teachers need to feel supported to provide the best play-based learning experiences for children. This subtheme aims to capture the different types of resources teachers value. They believe the purpose of early years education is not solely to teach children in an academic sense. Rather, it is intended to harness play to develop additional capabilities and act as a safe place for developmental exploration. The need for space for children to flourish when engaging in play-based learning is expressed, as well as the lack of time that teachers feel they are given for such activities. This subtheme also aims to capture the benefits reported of collaborating with other practitioners. Having additional support staff in classrooms, and the ability to access informative training on play-based learning, are seen as beneficial. Additionally, the types of physical resources teachers use for play-based learning is discussed, with examples provided.

Teachers expressed the importance of the school environment for children's experiences of education. Some of the teachers spoke about the school environment in terms of physical

space, such as the set-up of the classroom and outdoor areas. Others spoke about environment in terms of offering a 'safe space' for children to explore and learn:

Amelia: *I think the world's got more horrible, hasn't it? And I think they are only little for such a short amount of time. School should be a safe space that they want to come to, but it should be fun as well.*

Debbie: *I think it's really important that we allow them a safe space to let out and express their emotions in a way that isn't so daunting. The environment then takes that pressure off a child.*

The routine that comes from being in a school environment is seen as providing further opportunities for children to develop a sense of safety. It is important for children to feel at ease when at school.

Grace: *I think structure, even within a play-based environment, is really key for any child because they just feel safe, and they know what they can do. They need a boundary, they need expectations.*

Another concern voiced was the amount of physical space available. Two of the teachers expressed concerns about small classrooms, where there was limited space to set up play-based activities. Additionally, they felt that classrooms were designed for formal learning, with the wrong furniture being prioritised. Play-based learning requires space for exploration and distinct zones, which is problematic in the current environment:

Amelia: *I think some classrooms are so tiny. And having the space and allowing that noise and that stuff to develop organically I suppose. I think that as well can have a bit of an impact for them.*

Ellie: *Space... We've got a lot of children with a lot of energy and you want to set up wonderful things... and I think this is really tricky, particularly if you're in a school that want lots of tables and chairs in the classroom.*



The need for sufficient outdoor space was also seen as important for the success of play-based learning and providing key learning experiences for children, particularly in EYFS and the start of KS1:

Ellie: *... you want to put out all these wonderful things, and children want to explore, and you're in a really tiny space...*

A large outdoor space specifically for EYFS and KS1 was seen as important for allowing children freedom to explore on their own. In a formal classroom, children may be more heavily influenced by the adult, which is counterproductive to the principles of play-based learning:

Grace: *Definitely they need that outside space. They need that time to just explore and learn at that age without being heavily led by an adult.*

Bob: *... the frustration is that that methodology of play-based learning doesn't translate particularly well to a Key Stage One classroom.*

Another constant finding was the pressures teachers feel their individual schools and wider government place on time for the curriculum and testing. There is a sense of play-based learning not being valued beyond EYFS as the National Curriculum requires lots to fit in and never enough time. It was made clear by the teachers that the curriculum and testing were prioritised over play-based learning by those higher up, be it SLT or the government.

Therefore, they felt they had to follow this directive:

Debbie: *... when you're trying to reach an increasing amount of goals and standards to meet the curriculum and assessments, it is very hard to do that... because there's time constraints, there's financial constraints, there's pressures constantly around you.*

Bob: *Because you've got a rigid timetable, you've got so much more jam packed, curriculum of stuff. There's more stuff to do.*

Amelia: *... I think things like those standardised tests... I know they're important, I'm not saying they are not important, but it feels like the curriculum is so huge there isn't enough time to do everything in its depth.*

In contrast, Grace felt that there wasn't even enough time set aside for play in EYFS due to other priorities:

Grace: *You know in early years that they have got so much they have to do that in a way you haven't got time to play... So, I think that's probably the worst thing is that there's never enough time, and actually it doesn't always work for all of them.*

Others spoke about the frustrations of understanding PBL, what it entails, why it is important, and why time should be set aside for it in the school day. However, they reported having very little control over its implementation. The lack of autonomy over their time as teachers was a constraint to their practice:

Debbie: *... there needs to be kind of freedom within the classroom over scheduling, over curriculum, and over specific, additional things that your child might need to be learning.*

Amongst the teachers speaking about their experiences across different schools, there was a conflict apparent between personal views and those of the SLT. Many felt that leadership needed to understand PBL better and subsequently value time awarded to it in the school day. A dichotomy is felt to exist between play and learning, seeing them as mutually exclusive.

Ellie: *Their timetable is so crammed that people will say, 'there's not enough time to play', and that's really tricky, when not all practitioners agree with that. And you'll have two types of leaders, ones who want them to sit at the table writing and ones who understand that they need to be out there exploring and digging. First of all, they need to be out there digging and playing and moving their hands. But all too often, practitioners are saying, 'They need to write their name', 'We are in the autumn term. They need to write their*

*name'. And I think, 'No, they don't'. And then you have the battle of should they be playing? Should they be learning? And I think they are learning when they're playing.*

Another limitation involved management of human resources. Most of the teachers spoke about the usefulness of discussing their practice and ideas for PBL with colleagues. They also found PBL easier to implement when they had support staff available to them. Finally, within this area, the need for adequate training of staff in PBL is discussed.

Amelia: *... if someone else has done some really good thinking around something that's worked really well, I think the opportunity to be able to share that's really helpful.*

A joint understanding and willingness to support each other was seen as key to being able to implement PBL. There are reports showing that not all practitioners value PBL equally, especially those with little experience of EYFS:

Faye: *I think you have to have very supportive colleagues. So, I know that we've got some colleagues that have previously taught in Key Stage 2, and they don't see the benefit of it (PBL). So, you have to make sure everyone's on side.*

Some felt that PBL is hard to continue without adequate staffing. Bob's extensive background in play informed his views on PBL in a school setting, and felt that individual views on play had a big impact on what it looked like in practice:

Bob: *... you're banging the National Curriculum drum 100%, and so you're not doing PBL. Because PBL is time consuming, and it's adult heavy, it's resource heavy.*

All the teachers spoke about the complexities of implementing PBL past EYFS and early KS1. Alongside curriculum challenges, the need for more adult support for PBL was a prominent concern:

Claire: *... it is almost impossible to get around every child in a day. You could do it maybe with two adults, if you had a timetable of who needs to be where, when. But that's maybe ten minutes out of a whole week that that child is getting an adult in their play-based learning.*

Two of the teachers spoke about the importance of not only having more adults as a resource for teachers in the classroom, but also the need for those adults to be *'good practitioners'* who know about PBL:

Ellie: *You need the adult not telling them, but modelling...*

Faye: *... if the practitioner isn't trained enough, it will just become a case of, 'It's all over to the children'.*

Additionally, senior management need to understand why the training and successful implementation of PBL in schools is a necessity:

Amelia: *... some proper quality training and an understanding right from the top about the importance of [PBL].*

Teachers spoke about the need for practitioners to have different types of training, including observations of practice and being taught about the language that can be utilised to support children's PBL experience:

Faye: *... actually becoming part of the play rather than it just being either observations or questions. That way they get involved.*

Due to her role on SLT, Faye had been involved in providing training to other teachers and understood what needs to be included for it to be worthwhile:

Faye: *... getting Year Two teachers into early years and spending the day in early years, or the early years teachers going into Year 1 classrooms and setting them up... it does come through training.*

Another constant involved physical resources that many of the teachers felt are required for PBL and to extend children's play experiences. They spoke about the type of resources they

prefer, usually natural or real world, and the difficulties they have found in acquiring these.

Claire discussed the need to hunt for resources in her spare time:

Claire: *... the difficulty with that is the time it takes, not just in school, but out of school... you might need to go out at the weekend and find pebbles or pinecones. Having the resources available is tricky.*

She also highlights the difference in the number of resources needed in classrooms, based on the year group in question. Due to PBL being seen as resource heavy, more are required in the lower end of the school:

Claire: *... when I was working with Year One, I needed so much more in my classroom to make the learning purposeful. Whereas now I can just put a piece of paper in front of the children in Year 4.*

Several of the teachers felt that the use of natural resources could be used to enhance learning. This can encourage a child-led approach, which they believe is one of the defining features of PBL:

Ellie: *We've had children with leaves, stones, gems, making beautiful artwork using lollipop sticks to make their own frames. And then you put it all away and they create a new one... Let them be free with their imagination.*

Bob: *I think you can see some amazing learning going on when all you've done is provide some children with some bricks or a bag... You get some amazing stuff going on, and you have just got to trust in the process.*

#### **4.4.2. Theme 3 Subtheme B: Managing external expectations**

Subtheme 3B aims to document the external influences on teachers impacting their implementation of PBL. They spoke about out-of-school factors such as parental expectations, misunderstandings of the benefits of PBL, top-down pressures on teachers to meet curriculum demands, and performance measurement criteria such as testing and

Ofsted outcomes. They also referred to a tendency for didactic teaching to be favoured over PBL. Similarly, within-school struggles were reported including differing views of PBL and feeling restricted by senior leadership.

Several teachers reflected on the difficulties associated with parents not fully understanding PBL:

Amelia: *I think sometimes being able to communicate effectively with parents can be quite hard as well. I think sometimes that makes a big difference.*

Faye: *The main thing that I think needs to happen now is... speaking to parents about it and that needs to keep evolving.*

One teacher felt additional pressure from parents due to working in an infant school. She suggested parents focused on policy-defined measures of attainment and preparation for formal learning. She felt parents saw PBL as a waste of time and a distraction from education:

Faye: *... a lot of our pressure comes from the parents, 'Well you need to get them ready for Junior School now', and, 'You need to get them ready for the next step', so they view that play-based learning should only be in early years.*

Other teachers could clearly see evidence for the effectiveness of PBL, particularly for children struggling with formal education. However, teachers didn't feel support from parents, which was problematic:

Grace: *[PBL] is absolutely having a good impact despite the fact that his mum doesn't agree.*

Reflecting on this point, the individual context of each child was brought up as an important factor for teachers. They highlighted that experiences at home impacted on their knowledge base and understanding:

Faye: *I think it goes back to the whole knowing what the children's prior experiences are... So, you have to really work out what they already know to then gauge how you're going to teach it.*

All of the teachers reflected on the constraints and pressures they felt from the government and national curriculum:

Bob: *It's our system that says, 'No! They absolutely, 100 percent have to know it. And if they don't know it, they have to do twice as much of it.'*

Claire: *Trying to then get the learning in around all of those things is really difficult. There just isn't enough hours in the day.*

Some teachers described feeling stuck in a hierarchical system that they not only don't believe in, but also fear:

Ellie: *... we are all accountable to somebody. So, everybody's looking at data, Year 6 data. So, our leadership team were under pressure from our governors, our governors are under pressure from the local authority, our local authority under pressure from the government. It needs to come from the top down, and you've got to be a very, very brave head and a very brave deputy to be able to go, 'No! We are doing it this way.' An inspector might come into your school, and everyone fears OFSTED, dare I say it. But they do.*

Following from the above, Faye strongly felt that the performance measurement aspect of the wider system impacted on the type of teaching that occurred.

Faye: *I think there's a lot of pressure, and that all stems from the government and statutory documents that they have to achieve certain things... The pressure for them to achieve and be above the national average. And by the time it gets to Year Two, it is just statistics. That then gets passed down to Year One that they have to start being more formal, earlier, and then that gets passed down to reception.*

There was a consistent message from the teachers that the current system is flawed, and that it puts unrealistic and unattainable pressures on both staff and children:

Grace: *I think it's very test heavy, very data heavy and that doesn't always work for every child. So, we're at a point where all children need to be this level and, actually, not all children can be that level. And that should be celebrated.*

Ellie: *Education has changed dramatically. I've been teaching for 18 years and there is so much pressure these days. Even though we're supposed to be talking more about wellbeing, I think sometimes, depending on the leadership of the school, we forget that, and we get obsessed with statistics...*

Similarly, other teachers recognised that children's basic needs must be met first in order to access learning:

Faye: *Unless they are happy, they are not going to learn.*

Amelia felt the expectations had a detrimental effect on children from the start of their school life:

Amelia: *Generally, with boys I'll be like, I think they're gonna be fine by year 3, 4, 5 but they're just too little at the moment, they're just not ready. So, I think we expect an awful lot of them, and we expect them to meet those standards, which actually are pretty hard.*

Another aspect of subtheme 3B describes the internal struggles faced within schools. These include differences between teachers' views and those of senior management, and feeling pressured over their teaching approaches:

Bob: *... there isn't an awful lot of play-based practice in teaching. You know, I see a lot of playful learning... but play, in order to be play, had to be self-initiated, freely chosen with no fixed outcome.*

Bob reflected on the impact of individual teacher's backgrounds and definitions of play on how well it was utilised in the school. A discrepancy is evident between those with 'play backgrounds' and those purely in the education sector:



Bob: *... when I encounter teachers who reflect my background and have had a play background, particularly in early years, it contrasts very heavily with teachers I meet who don't have a play background and who don't think of playing that way.*

Similarly, other teachers spoke about the difficulties of certain staff members either not understanding PBL or feeling restricted in their practice due to perceived limitations from the school and management:

Ellie: *I honestly think sometimes it's a lack of understanding... they will say, 'Why are you doing that? What are they learning?'*

Amelia: *...there is a lack of understanding of the early years curriculum and the way in which children learn at that young age. I think it can massively prohibit any sort of play-based learning...*

Another barrier to PBL in schools was having a lack of autonomy due to needing permission from SLT:

Ellie: *I'm very passionate about play and I'm a big advocate for that. But you can only do what your school allows.*

Additionally, many referred to their superiors as gatekeepers for PBL:

Claire: *I could go higher up and go to SLT, but she was very against PBL and she's the one who has those meetings with senior leadership about these ideas.*

SLT's approach to PBL and willingness to allow it past EYFS was very context- and school-dependent:

Ellie: *... very often, the heads and leadership aren't always early years trained so you're fighting a battle... it is children who learn through play and, unfortunately, not all practitioners and not all leaders of school, understand the importance of it. And we are trying to get children to run before they can walk.*

The teachers felt powerless without SLT backing and the lack of a whole school approach towards PBL implementation:

Faye: *... we have to have SLT onside...*

#### **4.4.3. Theme 3 Subtheme C: Standardisation prioritised over unique child development**

Most of the teachers felt conflicted over priorities:

Bob: *[Holistic development is] not given the same weight as, 'Are they school ready? Are they reading? Are they writing?'. And if you focused on more of, 'Are they a well-rounded person?', if that was your focus, and in and around of all of that they're doing all their own stuff through play, I think you have some amazing children who then would hit the ground running when they got to Year 2.*

Debbie: *... it's purely academic, but without the basic social skills and independent living skills. We're missing out on such huge parts of learning that are best done from a young age.*

Faye: *Going into Year 1, they only look at reading, writing and maths. Then the children who haven't met their early learning goals in personal, social and emotional development or communication language, well, they get completely dropped. Because we have flagged that they haven't met it, but then it doesn't get picked up anywhere else...*

Grace: *Our curriculum is so based on literacy and maths and that is a key thing so.. I think yes, children should leave primary school being able to read and write. But, I think actually the social side is so key.*

Similarly, Claire felt a discrepancy between what she felt should be prioritised in education, and what she was made to focus on instead:

Claire: *I think there's too much pressure on schools, scores and data. I think their emotions, their well-being comes before that in my opinion. But, it's overshadowed by data and expectations of age and where they should be at*

*what time, when everyone knows that every person, adult or child, learns differently and learns slower or quicker than others.*

Others also felt that the development of wider capabilities was being ignored in favour of meeting prescribed academic goals. Many teachers felt children lose independence as they go through the school and miss out on opportunities to shape their own learning:

Debbie: *It's generally the curriculum goals and standards and everything have to be met first and if you can fit [PBL] in great. If you can do that in your hours, then good for you, but it's not a priority of the school.*

Grace: *Children are different now... they just need you all the time. They always want to ask you something. They can't just go off and play... because they don't have those independent skills to just go and play a game.*

Even in reception, some felt that academic outcomes took precedence over other skills:

Bob: *[F]rom a teacher's point of view, it's more playful than a very academic, sat at desks, formal didactic me at the front, them at tables approach... but I still think it's driven very much by set outcomes.*

In contrast, one of the teachers felt her school did recognise the need for developing the whole child:

Ellie: *I think that even though we have got quite a lot of pressure on the academic side, we do remember they're not robots. It's not all statistics. And, actually, if they're not healthy in other aspects, the rest doesn't really count.*

The same teacher also provided an example of still being able to meet the academic requirements but by utilising different methods:

Ellie: *I think we can collect evidence for the children meeting objectives through other ways like voice recordings, iPads. It doesn't all have to be written evidence. So they could learn that through play, through practical activities. And as adults and practitioners, we need to think about how we evidence*

*that. And it doesn't always have to be on a piece of paper just so we can stick something in a book.*

Similarly, Grace provided thoughts on ways to combine the two approaches:

Grace: *... children learn best when they can actually do it... So, we've got some new lessons we're using for that, which is a lot more focused on active specific projects.*

All of the teachers had strong views on the impact of the type of teaching on children:

Ellie: *Why, at 2:00, o'clock in the afternoon, are we making 5-year-olds write when the objective was to be able to talk about similarities and differences...*

Some felt the shift from PBL to Year 1's more formal style placed too high expectations on children:

Amelia: *I remember the first time I had Year 1 and they asked, 'When are we gonna play? When are we gonna play? When are we gonna play?!' Because that is their learning, isn't it? That is just what they see. It is a massive shock where the children are going from working on like a carousel rotational basis to then everyone being in the whole class are being asked to do the same thing at the same time or very similar things at the same time.*

In contrast, Debbie found in her school that most of the children were more used to formal learning styles and therefore struggled with the notion of PBL:

Debbie: *I think they're so used to being in an environment where it is just, you sit and listen to the teacher... You are used to maybe associating the fun and play with playtime and only playtime and this is my free time. So, it's hard then when it's also educational.*

She did however reflect that, in general, children's responses to PBL or formal teaching was child-dependent and based on individual preference:

*Debbie: ... for some students, play is really exciting, and it's really fun, and it's really engaging. But for other students, that might be quite overwhelming. And, actually, they learn better in a more structured environment where they're at the table and it's quiet and it's more teacher-led*

Similarly, Faye and Grace also highlighted that children's preferences are individual and a one-size fits all approach won't work. They suggested a more child-led, needs-led approach would work better:

*Faye: ... where I found it really difficult, it's where there's some children who are very able and very academic. And to be honest, they just wanna sit down. They wanna sit down and they want to learn and that's all you ever hear them say. It's like, 'Well, what lesson have we got now?', even in early years.*

*Grace: Some children, the children who have got particular needs, find it too overwhelming... and actually they need more of a focus so they almost need to be drawn into an activity and supported through that and then they will be fine.*

Some children respond better to formal learning, even as early as Year 1:

*Grace: I think probably at this point in EYFS, you've got some really academic children who they just need to go now and go with school and go into Year One and start having some more formal learning. They're ready for it.*

The same teacher recognises that others would benefit from a gradual transition:

*Grace: In a reception class, there are some children that really struggle with a change in routine. So, when there is playing, they love it. Then, when you ring the bell to say they've got a transition to something else, there's meltdowns because it is teaching them those rules of school. And, actually, even at that age, they're not quite sometimes ready to do school. And, even in reception, they've got those expectations. I think it's a real issue of the curriculum that it is so hardcore. There's so much expectation on children even from early years.*

#### 4.4.4. Theme 3 Subtheme D: The curriculum needs to evolve

Subtheme 3D continues to show the teachers' views on the abrupt shift from PBL to formal learning during the transition from EYFS to Year 1. It also continues a recurrent thread across this theme and the others regarding schools and the government favouring the didactic formal learning approach over PBL. In this subtheme, the teachers discuss the dissonance between their beliefs and reality. It also highlights the mixed views amongst different teachers regarding what changes need to be made to incorporate PBL into additional year groups. Some teachers expressed concern that too much PBL had the potential of not preparing children for the 'real world'. Additionally, this subtheme explores practical suggestions from teachers about what the changes to the system would need to look like, such as mirroring approaches used in other countries and changing how we measure performance.

When thinking about changes they felt were needed, most of the teachers expressed a desire for PBL to continue across the school:

Amelia: *I think there's definitely space right across the whole school. And I know some schools do that, you know, continuous provision, so like play-based learning right up until year 6.*

Claire has worked across different year groups and spoke to SLT to have PBL extended. This suggestion, however, was met with resistance:

Claire: *... if I could, I think I'd have it in Year 4. I've suggested it before, but they're like, 'Mmm, well you kind of want your provision to be gone out by Year One, Year Two.' ... well actually up in Year 4, if you put an independent writing station out, many more children will engage with it because they have the skills to do it.*

She acknowledged that, due to curriculum demands, it wouldn't be as easy to implement as it would be in KS1:

Claire: *I think in the older years, having it every day would be challenging. But, I'd say from Year 4 upwards, Year 5 and 6 it would be like an hour a week on a Friday afternoon would be a really nice activity to do.*

Ellie felt that PBL in older year groups may benefit behaviour:

Ellie: *I would have continuous provision all the way up... we always say we don't want to make children fit in a box. But, that is where education is at the moment. We are making children fit into a box. And that is also why you're seeing the high levels of behaviour, because COVID has an impact on them, they're struggling in the lessons, so then they want to kick off.*

Other teachers also felt PBL should, as a minimum, be implemented in KS1 and elements of it in KS2 where required, based on individual children's needs:

Faye: *I think it should happen throughout Key Stage 1. Well, to be honest, I mean there's elements that should happen all the time depending on topics or children or things that are particularly challenging.*

It was clear that teachers felt pressurised into the false belief that the sole route to delivering the National Curriculum was formal teaching:

Grace: *I think it would be lovely to have play-based learning all the way through... But, I also think, actually in terms of the rigour of our curriculum, they do need to learn stuff to manage in life...*

One felt it impossible to even dream of a different reality:

Debbie: *I think it's so idealistic to say that that would be able to happen. Because I think, no matter what, you're going to have people telling you, 'You can't do that!', whether it's parents or governments or local authorities. It's just not going to happen.*

Several of the teachers suggested the English system needed to align more with other countries in delaying the onset of formal education and the National Curriculum:

Bob: *I think you would have to mirror the later start that you get in Europe... I'm always amazed that we start them so young in this country and yet they get massively outstripped in terms of education performance by the time they're older...*

In some schools, there is recognition that change is needed. Plans are being put in place for 2024 to try to address these by bridging the gap between PBL and the curriculum:

Faye: *Ultimately, I think they should still be doing it in Year Two... Actually, they should be outside exploring it, acting it out, whatever it is, rather than just being like, 'Here's a story. Let's write about it'.*

One of the teachers also spoke about the change in priorities for Ofsted. He felt the system in England focused on the wrong areas:

Bob: *[In European systems] they would inspect a school for its ethos rather than its educational outcomes.*

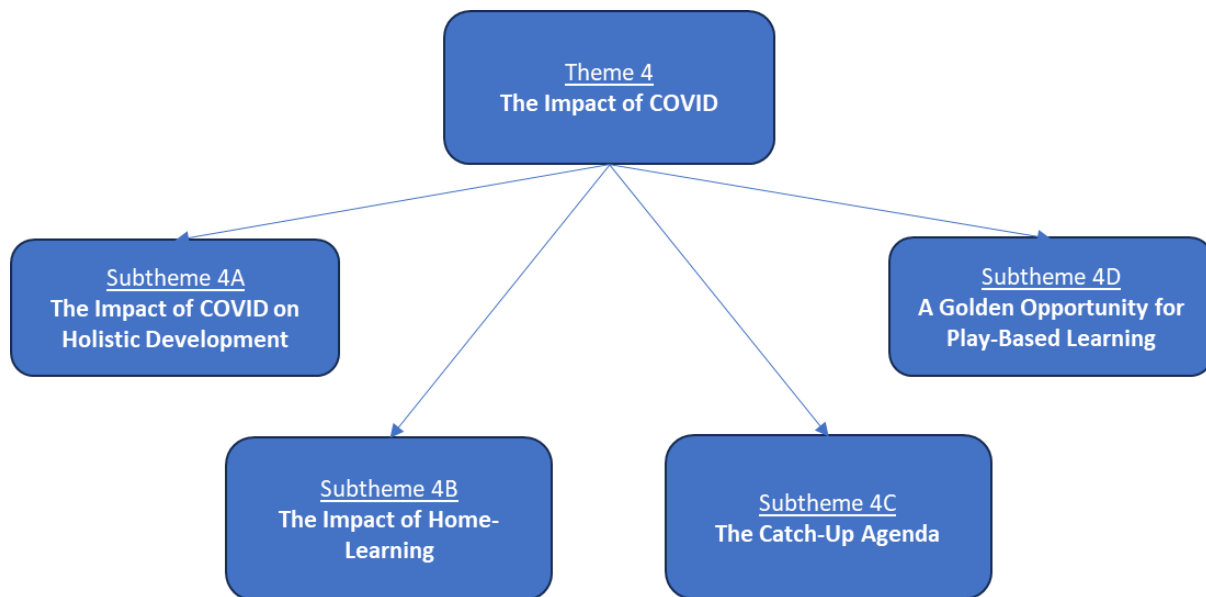
One point of particular note was the conclusion Bob reached that the current system is discriminatory. The unfairness stems from the 'over-datafication' culture of current policy and the effect this has with Ofsted as sole arbiter of quality.

Bob: *... it was impossible to be outstanding if you didn't have outstanding results. So, you could have an amazing school with an amazing ethos with amazing teachers. But, if they were in a culturally deprived area, or financially deprived area, and their educational outcomes weren't high enough. They could never be outstanding.*



## 4.5. Theme 4: The impact of COVID

Figure 6: Theme 4 and subthemes



Theme 4 aims to demonstrate teachers' perspectives on the changes in education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The evolving nature of the pandemic meant that schools had to act quickly and follow ever-changing rules and guidelines. Subtheme 4A captures teachers' beliefs concerning the breadth of skill sets that were negatively impacted by not being at school. Additionally, many of the teachers identified that COVID caused an increase in children's SEMH needs. Subtheme 4B encapsulates teachers' experiences of the two lockdowns and how these affected children. Subtheme 4C comments on the reintegration process from home-learning back to face-to-face learning as restrictions were lifted. This subtheme includes reference to the unfair and unrealistic expectations they believe were put onto children after such a turbulent time. Finally, subtheme 4D reflects the attitude that the period of reintegration, when so many facets of children had been under-developed in different ways, should have been the perfect moment for play-based learning to have been the pedagogical strategy of choice.

#### 4.5.1. Theme 4 Subtheme A: The impact of COVID on holistic development

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant disruption to education and had a huge impact on children's abilities. Some schools put actions in place to try to counteract this:

Amelia: *... they have embedded more play-based opportunities for the children... they really needed it, because they just hadn't had the social side.*

Teachers realised that, when children returned to school, they weren't at the expected age-related targets for socialisation and relationship building:

Bob: *They've had less opportunities to do that social stuff, to learn to play with others... So, there were children who didn't feel so comfortable in a large group... and you had the sense that they weren't very socially comfortable.*

Ellie: *And since COVID, we've seen... an increase in their SEMH needs and a decline in their mental health, which has been really sad.*

Claire: *... the ones who are currently in Year Two now, they are a very challenging cohort... they were home when they were in that key stage of building relationships with people that age...and learn how to share and learn how to talk to somebody...*

Similarly, key aspects of the EYFS, for example understanding the world, were missing post-COVID due to not being able to experience anything in the real world. Teachers recognised the inequality of experiences and skills amongst children based on their home set up over the pandemic:

Faye: *We did a transport topic and, actually, it was the first year where none of them had been on a bus or a plane or a train or anything. So, actually, they hadn't got that understanding of the world. It was so narrow that all they really knew was their home environment.*

Ellie: *... what we've also noticed since COVID is, you know, if a child was talking about an oven, they won't use the word oven they'll say the 'hot thing'. They are describing because they don't have those keywords, they don't have the nouns to tell you everyday objects.*

Others referenced physical skills being under-developed due to the setup of their home environment during COVID:

Faye: *... we had quite a few that, they've been in flats and whatever, hadn't even been to playgrounds. So, actually, their physical side was really poor. And then that impacted their play-based learning because they were constantly tripping over absolutely everything when they were doing it.*

#### **4.5.2. Theme 4 Subtheme B: The impact of home-learning**

The teachers spoke about the differences in school life during the two COVID lockdowns and the impact this had on themselves and the children. Teachers suggested that the approach to home learning was better initially and then the government started imposing rules which felt counterintuitive to the development of the whole child:

Bob: *... it's different children, different days, some in the morning, some in the afternoon... And it was so much more geared around their social happiness... Then the second lockdown came around and, I think by then, the government had gotten a mighty panic about children's educational outcomes being affected. And it was much more formal.*

Claire: *The expectations for online learning was much higher and, by then, online learning had sort of become an industry. Whereas before we were making up, we were kind of doing our own stuff.*

Others noted the effect of social-distancing requirements:

Grace: *... they were having to sit at tables... It's had a huge impact, and definitely play-based learning changed, and not for the better, because they just couldn't do it with COVID. That's the whole thing that none of us could help.*

Claire: *... it was quite segregated. So even when we had our outside area, the whole of Year One didn't go out at the same time. We had slots that our class was allowed out because we were in our class bubble.*

Debbie: *... there's a bit of apprehension being next to other kids again and being close enough contact to other students.*

One of the teachers spoke specifically about children being more hesitant to attend school post-pandemic. It was clear that she felt unsupported in her role and ill-equipped to help the children:

Grace: *I've got so many children, as the SENCO, that I'm having to deal with that are school refusal or they don't wanna come in. They just run off.*

A few of the teachers spoke about the differences in abilities across children of the same age after their COVID and home-learning experiences:

Faye: *... it was like there were those kind of two halves, some that had just been left to play constantly, but equally their language and PSED was terrible. And then some that had just been sat and they were just writing. And then they really struggled to play, and they really lost that element.*

#### **4.5.3. Theme 4 Subtheme C: The catch-up agenda**

The teachers reflected on their experiences of the governments 'catch-up agenda'. There was a consensus among them that there was focus on the wrong aspects which could further magnify the absence of vital skillsets:

Bob: *You were trying to ease them back in and making allowances for the fact that they've missed out on an awful lot... whilst also responding to the fact that, in terms of the curriculum, they were massively behind.*

Additionally, the teachers were frustrated by the rush to fill the academic gaps:

Bob: *... they did lots and lots of sessions outside of the main teaching sessions to try and catch them up. I don't think that was very play-based at all for them.*

Teachers were disappointed that the standardised 'imaginary learner' was still the expectation.

Debbie: *I think it's really sad the teachers had so much pressure on them. The kids had so much pressure on them because the curriculum hasn't changed, the goals haven't changed, the standards haven't changed.*

Another reflected on the high expectations placed on children with no concessions made for the impact of COVID:

Ellie: *... let's get a reading session. Let's get an extra phonics session. All that, and you go in there and you think, 'Gosh, you look so tired because you're only five years old and today, by lunch time, you've already had a phonics, a literacy, a reading, and a maths lesson. That's four lessons!'*

Some schools felt the need to recruit professionals from different disciplines to help the children's skills, for example speech, due to teachers not having the time. The impact of COVID on children's mental health was also an issue:

Ellie: *I've noticed a real decline in our children's language... Speech therapists are noticing that too... And, obviously, we've already mentioned their SEMH needs. A lot of these children saw and heard things that were really sad in COVID... which is why our learning mentor support at the moment is paramount and I don't think we'd be able to run this school without them.*

Another spoke about their concerns for extra support:

Debbie: *There needs to have been a much nicer transition for children to come back with lots of opportunities to express emotions and lots of opportunities to find fun and enjoy learning again...*

#### 4.5.4. Theme 4 Subtheme D: A golden opportunity for play-based learning

Despite teachers feeling that PBL would be an invaluable tool for transitioning children back to school after COVID, the system dictated what they were allowed to do:

Debbie: *... we were under even more time constraints to just get through things... It's really sad and, if anything, it was the prime time for staff and students to be utilising play-based learning to bring everyone back to the new normal.*

Teachers already expressed concerns about the abrupt transition from EYFS to KS1 pre-COVID. This seems to have worsened post-COVID:

Claire: *You could see when they were getting restless and when they'd lose their motivation, cause they've been sat in a in a chair rather than running round...*

The teachers discussed having to try to change the setup of EYFS and PBL post-COVID to account for the lost skill base and help to rebuild those fundamental development stages:

Ellie: *Our EYFS lead says to me so often they don't know how to play... We have had a real increase of needs.*

One teacher described the impact of the pandemic and thought the lack of assessments had a positive impact on children and increased opportunities and time for PBL:

Amelia: *The only difference was when we didn't have SATS for a year, that made such a difference.*

Finally, a simple statement of attitude from a teacher:

Ellie: *I actually think we should be doing much more play now since COVID and having it up through the school.*

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Chapter introduction**

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of this study and highlight where they fit within previous literature and gaps in the knowledge that they may fill. Initially, the themes and subthemes will be mapped on to the research questions. Some subthemes will map directly on to research questions, whereas others will provide context around the answers provided. These will be presented in order of research question. The text will be interspersed with short quotes highlighting relevant points. There will then be a summary of the way in which the research questions were answered. This will then be followed by sections focusing on the contributions of this research, limitations of research, quality assurance, future research, and a description of my reflexive journey.

### **5.2. Addressing the research questions with the themes**

#### **5.2.1. Research Question 1: What are primary teachers' attitudes towards PBL?**

Answers to Research Question are provided by Theme 1, 'The purpose of child education'. Through the interviews, it soon became apparent that teachers viewed early years education, and their own role within it, as multi-faceted. All teachers expressed views that education was not simply the retention of certain facts to pass standardised tests. Instead, there was greater importance attached to developing happy, well-rounded, resilient young people. These views reflect those previously expressed in the literature concerning 'kaleidoscopes' and 'journeys' (Palaiologou, 2019; Wood, 2019).

Contrasts were communicated between what is being taught and how, and what and how a child should be learning. Therefore, it is informative to understand how the teachers viewed the purpose of child education. All of the teachers had strong views that education is much more than knowledge transference. They view its ultimate purpose as promoting skills and abilities that cannot be learned from reading a textbook, writing at a table, or taking a test. Instead, the teachers believe education should be about developing the 'whole person'. This was a consistent belief irrespective of the length of time they had worked as a teacher.

Ellie: *It's about giving young people the tools they're going to need to succeed in life.*

These communications also implied certain beliefs about the current English curriculum and whether it is fit for purpose. One of the ways I gained an understanding of the teachers' attitudes towards PBL was to elicit their views on the best approaches to teaching and learning. The teachers reported a conflict between what they felt should be prioritised and what they were told to do. Multiple examples were given by the teachers in terms of their attitudes towards the types of skills that should be taught at school, how these are taught, and their views on what needs to change to improve the whole system.

Bob: *... you're cramming their heads full of learning all the time.*

As reported in previous research, it became clear that previous career histories had a direct impact on how the teachers viewed and defined PBL (Fisher, 2022). Bob had the perspective of working in the community as a play lead for many years before he moved to the education sector to teach in Reception and Year 1. His extensive background in play influenced his philosophy surrounding what play is, and the distinction between 'play' and 'PBL'. He highlighted a disappointment in the education system whereby children are being deprived of the type of play that is necessary for development:

Bob: *I'd love for there to be more play-based learning really. But it would mean seeing education more as a process rather than an outcome.*

Three of the teachers, who have only worked in the education sector, viewed the culture of PBL as being led by the child and tailored to their interests. In this theme, they spoke passionately about the way PBL can aid children's development. However, again there was a feeling of frustration at the current system and PBL being neglected past EYFS.

Ellie: *... schools had lots of play-based learning in Year One, but that's all been stripped cause we've gotta get Year One children ready for Year Two.*

Five of the teachers had similar attitudes towards the key components of PBL. They reflected on key learning experiences where they used PBL to teach aspects of the curriculum. There was a consensus that children are more engaged and likely to remember their learning if it is



accessed in a fun and enjoyable way. PBL allows for this, and can help children to develop skills that they would otherwise be less able, or less motivated, to access in a more formal set up.

Ellie: *... those boys didn't like writing, but they like writing in their play because they had that element of control.*

Despite systemic resistance towards PBL, the teachers provided numerous examples of using PBL to teach skills that are required by the curriculum.

Faye: *... children who... had really struggled with mass and... capacity... were comparing the chair sizes, and all of that happened through play-based learning...*

The teachers' positive views of PBL seemed aligned with the research literature (eg., Nuttall et al, 2014). All teachers also expressed self-awareness of their own role in the provision of good early years education. Although different descriptions were used, the teachers alluded to the existence of multiple identities which must be assumed to fulfil the role of 'teacher'. They viewed themselves as an addition to the child's experience. Ultimately, PBL should be exploratory and have a sense of freedom for the child. The children should be able to navigate their experiences without interference from a practitioner. These attitudes would confirm previous findings concerning the role of the practitioner in play-based learning (Bilton, 2020). There was acknowledgement that learning may have an intended outcome, but that allowing the child to lead resulted in more memorable experiences. Across all the teachers, there was a view that PBL is different to free play due to the educational element. It is an important distinction which would seem to add to previous findings framing play as a continuum. The teachers understand that their own involvement requires variation and responsive regulation (Wood, 2014; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

One area of contention that seemed apparent for all teachers was that PBL is, first and foremost, associated with EYFS. Generally, PBL was encouraged in the first term of KS1. However, all teachers spoke about pressure to phase it out completely by the spring term of Year 1. The teachers understood the benefits of PBL, and advocated for it to be continued

into KS1 and higher. The attitudes of the teachers would appear to confirm previous findings that practitioners are enthusiastic about extending PBL in primary school settings (Fisher, 2011; Hood, 2013; Nicholson, 2019).

Amelia: *There's just no time to do that now even for our year ones. Our play-based learning is ... only in our reception and nursery classes.*

Faye, who has worked as an early years lead practitioner, deputy head teacher and now Year 1 teacher, highlighted the need for a shift in the system. Due to her extensive experience of, and training in, EYFS, she spoke about her plan to train more of her staff in PBL. This would seem to follow previous research suggesting that training and understanding the role of play promotes positive attitudes towards its importance (Jung & Bora, 2015). A clear attitude shared by the teachers was that, unless SLT increased their own and their staff teams' understanding of PBL, nothing would change. The teachers felt powerless within the current system as they need SLT to make changes to the system and SLT need the policymakers to shift their approaches. Meanwhile, the holistic development of children is not being well-served by a test-heavy education environment. As previously reported, the premature imposition of formal education can negatively impact upon academic, emotional, and social development (Margetts, 2007). It was clear throughout all of the interviews that the teachers believed PBL should be extended past EYFS, into KS1, and possibly further.

Amelia: *I think there's definitely space right across the whole school.*

Faye: *... there's elements that should happen all the time depending on topics or children or things that are particularly challenging.*

### **5.2.2. Research Question 1 Summary**

Research Question 1, 'What are teachers' attitudes towards play-based learning', was answered both directly and indirectly. Many benefits were acknowledged in line with previous findings. Furthermore, many potential failings of the current curriculum were reported for which play-based learning was seen as an answer. Emphasis was placed on the understanding that the provision of education is about more than merely transferring knowledge. It is about holistic development, attaining social and emotional understanding,

independence, confidence, and enjoyment. The current English educational ideology of standardisation was roundly rejected in favour of child-led, needs-led, reactive pedagogy. Teachers saw themselves as responsible for enhancing exploration, scaffolding development, and being playfully reactive to each child's needs. Additionally, the teachers promoted the idea that, for children to experience a high-quality education, they need to be motivated and engaged. This is most effectively created through harnessing their natural inclinations to discover the world through play.

### **5.2.3. Research Question 2: What are primary teachers' best experiences of PBL?**

Answers to Research Question 2 were provided by Theme 2, 'How play-based learning is viewed by teachers.' First and foremost, it was important to understand what teachers understood PBL to be. A definition of PBL was created from statements concerning the teachers' perceptions of what play-based learning is, and how it is intended to work. There was consistent acknowledgement that play is a critical part of child development. There was also consistency with regards to harnessing the power of child-led play to enhance learning rather than using adult-led instruction with the use of playful objects. These attitudes correspond with the academic view, rather than the policy expectations, that play is an essential activity for children and should not be disconnected from education (Palaiologou, 2017).

Other key qualities mentioned were that play is the way a child discovers their world, and PBL aims to build upon these intrinsic motivations. This is in line with previous conceptions of children's instinctual will to discover (Robert-Holmes, 2019). Further statements mirrored the concept of play being more concerned with performance than outcomes (Smith, 2010). Similarly, the culture of playfulness which should surround PBL is mirrored in previous encouragement for practitioners to be reflective on their own playful actions (Walsh et al., 2017). Another idea communicated was that of the importance of the child's self-determination when it comes to what they want to learn. This mirrors the three modes of play-based learning in previous research (Wood, 2014) and policy mandates for early years teaching (EYFS, 2014).

Once defined it became apparent that teachers were enthusiastic concerning what they believed play-based learning offered to holistic child development and which failings of the current curriculum it could remedy. The main point of agreement between the teachers was the fact that play-based learning could be tailored to an individual child's needs. It was recognised that development is a child's unique journey, reflecting a view of development expressed in the literature (Palaiologou, 2017). The idea of building upon a child's interests was expressed as a way to elicit natural motivation. Such increase in motivation has previously been suggested to be a playful behaviour demonstrating a child's relaxed state (Bundy, 1993). It is a hallmark of a high-quality early years education resulting from a play-based approach (Howard, 2010).

Teachers showed a consistent desire to provide this high-quality, enjoyable education. The benefit of enjoyment is highlighted in the literature as one most negatively impacted by the abrupt transition from EYFS to KS1 (Nicholson, 2019). Another way to provide high-quality education noted is the intent of the teachers to utilise all resources, physical, human, and environmental, to enhance children's learning. The teachers also shared a common belief that play-based learning was a better way through which to promote a child's well-being. This was considered more important to the teachers than ideological standardisation and assessment.

Claire: *... making sure they're happy and learning life skills and social skills and how to manage emotions and the world is probably my bigger one.*

The development of 'non-academic' skills was constantly highlighted as a benefit of using PBL. Such skills include emotional literacy, teamwork, sharing, and social communication. This mirrors the description of holistic development previously reported (Whitebread et al., 2012). They also reflect the 'non-academic' of the seven areas prescribed for development in the EYFS (Bilton, 2020). It was also stated that 'real world' skills were more readily developed by utilising PBL.

Amelia: *... all the critical skills as well that we need children to be able to do, to be able to share, to be able to problem solve, to be able to work together as part of a team, all of these things come, I think, through play-based learning.*

The teachers also spoke of the problem with the perceived dichotomy between ‘playing’ and ‘learning’. As those most familiar with the way in which children learn, they were consistent in their statements that children learn through play. There were also statements concerning the confidence of children. One teacher was critical of the effect of standardisation on previously creative and confident children. This was mirrored by another who showed understanding of trial and error in the developmental process.

Ellie: *... children are confident to make mistakes in play.*

Previous examinations of primary school teachers’ attitudes tend to be less in-depth, with data collected via surveys (e.g., Fisher, 2022) or in small scale comparative studies (e.g., Nicholson, 2019). Other research concerning PBL has focused on teachers within the EYFS framework (e.g., Bilton, 2020) or the focus has been on outdoor learning rather than play-based learning (e.g., Kelly et al., 2023). I chose to interview teachers who work across Key Stage 1 as, in England, PBL is most associated with EYFS. It has also been remarked that this transition is too abrupt (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007) and that the lack of support during transitions at too young an age negatively impacts children’s academic and emotional capabilities (Bateson, 2013). I devised a research question asking for teachers’ best experiences of PBL to try to understand what teachers believe makes it worthwhile. Practical examples of teachers’ experiences are useful to guide practice moving forward.

Teachers also provided real-life examples of best experiences which were explained in-depth. One particularly enlightening example shows how PBL is adaptable to children’s needs. Grace spoke of a Ukrainian child entering Year 3 who, unsurprisingly, was not at the level of age-related expectations provided by the ‘imaginary learner’ of the National Curriculum.

Grace: *It is the only thing that we have seen him actually show some joy at and some engagement in.*

One teacher spoke of how all areas of a curriculum were covered in a single activity with excellent results. Another teacher spoke of how a concept as oblique as social understanding was made available for an educational opportunity when reaction to conversations regarding

home-life were extrapolated into an understanding of the role of police officers. These examples show how play-based learning, child-led and interests-led, can enhance the learning experiences and holistic development of children. The second example in particular mirrors the idea of unintended learning (White & Woolley, 2014), suggesting child-led and interests-led education finds its own purpose rather than requiring adults' judgement of what should be 'planned and purposeful'.

As previously noted, there was unanimous acknowledgement among the teachers that knowledge transference alone is not sufficient for a high-quality education. Other key elements the teachers expected to transfer were independence, tools for life, social communication, and emotional wellbeing.

Grace:           *... helping children be the best that they can be and overcoming any barriers that they have.*

All of the teachers spoke passionately about the range of capabilities they believed children are able to develop through PBL. There was a consensus that teachers need to use their expertise to know how to help children by modelling language and using open-ended questions to elicit the best outcomes. Some of the teachers spoke about aspects of their role within PBL, such as prompting and expanding children's thinking. Additionally, many of the teachers believed that all skills can be taught through PBL just as well as, if not better than, in a didactic approach to learning. The general consensus was that, at the level of Key Stage 1, gaining knowledge has its place, but the emphasis should be on developing well-rounded, emotionally and socially capable young people.

#### **5.2.4. Research Question 2 Summary**

Research Question 2, 'What are primary teachers' best experiences of PBL?' is recognised to be sample specific. It was of interest to see specific examples of how PBL had been used to enhance learning. Describing such examples may be of future benefit for training practitioners in play-based approaches. It was perhaps more interesting to pick up on the sense of enthusiasm apparent in the teachers. There was a strong consensus that using their own creativity, any challenge in their practice could be overcome. Understanding the use of

PBL resulted in teacher empowerment. This mirrors previous research showing that understanding and experience of PBL resulted in greater positive attitudes towards it (Jung & Bora, 2015). This is in stark contrast to the feelings of powerlessness noted when describing their perceptions of the National Curriculum. The best experiences are evidence for enthusiasm to extend PBL to other age groups on a needs-led basis, the power of PBL for combined, enjoyable learning about multiple areas of the curriculum simultaneously, and promoting life-skills not included within the National Curriculum. Again, developing children holistically and encouraging all-round capability is the priority of the teachers.

#### **5.2.5. Research Question 3: What, if any, constraints do primary teachers believe they face which inhibit PBL? What, if anything, have they done to overcome these?**

Answers to Research Question 3 are provided by Theme 3, 'Perceived barriers to achieving objectives.' Teachers demonstrated enthusiasm towards PBL. Thus, it is important to understand the barriers to implementation that teachers face. The main issues reported in the literature involve policy ideals of assessment, standardisation, and the 'imaginary learner' (DfE, 2014). Thus, it is of interest to understand teachers' perspectives of the top-down pressure applied regarding conformance to the National Curriculum. This has previously been reported as the cause for pedagogical tension in primary school teachers. (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Nicholson, 2019; Nolan & Paatsch, 2017).

Another constraint is that teachers view PBL as resource heavy. It has previously been reported in the literature that management of resources is a challenge in education. Headteachers need to assign funds, and generally tend towards applying them to formal education (Prince, 2019). In addition to physical and monetary resources, insufficient time, training, and opportunity are also reported to be a challenge to implementation of PBL (Prince, 2019; Waite, 2013).

Initially when writing the research question, I also aimed to gain an understanding of ways in which teachers felt the constraints of PBL could be overcome. However, I found that most of the teachers felt powerless. They felt that decisions were out of their control, either due to SLT and their specific school context, or wider systemic restrictions. Ideas promoted in the

literature of empowering teachers towards experimentation (Brundrett & Duncan, 2014) or transgression (Mereweather, 2017) seemed out of reach of the teachers interviewed.

The answers to the questions posed in Research Question 3 are provided within Theme 3, 'Perceived barriers to achieving objectives'. It was decided to use the term 'achieving objectives' as opposed to 'implementing play-based learning' as a result of reflexivity. This was due to the overwhelming attitude of teachers being that play-based approaches were the best tool for encouraging the development of well-rounded, capable children. This type of development, rather than the means by which it is achieved, is the teachers' priority.

The teachers highlighted the difficulties of implementing PBL without sufficient space, time, and support. Previous literature has highlighted the importance of learning environment (Mart & Waite, 2021) and the necessity for greater support (Stirrup et al., 2017). They spoke about the different priorities within schools and the negative impact this can have on attitudes towards PBL. One aspect that came through in nearly all of the interviews, was the idea that PBL is not up to one practitioner. There needs to be a collaborative approach and whole-school understanding. It was clear that very few schools prioritised PBL past EYFS. It seemed evident that these internal constraints were a product of the external pressures, such as performance measurement, government agendas and OFSTED. The interviews highlighted that school leadership teams, parents, children and teachers are all impacted by these different interacting factors and changes need to be made to create a better system. These findings seem to contrast with previous research where headteachers had suggested they were happy to be led by teachers regarding PBL (Fisher, 2022).

All teachers brought up the issue of time. They indicated that, in order for PBL to be consistently implemented within schools, there needed to be adequate time allocated to it. That time is considered the most restricted resource would mirror previous findings (Prince, 2019). The lack of understanding surrounding the importance and benefits of PBL means that it is easily overlooked by school leaders. Human resources are also a key factor for PBL. One constraint expressed was the need for support provided by other practitioners, to create a space where they can work together to problem-solve, share ideas, and discuss best practice.



Amelia: ... *you don't need to keep reinventing the wheel.*

However, the key to these collaborative conversations with colleagues being beneficial is that other practitioners have extensive knowledge of PBL. The teachers who had the most experience with PBL were clear about the need for everyone to be trained to ensure that it is distinctly PBL and not 'play'.

Faye: ... *they're not teaching them, they're just handing it over to the children.*

Another facet to this need for training is a lack of consensus over what PBL is, and what it should look like within classrooms. Teachers understood that PBL should be child-led. However, there was disagreement over whether there should be an intended educational outcome. This is reflected in the literature with the concept of children and practitioners considering play as a continuum (Wood, 2014). Again, this could be helped through training and adopting a whole-school approach. The school would need to identify what they believed PBL to be and how this would look in their school. Teachers can have a level of freedom over how they approach it and alter the experiences based on what each individual child requires.

Other comments concerned how the school environment acts as a safe space in which children can express themselves. This mirrors the literature concerning how learning is enhanced when children are relaxed, confident, and playful (Bundy, 1993; McInnes, 2019). The teachers also showed concern for the effect small classrooms can have on children. Suggestions were made that having extra, outside space would be beneficial. This is a further requirement mandated in EYFS which should be part of the smooth transition to Key Stage 1.

Grace: *Definitely they need that outside space.*

Teachers feel increasing pressure to fulfil requirements set by policymakers. It feels almost impossible for teachers to change their approach, even though they know it goes against their beliefs. Teachers feel as though their autonomy over their style, and the content of what is being taught, has been taken away from them. The pressure of fitting everything into a school day in order to keep up with curriculum demands is having a detrimental impact on

teachers' practice. As a result, children are negatively impacted, and the pressures are transferred down to them.

Debbie:           ... *for me to be able to give the correct amount of, or what I perceive to be a good beneficial amount of like, play based learning, it's really hard to do...*

This lack of freedom and autonomy over their teaching was expressed in terms of helplessness. They seemed conditioned to accept a top-down approach where they had little control over what happened within their classrooms. Those who also worked on SLT spoke about the order coming from OFSTED and other governmental bodies. Other teachers also felt the curriculum demands restricted their ability to practice PBL in alignment with their views. However, they blamed this on SLT. Without permission from SLT, teachers felt unable to deviate from a didactic style of teaching. Some teachers spoke about feeling supported by their SLT which provided a sense of freedom. However, from the interviews I conducted, it was still evident that this freedom was conditional and had boundaries. These mixed views of SLT suggest to me that headteachers need to be taking more responsibility over their staffing teams and content of their teaching. Again, this highlights the contrast with findings in previous literature regarding headteachers encouraging teachers to guide practice (Fisher, 2022). If they believe in PBL, they need to advocate for this across the school and upskill their staff. The teachers also spoke about the frustration of understanding the benefits of PBL but having no autonomy over what they can teach. The teachers felt that, for this to change, SLT need to change the priorities to allow time for PBL to be developed. The inadequate understanding of PBL amongst senior leaders is problematic. Training sessions need to be attended by teaching staff, support staff, and senior leadership teams, to ensure a whole school approach to PBL. The culture within schools also needs to change to enable teaching staff to feel less pressured to conform to curriculum demands and to have the freedom to explore PBL approaches.

Another external pressure commented on was the expectations of parents. It was noted that parental expectations seemed to be shaped by National Curriculum goals.

Grace:           *Play-based learning is absolutely having a good impact, despite the fact that his mum doesn't agree.*

The consensus among teachers was that the system prioritised ideological goals of assessment, measurement, and standardisation. This was in conflict with the teachers' overall beliefs that holistic child development was their priority. It was stated that, if policy changed to valuing other aspects, this would be beneficial for children from Key Stage 1 onwards.

Bob: *... if you focused on more of, 'Are they a well-rounded person?'... I think you have some amazing children who then would hit the ground running when they got to Year 2.*

Teachers expressed their disagreement with the narrow view of the National Curriculum with respect to child development. This was compounded by the top-down pressure to conform to standards. This will to find a different way to measure achievement is reflected in suggestions made in the literature that standardisation is a fantasy (Wood, 2019) and that other criteria of progress need to be introduced (Palaiologou, 2017).

One of the biggest constraints faced in the implementation of PBL is the pressure to fulfil the test heavy demands of the National Curriculum. There is the ideology-led move away from developing the child holistically and a pressure towards assessment. These aspects are further impacted by the way in which Ofsted rate schools. Despite strong beliefs amongst the teachers that PBL should be extended in order to develop the whole child, they indicated that the curriculum and testing were prioritised. The teachers believed in the importance of developing social skills, communication, and resilience. However, they suggested writing and maths take precedence. Holistic development is ignored in favour of the concept of school-readiness. The teachers acknowledge that core subjects such as maths and literacy are important. However, they believe these academic skills can be taught alongside the, more important, life-skills through effective implementation of PBL. These findings would suggest that teachers are more enthusiastic about the academic view of the importance of play for child-development rather than the ideological insistence on standardisation and testing (Palaiologou, 2017; Wood, 2019).

To overcome curriculum and assessment constraints, there needs to be a change in the system. The teachers want to develop well-rounded individuals and to use PBL to accomplish

this. Teachers made some recommendations through which they believed positive change could be accomplished. The main argument was that play-based learning has its place throughout primary school. Its use is not simply to smooth the abrupt transition between EYFS and KS1, but rather it is a child-led, interests-led, needs-led approach which may contribute to helping a child overcome challenges throughout primary school. This reflects the conclusions of academic researchers (e.g., Nicholson, 2019).

Amelia: *I think there's definitely space right across the whole school.*

It was noted that formal education starts comparatively early in England, with no benefit. This reflects the need for extension of PBL into and beyond KS1.

A final point of note was made which reflected the overreach of Ofsted as reported in previous research (Wood, 2019). Schools and teachers are no longer inspected for their ethos, all that matters is the data. Being based on concepts like the 'imaginary learner' and insisting that this is the standard to be attained, shows no understanding, and offers no compromise or concession, towards circumstances. Essentially, it is a discriminatory system.

Overall, the teachers spoke about needing change in the system. They also highlighted that every individual is different and therefore they will have different needs. Some children benefit from a more structured, formal set up, whereas others need the freedom of a play-based, exploratory approach. In the current system, there doesn't seem to be room for both. It is very much PBL in EYFS and then the abrupt transition to the National Curriculum. One concern was the lack of autonomy reported by teachers. The ideas of experimentation and transgression previously stated in the literature (Palaiologou, 2017; Prince, 2019) seemed unreachable.

### **5.2.6. Research Question 3 summary**

The teachers reported feeling constrained by the current educational ideology and the top-down pressure exerted. Time, human and physical resources, and space seemed insufficient. There were consistent recommendations for greater training among a greater number of members of primary school professionals. The priorities of the teachers were being overlooked in favour of the policy of standardisation. It was suggested that this ideology

should be viewed as discriminatory. However, due to the never-ending demands to do more, in less time, without sufficient support, the teachers seemed fatigued by the current system. As previously stated, the priority of teachers is to help children develop into well-rounded, capable young people. They believe play-based learning is a potentially powerful tool in achieving this. However, the conditions under which they must practice give them no encouragement or support to achieve this.

#### **5.2.7. Research Question 4: What changes in play-based learning have teachers noted between pre- and post-pandemic?**

COVID-19 had a huge impact on the education sector and children's development. Being so recent, there is limited research on the impact, particularly linking to PBL. I therefore felt it was important to have a research question which identified how education changed over that period. It should be clarified that this period particularly refers to the government-imposed lockdowns introduced to slow the progression of the virus. It is acknowledged that mutations of the virus are still prevalent, and the situation is ongoing. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, I deliberately ensured a part of my inclusion criteria should be that all participants had experience working for at least four years in KS1. I did this to ensure they would have worked both pre- and post-COVID and were subsequently in a position to comment on any differences. Once schools started to reintroduce students and find their 'new normal', there were campaigns from the British Psychological Society and governmental talks surrounding the state of play. In particular, the BPS 'Time to Play' (2021) campaign sparked my interest, and partly influenced the choice of this research question. The BPS recognised the importance of play for skill development and they believed that the government strategy for pandemic recovery was an opportunity to re-evaluate priorities for children. I was particularly interested to see what this meant in reality for schools and whether it had the desired impact.

Research Question 4 is considered in statements collected in Theme 4, 'The impact of COVID'. The teachers identified that a number of skills were negatively impacted on as a result of missing education. It also covers the issues teachers recognised that resulted from the closure of schools. Children who had less-involved parents at home and didn't have siblings suffered the most with their social communication and interaction skills. Others fell

behind with their language development without the constant interaction with peers and ability to progress with their learning with a trained teacher in school. Similarly, those teachers who have had extensive experience in EYFS reflected on the 'covid cohort' being behind in terms of what is normally expected. The government's push for a 'catch-up agenda' was criticised by the teachers, who were disappointed at the missed opportunity to utilise PBL to help develop skills that were lost.

Teachers recognised that, in addition to academic knowledge, other skills had been impacted negatively. The prime concern was for the lack of social skills resulting from the isolation mandates of the time. It was reported that children struggled with unstructured time, felt discomfort in groups, and found building relationships challenging. These findings mirror the findings of previous studies (Fox et al., 2021; Tracey et al., 2022). Other skills and capabilities noted to be lost were the will to explore and even motor skills. A general consensus was that the cohort in question lacked independence. It was recognised that the environment within which they had been attempting to continue education had a huge impact on their capabilities.

The impact of lockdowns was most apparent during the various attempts at restarting normal schooling. After the first lockdown, there were still mandates in place requiring social distancing. This resulted in fragmented classrooms and timings. At this time, there seemed to be an understanding that children would need support. However, this apparently changed after the second lockdown. Other teachers reiterated that children's confidence, imagination, and resilience had been negatively impacted. This manifested itself in lack of will to work, and simply refusing to go to school.

As touched upon, after the second lockdown, there was a sense of government panic regarding children's outcomes which resulted in pressure towards formal teaching. There was a realisation that these children had missed out on a large portion of the curriculum. However, no compromise or adjustment was made to allow for this, instead, extra formal teaching was implemented. The general impression was one of disappointment and pity. There seemed to be no policy-led recognition of the turbulent times. There was some extra funding given, but the ideologies of assessment, measurement, and standardisation did not shift.

The overall feeling expressed by the teachers was that using play-based approaches in a reactive way for each child would have been the best pedagogical solution. However, as noted, they received no encouragement towards this.

Debbie: *... it was the prime time for staff and students to be utilising play-based learning to bring everyone back to the new normal.*

Part of the problem was the continuation of social distancing requirements resulting in even less space available. Restlessness and lack of motivation were noted. Additionally, dealing with the two types of pupils that returned after the home-schooling periods would seem to be a perfect time for child-led learning. More acknowledgement was made of this when describing the reduction in language skills which resulted from the lockdowns. It was even reported that EYFS teachers had stated that children seemed to have lost the ability to play.

Ellie: *I actually think we should be doing much more play now since COVID...*

Despite this being the opinion of teachers, policy made no concessions from standardisation.

#### **5.2.8. Research Question 4 summary**

The COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing and the effects it has had will possibly not be understood for years. The UN understood the potential impact and made an early recommendation for education to be prioritised (UN, 2020). However, in England there seems to have been little adjustment in terms of policy. Despite teachers recognising the severe negative impact on skills required for holistic child development, the general consensus was that they were compelled to double-down on formal teaching and knowledge transference. Similarly, with isolation impacting social and language skills, it was reported that child-led, needs-led education should have been a priority. It was acknowledged that there was a temporary focus on child wellbeing after the first lockdown. However, this was overturned in favour of extra tuition to catch up with uncompromised standards. Overall, a golden opportunity for expansion of play-based learning seems to have been spurned.

### **5.3. Summary of Research Questions**

In summary, primary teachers' attitudes towards PBL show that they view education as being much more than transferring items of knowledge to enable children to pass tests. Instead, it is something that should be enjoyable, engaging, and fulfilling. PBL is an adaptable tool for overcoming challenges. Additionally, the teachers viewed their role as adaptable. The role adopted reacts to the needs of the child at any given time. The teacher needs to have the expertise, knowledge, and confidence to switch between these roles as and when required.

Teachers discussed the different elements they feel are important within PBL through the second research question. They identified the importance of linking learning to real life experiences. Understanding children's abilities and individual contexts guided their approach to PBL. For the third research question, they identified barriers to the implementation of PBL. The main concern was the powerlessness to deviate from didactic methods due to curriculum demands. Additionally, the lack of time, support, and training were seen as inhibitors.

Lastly, Research Question 4 examined the impact of COVID on children's experiences during a lockdown. The main effects were children lacking social skills, not knowing how to engage in PBL, and how to interact with other children. The schools were required to change their approaches towards PBL within EYFS to account for the lack of understanding from children. However, they were limited in the ability to do this due to the covid catch-up agenda being focused on achieving academic standards through additional didactic teaching. A golden opportunity for the expansion of play-based learning was missed.

### **5.4. Contributions of the research**

The current research I have carried out on play-based learning has provided a unique contribution to the field of educational psychology and is a significant piece of research for my doctoral thesis. It is a topic of importance, especially after COVID, and has added to the existing literature. In this section, I will consider the contribution of my research to the PBL literature identified earlier in the literature review. I will then explore the research's practical



implications for educational psychologists in their professional practice. Lastly, I will discuss the research in terms of its contributions both locally and nationally and the wider scope it could have.

#### **5.4.1. Adding to the existing literature**

The present study was conducted through in-depth interviews of primary school teachers regarding their attitudes and experiences of play-based learning. Recent studies seem to have neglected this population. The type of rich data provided by the teachers is itself a novel contribution. Previous research has focused on interviewing headteachers, but only surveying teachers (Fisher, 2020). Other research has compared and contrasted single teachers in different frameworks (Nicholson, 2019), experiences of outdoor learning (Bilton, 2020; Kelly et al., 2023; Mart and Waite, 2021), or attitudes of teachers and children towards play (McInnes, 2019). As stated throughout, I believe teachers in Key Stage 1 are best placed to understand and communicate the effect that the abrupt transition from EYFS to the National Curriculum has on children. It was for this reason that I considered their views so important. Through analysis of in-depth interviews, I hope I have given a never-before-heard voice to their beliefs.

It is encouraging that findings from previous research are reflected in this thesis. It was overwhelmingly apparent that the teachers interviewed believed education to be far more than the acquisition of knowledge. The priority of teachers is the holistic development of the child. There was general agreement that this is best achieved through play-based approaches. This finding is in line with previous research (e.g., Palaiologou, 2017). Another overall finding is that the role of the practitioner is varied. Again, this is in line with previous findings that teaching is a complex profession (Bilton, 2020; Shulman, 1987). This is further enforced by understanding among teachers that high-quality education for this age group is provided by child-led, needs-led experiences. Again, this demonstrates the teachers to have a good understanding of the critical qualities of play and play-based learning (Wood, 2014).

The teachers expressed one of the major constraints to play-based learning was a lack of school-wide training. This mirrors previous research suggesting attitudes to PBL are improved with greater training and experience (Jung & Bora, 2015). Similarly, the lack of

resources, be they time, physical, or human, are reported as challenges for the implementation of PBL (Prince, 2019; Waite, 2013). Important, first-hand evidence is provided by the teachers' criticisms of the National Curriculum. Previous research has tended to be from an academic commentary perspective (e.g., Palaiologou, 2017). In the present study, it is apparent throughout that there is a conception that the English system is unsatisfactory, misguided, and even discriminatory. There is belief that play-based learning has a place throughout child education but, as it is not specifically mandated, the teachers have no power to implement it.

This study has also attempted to fill gaps in the literature by investigating the effects of COVID on primary schools. Here, again, the main criticism seems to be that it was the perfect opportunity to implement greater play-based learning, but that was overlooked in favour of a greater quantity of didactic knowledge transfer. The benefits of PBL with respect to responding to individual children's needs were promoted by the teachers. However, the result was to regress to policy ideologies with no concession to the reality unfolding.

#### **5.4.2. Implications for educational professionals**

This research has numerous implications for Educational Psychologists and the implementation of PBL. EPs are in a unique position due to being able to work at different levels, organisational, systemic, and individual, depending on the need. They also possess a unique set of skills and knowledge base which can help to inform their own and others' thinking and practice.

##### Whole school approaches

It is evident from the current research that, for PBL to be successful, it needs to be embedded as part of a whole-school approach. The teachers made it clear that they often felt dismissed by SLT. They felt they had useful ideas about how to expand PBL across different age groups. However, due to a lack of understanding, pressure from external sources, or unwillingness to invest in training, these ideas weren't being actioned. I believe EPs should work within their individual services and as part of the wider Local Authority to create a bespoke training package on the benefits of PBL. It should be made clear that PBL is

a valuable tool and the perceived dichotomy between 'play' and 'learning' should be eradicated. The training package should then be made available to the EP's link schools and disseminated accordingly based on the individual school's needs.

The training package would need to be taught at a whole school level. All staff need to feel confident in the value of PBL and understand their roles before implementation into practice (Keung & Cheung, 2019). This study provides additional evidence that teachers' roles within PBL need to be adaptable (e.g., Pyle & Danniels, 2017). I also believe EPs could deliver a more accessible, parent and carer friendly version to those who are interested. In accordance with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, all the systems surrounding teachers and children need to be involved (Bronfenbrenner, 2000).

### Parents and Carers

As mentioned above, training may benefit parents and carers. It is argued that parents' and carers' involvement is paramount to a joined-up approach at school and home (Keung & Cheung, 2019). Another option could be for parent and carer workshops to be set up by EPs. These could provide practical examples of how parents could support PBL at home. The current research highlighted a misunderstanding of the benefits of PBL amongst parents and carers which often led to them pushing for more formal learning. It would be beneficial for EPs to bridge this gap in knowledge and help parents and carers to see how it can be used effectively. EPs are best placed to both create and deliver the training due to their knowledge of evidence-based research and practice. They are also in a position where they work across many schools and know about school cultures and systems.

### Consultation, communication, and conversation

Another way EPs can help with the implementation of PBL in schools is through consultation meetings. It is important that all staff members feel equipped with the skills and confidence to encourage PBL. The current research indicated that there was a breakdown in communication between teachers and SLT. EPs could work in a consultative manner to bridge these gaps in communication. They could use their consultation skills to work in a solution focused way to ensure the school is working together. It was clear from speaking

with the teachers that many of them have years of experience with PBL and were enthusiastic for increasing it within school. It is my view that SLT felt too much pressure from external sources to meet standards set by OFSTED and therefore didn't feel they could respond to the teachers' ideas. Through consultation, EPs can work to help manage these discussions and help to create school strategy to increase the use of PBL.

It is important that SLT provide their staff with greater autonomy over their timetables and lessons in order to best use PBL. There needs to be confidence in staff and a joint understanding that they are all experts in their own right as they have been provided with bespoke training. Teachers need to also have the freedom to experiment and transgress from the curriculum as and when required (Brundrett & Duncan, 2014; Mereweather, 2017). There will be times when other skill development takes precedence, particularly in EYFS and KS1 when children are younger and need to develop their fundamental building blocks. Teachers need to be able to encourage and develop the whole child in whichever ways they feel necessary. However, they need encouragement and freedom from their senior leaders to do this. Otherwise, this is where frustrations and incongruence between theory and practice occur.

### Individualised support

Once the above methods of supporting schools have been embedded, EPs could further support schools on a more individual basis. This could include providing coaching sessions for school staff. These sessions could consist of teachers bringing specific difficulties they are facing surrounding PBL in their classrooms which can then be problem-solved in a safe and contained way. These sessions would need to be devised based on a needs-led approach and therefore would depend on the individual's goals. It could be offered as part of the traded model. EPs can also work at the individual level with children. They can conduct observations within classrooms or in outdoor spaces to see how PBL looks in that school. It can also be used as part of EPs' assessments of children and their needs. The EP can identify, through working with the child, what is important *to* and *for* the child and how PBL can be used to facilitate this. Additionally, EPs can consider children's play and PBL when writing psychological advice.

### Systemic support

EPs could also work with SLTs across different schools to increase PBL in schools systemically. These sessions should also work to help empower SLTs to have confidence to justify their approaches to Ofsted. The EPs can work alongside senior leadership to provide evidence of PBL meeting curriculum goals whilst enhancing child development. As mentioned earlier with the training package, the schools need to feel that they can stand their ground and not feel pressurised by the government to increase didactic learning for ideological reasons. There is a wealth of research that shows the benefits of PBL and why it shouldn't be restricted to EYFS. Another way EPs could work with SLT systemically is at the organisational level. It might be that some schools are new to PBL and, after receiving training on it, they want to change the environment within their school. For example, they could work with the EP to develop outdoor spaces and identify what this might look like and how it will be used. The EP may have knowledge of other agencies and support systems that schools could access to help them. EPs have a responsibility to ensure PBL is embedded, prioritised, and protected across schools.

### Influence at local and national level

Dissemination of research and conversations with policymakers are necessary. It is not enough to conduct research in a chosen area and hope that people will read it. Instead, as researchers and EPs, we must think of ways to reach a wider audience, and particularly those who have the power to enact change. One possible route to this would be to speak at local and national conferences. Initially, the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the Division of Education and Child Psychology (DECP) could be contacted to see whether they would be happy to signpost their members to the research. Although their demographic is likely to be within the EP field, it is a way to show others that the research exists, and they may be able to share with their colleagues.

As highlighted in the literature review, PBL and the topic of play are becoming more recognised, particularly as a result of the changes in education due to COVID-19. The BPS campaign, 'Time to Play' (2021), shone a light on the reduction of play in schools and the detrimental impact this was having on children's development. Other publications have also

shown the increase in children's SEMH needs post-COVID. Consequently, the current research is aptly timed and can help to raise further awareness. The research has the potential to add to existing knowledge and hopefully impact LA procedures and wider policy changes. One example is that the findings from this research could be applied to different schools across different LAs to alter approaches to PBL. The hope is that, in time, the research will help to change the system and make PBL available across all age groups in some capacity. If governing bodies such as Ofsted and the department for education reviewed the current system, the current research could help to inform any reforms and help to advocate for PBL to be extended to different year groups across schools in England.

My research wasn't limited to a certain LA and therefore is more generalisable than if it had been conducted only in one locality. It can be used to show examples of PBL in practice, what it could look like in the future, and provide ideas for a change in the English education system. A move away from prioritising academic learning towards encouraging a broader set of skills which allows for more PBL is the ultimate goal. The governing bodies could use research such as this as practice-based evidence for the continuation of PBL across key stages.

Other ways I could personally try to support the dissemination and contribution of the research at a national or local level is by finding appropriate contacts within the field who have links with policymakers or have more knowledge on how to start the conversation with the right people. I could talk with my colleagues at university to identify the key people to get in contact with from a research perspective. In order to make my approach more targeted and specific, I could speak with the PEPs of different LAs to see whether they are interested in furthering the discussion about PBL and potentially offer the bespoke training package I suggested in the previous section. Alternatively, it might also be that EP services have project and development time for their EPs, and they might be interested in using some of that to work together to develop the bespoke training package. A further way to disseminate the research and reach a wider audience to make an impact would be to publish the research so it is accessible to all.

## **5.5. Critique of the research**

Reflexivity has been used throughout this thesis. One of its most important functions is recognising strengths and weaknesses. The following section will consider these.

Additionally, there will be a description of quality assurance and potential avenues for further research.

### **5.5.1. Strengths of the current study**

I believe the use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis was important. It is a flexible method which was crucial when making sense of a large amount of data (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). This showed its strength in the ability to create distinct general themes from the combination of individual interviews which were participant-led and included personal opinions and beliefs. I believe these themes gave a rich account of each of the stories told by each teacher. One of my primary objectives for this research was to give a voice to these teachers. I believe the use of Reflexive TA was instrumental in providing this. This strength adds to previous findings around Reflexive TA that it provides a route to making sense of different participants' perspective and gives them a sense of reality (Yardley, 2000). This fits well with my ontological and epistemological perspectives as an interpretivist researcher.

The creation of themes from individual interviews adds to the possibility for generalisability. This was another primary objective of this study. Previous research has made little attempt to gain in-depth insight into the perspectives of primary teachers (e.g., Fisher, 2020; Nicholson, 2019). To fill this gap in the literature, it was decided to interview a sample of primary school teachers to investigate their beliefs and perspectives. That these interviews were conducted remotely, with teachers from different LAs is also a factor towards generalisability. From these various interviews, and through the use of Reflexive TA to create themes, it is possible to produce naturalistic, transferable generalisations (Smith, 2017). It is acknowledged that individual beliefs, and certainly individual experiences, have limited generalisability. However, I believe the sample size and information power expand understanding and, to an extent, begins to fill a gap in previous research.

One particular finding, that teachers feel powerless to enact change alone, is important for potential generalisability. It is hoped that other practitioners may become aware of this general consensus which may, in turn, help them to understand they are not alone, and empower them to enact change. This has further implications for encouraging teachers to approach SLTs to approve experimentation and transgression, which may in turn lead to a whole-school shift towards positive attitudes regarding play-based learning. An important outcome of any research is for the findings to resonate with other professionals within the system.

### **5.5.2. Limitations of the study**

One of the limitations of this study is that it was a self-selecting sample. The participants who responded were those interested in play-based learning. Once headteachers, as gatekeepers, agreed to pass on the study information to their teaching staff, the teachers had the choice whether to participate or not. There is a risk that those who chose to participate are passionate about play-based learning and therefore may have had a bias towards talking more positively about it. They may have already thought play-based learning was an important topic which could have influenced how they responded.

Another limitation of the study is that there was a single method used to collect data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide rich data. However, further richness could perhaps be added through the use of other methods, for example observations or a post-interview survey. However, as an exploratory study of attitudes, observations of their practice may have been a time-consuming undertaking which may not have added to findings. Additionally, there is a risk that my observations would affect the teachers' practices. Similarly, it would perhaps have been presumptuous to have created a survey aimed at gathering opinions based on my own priorities and views of play-based learning. Semi-structured, participant-led interviews were conducted precisely for reasons of exploration. It is possible that the questions I used for guidance in the interviews may also have manipulated biased responses. However, I believe I found an acceptable balance between allowing the participants to lead the conversations based on their perspectives and beliefs whilst simultaneously gathering appropriate, rich responses concerning the topic under investigation.



### **5.5.3. Quality assurance**

The following section is based on the four principles of quality assurance set out by Yardley (2000).

#### Sensitivity to context

The use of reflexivity throughout this thesis has encouraged me to be sensitive to contexts. As stated, one of the first undertakings was to consider my approach as a researcher. Concluding that I am an interpretivist researcher meant that I need to understand the perspectives of previous researchers when considering their approaches and findings. While compiling the literature review, it was important to appreciate not just what was written, but also why it was written. This is important for this thesis as the sources of knowledge come from various levels with different motivations. However, another responsibility of the interpretivist researcher is to use their knowledge and experiences to advocate for which concepts and findings are most persuasive. Thus, I believed it was important to introduce critiques of the current English education system. This gained importance with the realisation that teachers themselves lacked autonomy and felt helpless. A primary motivation for this thesis was to give voice to these teachers.

Similarly, it was important to be sensitive to the participants. They were generous to share their perspectives with me, and I felt obliged to treat our discussions with the greatest confidence. There was constant reassurance that their views would be kept anonymous. One particular perspective that I did not anticipate was the sense of fear teachers had towards Ofsted and, by extension, school leadership. Clarifying that their participation was anonymous and in confidence possibly helped to allow them to be as honest as possible about their teaching experiences.

#### Commitment and Rigour

The main elements of commitment and rigour were continuously used in the analysis of data. Reflexive thematic analysis is not a linear process (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Rather, it requires the researcher to immerse themselves in the data for familiarisation, including back and forth between steps to ensure the interpretation is as true a representation of beliefs

and perspectives as possible. This constitutes an intense journey towards understanding. I committed to the rigorous use of this type of analysis as I believed it would provide the best data for interpretation.

### Transparency and Coherence

These qualities were provided by continuous reiteration of the reasons for my study, my perspectives as a researcher, the reason for my choice of analysis, and the nature of the findings related to previous research. I made sure that my thematic findings mapped as closely to the research questions while also acknowledging that certain context was provided by other themes and subthemes. I believe these themes tell a coherent story about the teachers' combined attitudes towards play-based learning and the effect of COVID-19. I ensured the reader was aware of my personal motivations for this thesis, however, I also made clear my intention for interviews to be participant-led. As an exploratory study, it is important that the teachers were given a voice, but it was equally important for me to extract information relevant to my thesis topic. I believe I have been transparent about these motivations and concerns.

### Impact and Importance

It is hoped that this thesis may have impact on how teachers are supported in their beliefs that play-based learning has a place in the National Curriculum. Its importance may be that, as mentioned, teachers struggling with pedagogical conflict may realise they are not alone. I believe the variation in the sample used may lend itself to naturalistic generalisability and transferability (Noble & Smith, 2015). These are teachers of different age, sex, experience, background, and Local Authority whose combined views towards play-based learning are similarly enthusiastic. Again, a potential impact could be empowerment against the helplessness and fear of authority that teachers seem to feel.

I also believe this research could be helpful for EP practice. Additionally, it may prove useful for other teachers, SLT, and even policymakers. Current policy is ideological, and this ideology seems flawed in the eyes of the professionals affected by it. Similarly, there is consensus that teachers and children would benefit from a whole-school encouragement of

play-based learning. The results of this thesis may also in future be used to create a training package for schools to consider. Hopefully, this thesis may encourage questions to be asked which may help to enhance children's learning and development.

## **5.6. Future Research**

This thesis contributes to understanding teachers' attitudes towards play-based learning. As previously discussed, it consists of a small sample of teachers which could be expanded using a similar methodology. Similarly, other forms of data-collection and analysis could be used in combination with semi-structured interviews. Additionally, it would be of use to add to the type of sample used in this thesis. Attitudes of children, other teachers, SLT, and even policymakers would serve to give a greater variety of perspectives towards play-based learning.

An important research avenue is the use of longitudinal studies. These are already underway in Canada (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). It would be interesting to see how the use of play-based learning affects overall child development and educational outcomes. Previous research suggests that child development and educational outcomes are shaped by smooth transitions and child-led learning. However, it would be beneficial to have incontrovertible evidence that play-based learning is the powerful force it seems to be.

## **5.7. My reflexive journey**

Reflexivity has been used throughout the production of this thesis. It was a consistent tool used to counteract my own assumptions or biases. The use of Reflexive thematic analysis ensured that reflexivity remained paramount when assessing my own role as researcher and interpreting data. In this section, I will describe the main points which required reflexivity. I will start by reflecting on the recruitment of participants, including the role of gatekeepers and rearranging interviews. I will then provide reflections on conducting the research, such as the sensitivity of the topic and using remote interviews. Lastly, I will reflect on the findings, my role as a researcher, and implications for my future practice as a qualified EP.

### 5.7.1. Reflections on recruitment of participants

At the start of my research, when I was considering the topic and methods of recruitment, I thought it would be a simple, quick, and easy process. The demographic I was investigating, KS1 primary school teachers, was easy to contact, the data collection was easily accessible, and the topic seemed not to be of a sensitive nature. I also thought I would be able to recruit easily as I wasn't restricted to one particular region due to choosing to conduct the interviews remotely. However, as I progressed with the recruitment phases, I found the opposite. I have described the difficulties faced below:

#### Role of gatekeepers

As part of my recruitment process, school Headteachers became the gatekeepers. I sent information about the study to them and, if they felt it was appropriate, they would then pass on the details to the teachers. I did not anticipate this being a difficult stage. However, in reality, I found it incredibly difficult to get past the gatekeeper stage to my intended participant group. In a few cases, I had responses from Headteachers refusing without reason. Others would reply and say they didn't feel comfortable passing on the study details to their staff members. The reason given was that teachers already had too many commitments and pressures placed on them. It is my understanding that there were many teachers across different primary schools who would have met my inclusion criteria but weren't being shown the study details by their headteachers. I therefore missed out on recruiting numerous potential participants.

I found this process frustrating and unfair as I already felt as though teachers are an underrepresented group and voice within the PBL research. It didn't seem right that they weren't being given the study information and therefore couldn't make a decision about whether they wanted to take part or not. It felt as though the Headteachers were preventing the voices of teachers being heard. When I was able to recruit, it was evident that the teachers were passionate about PBL and happy to be a part of the research. It was therefore concluded that the recruitment difficulties were primarily due to Headteachers rather than the teachers not being willing to participate.

### Rearranging interviews

Another initial difficulty I faced once I had received the records of interest from potential participants and they had agreed to take part, was rearranging interviews. I thought that, by conducting the interviews online, it would make them easily accessible for participants and allowed for flexibility in terms of timings and days. I ensured I offered multiple dates and times for potential interviews, and I was led by the diaries of the participants as much as possible. I found that it was difficult to secure a date with a few of the participants and a couple cancelled on the day or asked to rearrange due to unforeseen commitments. It was clear at this stage of recruitment that I had underestimated how busy teachers would be, and the limitations on their time due to being in class most of the day. I found the process draining, as I was excited to have found participants and then scared that I might lose them. However, after a few rearrangements and flexibility on both my part and the teachers', we were able to secure a new date and conduct the interview. I was pleasantly surprised at how passionate the teachers were in the interviews and it was evident that they were very apologetic about the limitations on their time and availability.

### **5.7.2. Reflections on conducting the research**

#### Sensitivity of the topic

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, at the start of my research, I didn't see PBL as a sensitive topic. The existing literature gave the impression that participants were happy to talk about their experiences and that PBL was a well-known practice. I did, however, still follow ethical guidelines and, prior to each interview, I made the participants aware of the confidentiality protocol and details of anonymity. I also informed them that, at no point would any of the headteachers at their schools be informed whether they chose to take part in the study or not. Despite having this information, I found in five out of the seven interviews the teachers mentioned that they were concerned that the information would get back to their schools. There was a clear fear of 'going against the grain' and they felt that they were betraying the system and their schools if they spoke honestly about PBL and their experiences. I also had a few of the teachers whisper in the interview and tell me that their office was next door to SLT, and they felt the need to quietly talk about the challenges of

implementing PBL. These reactions made me reconsider whether PBL is a sensitive topic and perhaps it is in terms of teachers having different personal beliefs to senior management. I was also made aware of the power dynamics in school and could see that, in their settings, teachers felt powerless in terms of having their views heard. These reflections from the interviews made me pleased that I have been able to share their views through this research, without them risking their jobs or how they are viewed within their school context.

### Conducting interviews remotely

I chose to conduct my semi-structured interviews remotely via Microsoft teams. I thought this would be easier for both myself and my participant group as it allowed more flexibility in terms of where and when the interviews took place. It also meant that if any additional COVID-19 restrictions were implemented during any stage of my research journey, I wouldn't need to change my data collection method. Additionally, carrying out remote interviews would mean that I was not limited to one LA and therefore had more scope for recruitment should I need it.

Prior to the first interview, I was nervous about the technology and internet connection. I was aware that I was relying on no technical issues occurring. I therefore tried to mitigate for this by doing a practice run with a friend and making sure I knew how to navigate Microsoft teams and the record and transcribe functions. I was also mindful that, during the interviews, I needed to be flexible and adaptable ensuring I was led by the participant and their experiences. Initially, I was concerned about whether my interpersonal skills would come through virtually and whether I would be able to ensure the participants felt comfortable and at ease. I was conscious that I would need to work harder than an in-person interview in order to build rapport and ensuring social cues came through the screen. After the first interview, these fears were eased as it went well and I was able to tap into skills learned through conducting EP work on placement remotely in the COVID-19 lockdown.

### 5.7.3. Reflections on findings and interpretations

As an interpretivist researcher using reflexive TA, I am mindful of the subjectivity I bring to the analysis and interpretation of my research findings. I am conscious that, due to my previous experiences both in the workplace and on the course as a trainee EP, I am not coming to the research without preconceptions or perceived ideas. I am also aware that, as a result of this, there are certain aspects of the findings that may have stuck out to me more than others. Due to my past knowledge, there may also be elements of the findings that I thought would come up and others that were surprising.

One of the findings that, on reflection, was surprising to me was the way in which the teachers spoke about and defined PBL based on their experiences in their schools. It was clear to me before conducting my research that it was difficult across the disciplines and literature to find an agreed upon definition of PBL. It is a term that can represent different ideas to different people. However, despite this, I thought across English schools there would be a greater understanding and more distinct definition than there was. Before conducting the interviews, I decided on a definition of PBL that I would use for the purpose of the research. In some interviews I disclosed this, but in others, where the teachers had their own definitions, I didn't. It was interesting to discover that across the teachers and different school settings, there was a real hesitation and reluctance to confidently use the term PBL. In many instances, the teachers knew what it was and would provide in depth examples of best practice when they had implemented it.

However, the majority of teachers named it something else, for example, 'challenge time' or 'continuous provision'. I got a real sense that the teachers didn't feel they were allowed to implement PBL in many instances and therefore chose to name it something else that was more widely accepted within the school culture. As demonstrated in the themes, the teachers felt external pressures from government, policies, national curriculum, attainment standards, and internal pressures from SLT, school culture and context. The hesitation to use the term PBL became more evident as the teachers spoke about older year groups and anything higher than KS1. In particular, when talking about the spring term of Year 1 upwards, the teachers were noticeably less comfortable with calling it PBL.

#### **5.7.4. Reflections on my role as a researcher and my professional practice**

As I have referenced in both the introduction and methodology chapters, I am aware that I do not come into this research without potential biases and influences from my previous roles in schools and my current role as a TEP. Consequently, I had ideas and views about the type of topics that may arise in the interviews before they took place. I made a conscious effort to devise questions that were open ended and broad, to allow for the teachers to lead the interview and cover areas they felt relevant. However, it would be challenging to totally eradicate the impact of my previous knowledge and experience. It may have impacted on the way I asked some of the questions and my preconceived ideas about how the teachers might respond. As mentioned in the previous section, I was surprised at the lack of confidence surrounding PBL and the teachers' use of the term.

Additionally, based on my previous experience with play in schools, I thought SLT would be more on board with PBL and would have received the training in order to further implement it within a whole-school approach. It was clear from speaking to the teachers that I was mistaken. In most of their schools, SLT and a lack of training on PBL were seen as barriers. It was clear that my experiences were linked to specific schools. It was evident that the approach to PBL is not consistent across England. It is often led by policy, however its actual implementation and presence within classrooms is school dependent.

As discussed earlier, I needed to create my own definition of PBL for the purpose of this research. However, I am glad that in one of the interview questions I asked the teachers to tell me what the term meant to them. By giving them ownership over the definition, it helped to reduce my potential biases. The teachers were given freedom to describe it how they felt, and this was important for me as a researcher. In order to continue to ensure I wasn't imposing my own views or definitions I would ask follow-up questions to encourage the teachers to elaborate and clarify what they meant. When definitions were unclear, I would ask them to 'tell me more' or 'can you provide an example of this in your practice'.

My perspective of PBL has shifted in certain areas as a result of conducting this research. On reflection, after interviewing seven teachers across different schools, I have learnt that the constraints they face are much greater than I had anticipated. The change in schooling due to the pandemic also had a detrimental impact on children's development and experiences.



I have learned that the external and internal pressures that teachers face are much greater than I had thought. In all of the interviews, the teachers spoke about the conflict between their personal attitudes towards PBL and those of SLT and policymakers. The powerlessness teachers feel is a real challenge. Teachers need support from their schools, and they also need to feel more empowered. The previous literature suggests that headteachers and SLT value the perspective of teachers (e.g., Fisher, 2022). If PBL is to be protected, teachers need to feel able to utilise their expertise and practice in alignment with their beliefs. It is my view from conducting this research, that a whole school approach and a shift in school culture is needed in order to better support and maintain PBL.

In terms of my professional practice as an EP in the future, I can help to facilitate and support these discussions. I am in a position to help with a shift in school culture and provide opportunities for changes to be made. I can also work with schools and use psychological principles such as the change cycle to support this. I have learned that schools are in different places in terms of their understanding and acceptance of PBL as a concept. Therefore, compassion, time and understanding needs to be given when in consultation with schools. It is important to take into account the many pressures and constraints schools face and work to understand what is within their control. I would hope that by empowering SLT, it can then be a ripple effect throughout the school. SLT can then help to empower their staffing team, who can then empower children and their families.

## 6. Conclusion

Play is a complex phenomenon, and teaching is a complex profession. Play-based learning, however, is a natural approach to holistic child development. Play is the way by which children discover the world around them and acquire the capabilities to thrive within it. It is a powerful force for development. Teachers in England understand this, and are enthusiastic to harness this power to enhance learning. It has a place throughout early years education as a child-led, needs-led, interests-led approach to education.

The aim of the present study was to conduct an in-depth exploration of primary school teachers' attitudes towards play-based learning. The motivation for the research was my own positive observations of play-based learning in practice. There is very little research on the topic with respect to primary school education, even less of which focuses on the attitudes and experiences of those working most closely with children – their teachers. It was also of interest, once these primary attitudes were established, to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent lockdowns affected its implementation. My intention was to give a voice to a critical, yet under-represented, population in the field of play-based learning.

Key findings were described (see Section 4.) and discussed (see Section 5.). Overall, these suggest an overwhelming enthusiasm for play-based learning. There is an understanding that play enhances the development of a multitude of skills. It seems to be the priority of teachers to encourage the development of well-rounded, happy, capable children. However, this enthusiasm is suppressed by the numerous constraints teachers face in their practice. The main constraint faced is the top-down pressure exerted by a policy-led ideological insistence on assessment, measurement, and standardisation. In addition to the pedagogical conflict this causes, there is also a culture of fear inspired by Ofsted. The conflict the teachers feel is resonated within the majority of academic literature available on the subject of play-based learning. Other conflict was noted in the attitudes towards governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was felt that a golden opportunity for the expansion of play-based learning had been missed.

I believe this thesis provides a novel contribution to the limited existing literature. It provides insight into teachers' attitudes regarding the purpose of education, the suitability of the

current National Curriculum, the consequences of COVID-19 lockdowns, and that play-based learning is an under-appreciated approach. As an exploratory study, there are limitations, but it highlights avenues for further research. More understanding of the conflicts and constraints teachers face is necessary. These are the professionals best-placed to communicate the challenges caused by the abrupt shift from play-based approaches towards formal teaching apparent for children entering primary school. Greater understanding of the need for a whole-school approach to play-based learning may also encourage Educational Psychologists to provide persuasive training on its benefits. As stated, teaching is a complex profession. It is important we ease the pressures they face so they are free to use their expertise to enhance the development of well-rounded, happy, capable children.

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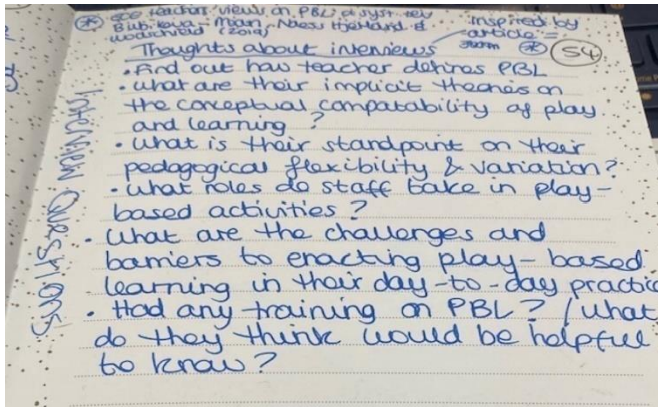
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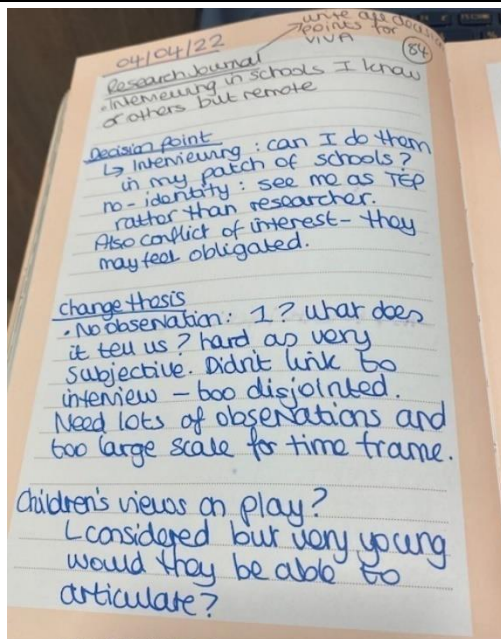
# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Exerts from handwritten researcher journal.

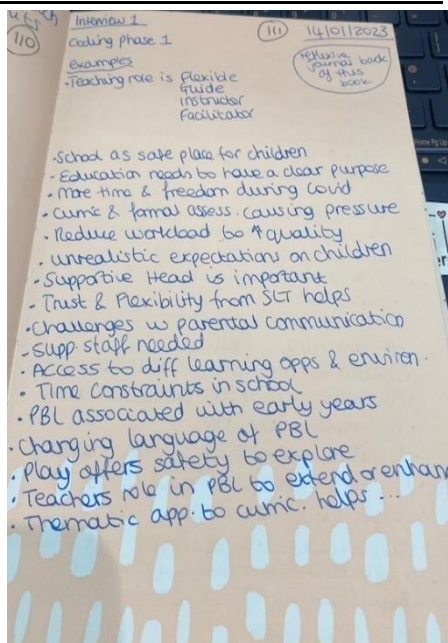
### Thoughts about interview questions



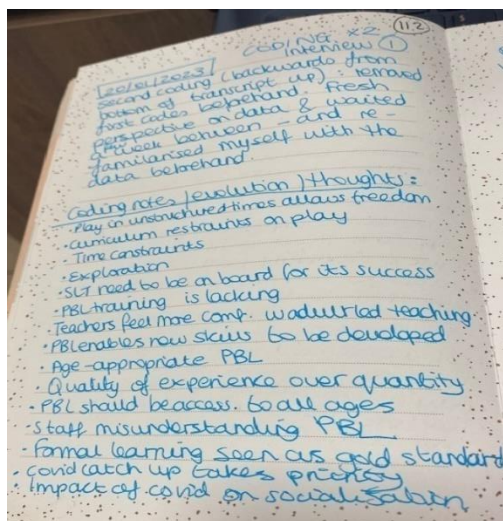
### 04.04.22. Decision points linking to methodology



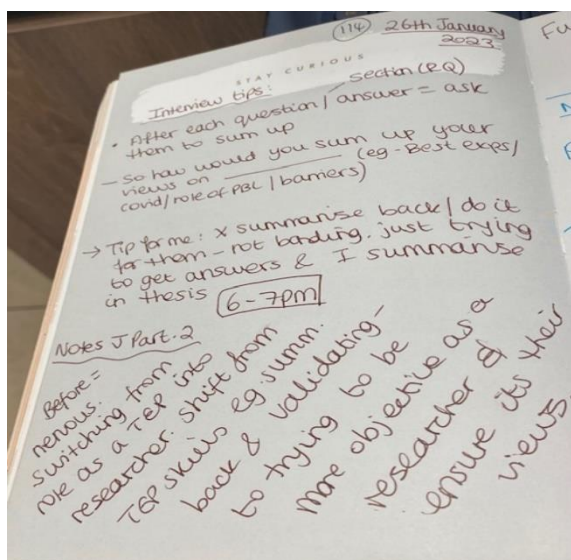
### 14.01.23. Interview 1- initial codes



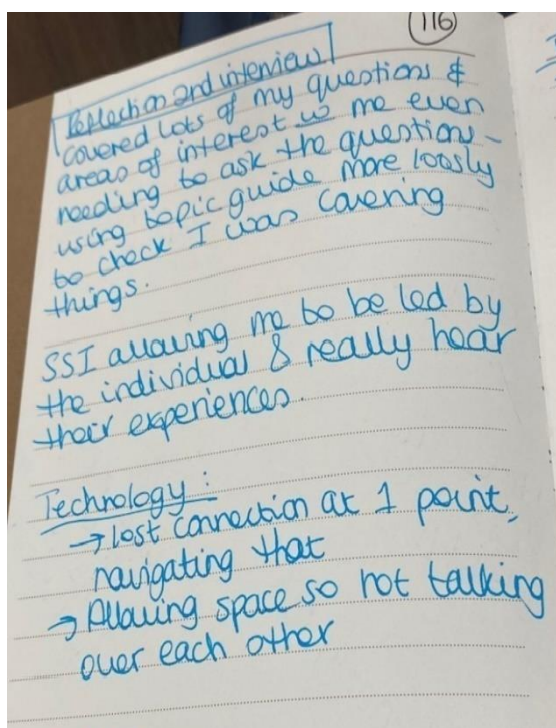
## 20.01.23. Interview 1 initial coding notes



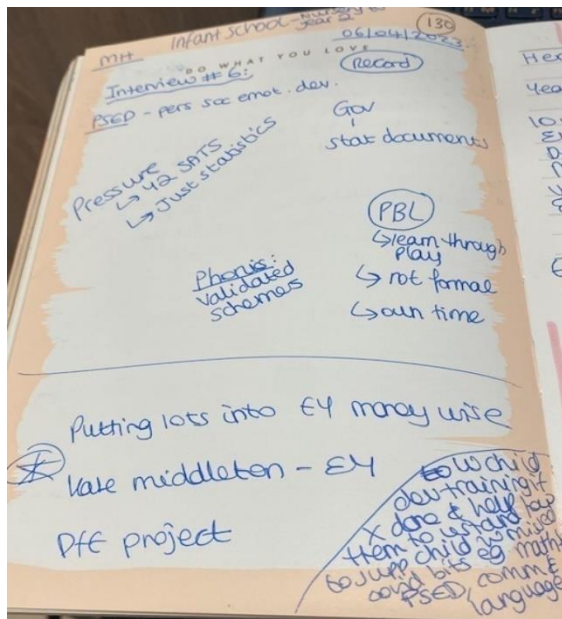
## 26.01.23. Interview tips/notes



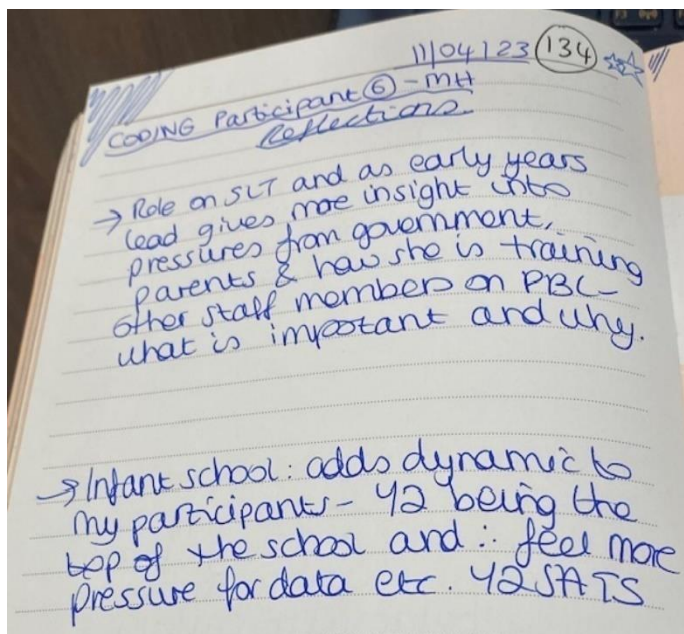
## Reflection after the 2<sup>nd</sup> interview



06.04.23. Interview notes



11.04.23. Notes on coding process





## Appendix 2. Headteacher and SENCO Information Sheet

School for Policy Studies



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### **‘A study exploring teachers’ attitudes towards Play-Based Learning in England’**

**For the purpose of this research, play-based learning will be defined as ‘A pedagogy which progressively scaffolds spontaneous, child-led activities for developmental and academic advancement’**

I am a second-year Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Bristol. As part of the course, we complete a piece of research. I would like to find out about play-based learning in England and hear the voices of teachers. I have worked in numerous Primary schools and I am passionate about play. My research has been approved by the University of Bristol School for Policy Studies ethics committee and meets ethical standards.

I am keen to understand the experiences of teachers who have worked for a minimum of 4 years in Key Stage 1 and currently teach in Key Stage 1. The reason for this, is to ensure they have had experience of working pre and post pandemic. I am looking to conduct a Microsoft Teams interview with each teacher for up to 1 hour.

I hope that locally, this research can help build a better understanding of play-based learning, teachers’ perspectives, examples of best practice and areas for possible development. I will produce a summary document of my key findings which will be issued to all the teachers who take part in the research and to the local authority. I also hope to find out teachers’ experiences pre and post the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact this has had on play-based learning.

If this is an area of research that you may be interested in supporting, I would really appreciate it if you could please forward the attached Information Sheet and Expression of Interest form onto the relevant teachers in your school.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email or phone. I would be grateful if you could let me know either way if you feel able to forward this information to relevant members of staff, so you do not receive unnecessary emails from me.

Given the high volumes of emails, I am sure you receive, if you are happy for me to, I will send a follow up email to check in with you.

Thank you for the time you have taken to read and consider my research,

Best wishes,

Bethany Jackson -Trainee Educational Psychologist, University of Bristol

## Appendix 3. Teacher Information Sheet

School for Policy Studies



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**‘A study exploring teachers’ attitudes towards Play-Based Learning in England’**

**For the purpose of this research, play-based learning will be defined as ‘A pedagogy which progressively scaffolds spontaneous, child-led activities for developmental and academic advancement’**

### **Who am I?**

Thank you for taking an interest in this research. I am a second-year Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Bristol. As part of the course, we complete a piece of research. I would like to find out about play-based learning in England and hear the voices of teachers. I have worked in numerous Primary schools and I am passionate about play. Please see further information about the research below.



### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The study aims to speak to teachers about their attitudes towards play-based learning. Currently, there is little research that focuses on teacher views within English classrooms. I would therefore like to invite you to take part in this research.

### **Why am I receiving this information?**

I am writing to primary schools in [REDACTED] in the hope of speaking to teachers of Key Stage 1 aged children. I feel you have real-world experiences that I would like to hear about.

### **Inclusion criteria:**

-  Currently working in Key Stage 1
-  Has worked for a minimum of 4 years in Key Stage 1



### **If I would like to take part, what is the process?**

If you are happy to take part in this research, please respond by email and I can send you the consent form, which I request you complete and email back to me. If you have any questions about the study, please do not hesitate to ask.

I would like to interview you to hear your experiences of play-based learning. The interviews would be booked for a mutually agreed time and date, and these are planned to happen over Microsoft Teams. The interview will be semi-structured and is expected to last approximately 1 hour. It will be audio recorded to ensure the information gathered is accurate.

A summary document of my key findings will be issued to all teachers who take part in the research. The document will be emailed, unless you do not wish for your contact details to be kept for this purpose.

I will produce a summary document of my key findings which will be issued to all the teachers who take part in the research and to the local authority

### **What will happen if I do not take part?**

Nothing, participation is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to take part at any stage.

### **What will happen to the information I provide?**

I will transcribe the interviews verbatim, but I will anonymise the transcript to protect your confidentiality, after transcribing the recording will be deleted. The transcript will be analysed for key themes, which will form the basis of my thesis.

If you would like to participate in my research, you can request to stop at any time, including having your data removed. The only time this is not possible is after analysis, as I may not be able to separate your own personal data.

This research will be published as part of my Educational Psychology Doctorate qualification at Bristol University.

### **Confidentiality**

I will ask you not to use the names of other professionals, colleagues or children. Your name will not be included in any reports or transcripts created. There are certain limits to confidentiality, for example safeguarding concerns or risk of serious harm. In these instances, I will need to inform the relevant people. At the start of the interview, I will check whether you give your consent for me to archive the anonymised data.

### **Data Storage**

Your name is only recorded on the attached consent form. The information that you provide will be made anonymous. I will store all data password protected on a secure University of Bristol Server. This will be kept for twenty years. I will ensure I always work within the Global Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

### **Contact Details**

If you have any further questions about the research, please contact me via email or my mobile number and I can answer any questions you have.

**Email:** [bethany.jackson@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:bethany.jackson@bristol.ac.uk) or [ex19954@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:ex19954@bristol.ac.uk) both addresses link to the same account

**Mobile:** 07710500545

If you have any concerns or a complaint about my research practice, you can contact my supervisor Rob Green - [mhxrg@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:mhxrg@bristol.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information and completing the consent form.

Best wishes,

Bethany Jackson

Trainee Educational Psychologist, University of Bristol

## Appendix 4. Teacher expression of interest form.

School for Policy Studies



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**Mobile- 07976075951**

**‘A study exploring teachers’ attitudes towards Play-Based Learning in England’**

**For the purpose of this research, play-based learning will be defined as ‘A pedagogy which progressively scaffolds spontaneous, child-led activities for developmental and academic advancement’**

Thank you for taking the time to read through the information for this research.

Your Job title details:

Your name:

Your contact details:

Can you confirm you have had a minimum of 4 years experience teaching in Key Stage 1, and you are currently working in Key Stage 1?

Yes  No

If you have any additional questions please feel free to email or call.

Best wishes,

Bethany Jackson- Trainee Educational Psychologist, University of Bristol

## Appendix 5. Consent form for teachers.

### Consent sheet for Teachers

#### **Informed Consent for 'A study exploring teachers' attitudes towards Play-Based Learning in England'**

Please place an X in the appropriate boxes

Yes No

#### **1. Taking part in the study**

I have read and understood the study information date \_\_\_\_\_ or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that taking part in the study involves engaging in an interview that will be recorded.

#### **2. The use of the information in this Study**

I understand that this research forms part of a doctoral research study and will be published as a thesis.

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the researcher.

I understand that quotes from interviews will be used within the thesis report; pseudonyms will replace names, and identifying characteristics will be removed.

I understand the interview recordings will be stored on a secure university server until they are transcribed, at which point they will be deleted. The anonymised transcriptions will be stored on a secure university server.

I understand that if someone is at risk of serious harm, confidentiality protocols will need to be broken and the relevant people informed.

I give my consent for my data to be archived.

I give my consent for my email address to be kept on file until the end of the research write up, so I can be sent a summary sheet of the research findings.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant [IN CAPITALS]

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix 6. Confidentiality Protocol.

School for Policy Studies



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**Mobile- 07976075951**

### **‘A study exploring teachers’ attitudes towards Play-Based Learning in England’**

The information obtained through this research will be confidential, anonymised, and stored securely. I will replace any names with pseudonyms and remove any identifiable details. However, due to the small-scale of this research in a small area, anonymity cannot be guaranteed despite taking these steps.

An additional limit to confidentiality is where a safeguarding risk arises or I feel there is a risk of harm.

If information is shared where the above arises, I will:

- ✚ Let you know that the information needs to be passed on
- ✚ Follow the school safeguarding policy and speak with the designated safeguarding lead
- ✚ I would speak with one of my research supervisors (Rob Green or Mary-Stanley Duke)

You have the right to withdraw from participating in this research at any stage. However, if I have already anonymised data/analysed for themes, it may not be possible to withdraw your information from the study in these instances.

Best wishes,

Bethany Jackson

Trainee Educational Psychologist

## Appendix 7. Initial email invitation to Gatekeepers- Headteachers (and later SENDCOs)

**Subject Heading:** Opportunity to take part in research to explore teachers' attitudes towards Play-Based Learning in England'

School for Policy Studies



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**Mobile- 07976075951**

**'A study exploring teachers' attitudes towards Play-Based Learning in England'**

**For the purpose of this research, play-based learning will be defined as 'A pedagogy which progressively scaffolds spontaneous, child-led activities for developmental and academic advancement'**

Dear Head Teachers name

I am a second-year Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Bristol. As part of the course, we complete a piece of research. I would like to find out about play-based learning in England and hear the voices of teachers. I have worked in numerous Primary schools and I am passionate about play. My research has been approved by the University of Bristol School for Policy Studies ethics committee and meets ethical standards.

I am keen to understand the experiences of teachers who have worked for a minimum of 4 years in Key Stage 1 and currently teach in Key Stage 1. The reason for this, is to ensure they have had experience of working pre and post pandemic. I am looking to conduct a Microsoft Teams interview with each teacher for up to 1 hour.

I hope that locally, this research can help build a better understanding of play-based learning, teachers' perspectives, examples of best practice and areas for possible development. I will produce a summary document of my key findings which will be issued to all the teachers who take part in the research and to the local authority. I also hope to find out teachers' experiences pre and post the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact this has had on play-based learning.

If this is an area of research that you may be interested in supporting, I would really appreciate it if you could please forward the attached Information Sheet and Expression of Interest form onto the relevant teachers in your school.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email or phone. I would be grateful if you could let me know either way if you feel able to forward this information to relevant members of staff, so you do not receive unnecessary emails from me.

Given the high volumes of emails, I am sure you receive, if you are happy for me to, I will send a follow up email to check in with you.

Thank you for the time you have taken to read and consider my research,

Best wishes, Bethany Jackson - Trainee Educational Psychologist, University of Bristol

## Appendix 8. Interview schedule/topic guide

### Key for the interview schedule:

**Blue text:** Shows the official research questions for this thesis and also the definition I used for PBL in the participant information sheet

**Pink text:** The key questions I believe need answering in order to address the main research questions. Depending on time scales within each interview, I made sure I always covered the pink questions. If I had additional time or felt more depth was required, I asked the black questions too.

**Black text:** General discussion points or script ideas as well as additional questions if there was enough time and I felt the pink questions hadn't sufficiently addressed the research questions

**Bold Black text on left side:** Prompts for me as the interviewer to use if I felt more depth was required or the participant wasn't fully able to answer the question/demonstrate their view point

### Details of the interview schedule:

Left side (structure)- informal prompts for me as the interviewer to help me navigate the interview

Right side (interview schedule)- script ideas to use flexibly within the interview and question ideas

<b>Structure</b>	<b>INTERVIEW SCHEDULE</b>
<p><b><u>Intro/Ice breaker conversation- 5 mins</u></b></p> <p>Prob free chat &amp; explanation of general topic, reminder of informed consent &amp; timings of interview</p>	<p>Hi, thanks again for agreeing to take part and meeting today. How has your week been?</p> <p>Can I check you are still happy with the consent form details? The interview will be approx. 1 hour. It will be recorded and deleted after transcription.</p> <p>Are you happy for me to start recording now?</p> <p><i>I am just going to start with some <b>General Questions</b> about your thoughts &amp; attitudes towards teaching.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you think the purpose of teaching is?</li> <li>2. How do you approach it?</li> <li>3. What do you think the current education system promotes and inhibits?</li> <li>4. What do you think are the most important attributes for a child to develop in the classroom? Prompts: purely academic or socialisation, creativity</li> <li>5. How do you think the educational system fits with these intentions?</li> <li>6. What general differences have you noticed pre and post pandemic in the classroom?</li> </ol> <p>How would you sum up your view of yourself as a teacher?</p> <p><i>So now thinking more specifically about PBL- looking at your experiences and attitudes. What do you understand by the term PBL?</i></p>
<p><b>Prompts- For the purpose of this research</b> play-based learning will be defined as ‘A pedagogy which progressively scaffolds spontaneous, child-led activities for developmental and academic advancement’</p>	
<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
<p><b><u>What are primary teachers’ attitudes towards Play-Based Learning?</u></b></p> <p><b>Prompts</b></p> <p>Can you tell me a bit more about that?</p> <p>What did you mean by...</p> <p>What did you feel when...</p> <p>Why do you think that happened?</p> <p><b>Topic prompts:</b> classroom, outdoors, wider school context</p>	<p><u>Approx 12 mins</u></p> <p>What do you value about PBL?</p> <p>What has been your overall experience of PBL?</p> <p>What do you feel is your role within PBL?</p> <p>Has your understanding of PBL changed over time?</p> <p>What involvement have you had with PBL? Can you provide examples?</p> <p>What does PBL look like in your school?</p> <p>How much do you feel PBL is teacher led vs child led? Can you provide some examples?</p> <p><i>In a nutshell how would you sum up your attitudes towards PBL?</i></p>



<p><b>What are primary teachers' best experiences of PBL?</b></p> <p><b>Prompts</b>  <b>Can you tell me a bit more about that?</b>  <b>What did you mean by...</b>  <b>What did you feel when...</b>  <b>Why do you think that happened?</b></p>	<p><u>Approx 12 mins</u></p> <p>Tell me about a time when you felt PBL went well in your class?  What specifically about this experience meant it was successful?</p> <p>What do you feel are the key elements of PBL and why are these required?  Do the characteristics change- what influences them?</p> <p>Can you provide examples of your best experiences of PBL?</p> <p>Tell me about some of things you like about PBL?</p> <p>What do you enjoy most about your role within PBL?</p> <p>What have you found helpful in implementing PBL?</p> <p>If you were advising someone who was new to PBL e.g. a teacher would you say?</p> <p>A question around resources? E.g. do they use any (which) to help PBL?</p>
<p><b>What, if any, constraints do primary teachers believe they face which inhibit PBL? What, if anything have they done to overcome these?</b></p> <p><b>Prompts</b>  <b>Can you tell me a bit more about that?</b>  <b>What did you mean by...</b>  <b>What did you feel when...</b>  <b>Why do you think that happened?</b></p> <p><i>Topic prompts: school system, time, SLT</i></p>	<p><u>Approx 12 mins</u></p> <p>Can you tell me about a time when you have found incorporating PBL difficult?  -Have you faced any barriers or constraints? If so, can you tell me a bit more about these?</p> <p>What do you think is needed to support you to use PB teaching and learning approaches?</p> <p>What, if anything have you done to overcome any constraints to PBL that you have encountered?</p> <p>How would you sum up the constraints placed on you which reduce the possibilities for PBL?</p>
<p><b>What changes in PBL have primary teachers noted between pre and post pandemic?</b></p> <p><b>Prompts</b>  <b>Priorities of the school...</b>  <b>Can you tell me a bit more about that?</b>  <b>What did you mean by...</b></p>	<p><u>Approx 12 mins</u></p> <p>Do you believe the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on PBL? If so, what was this?</p> <p>Have you seen differences in the way PBL is implemented in schools pre and post covid?</p> <p>Have you noticed any changes in children's responses to PBL pre and post pandemic?</p> <p>This might be a bit of a weird question. If you didn't have the constraints of .....and all those other things and you could just decide how much play</p>

<p><b>What did you feel when...</b></p> <p><b>Why do you think that happened?</b></p>	<p>based learning was in the school across year groups, how would you have it?</p> <p>In a nutshell what do you think are the main changes pre and post pandemic?</p>
<p><b><u>Ending- Questions, thank you - 5 mins</u></b></p>	<p>Is there anything you would like to tell me about that you feel you haven't had the opportunity to share?</p> <p>Do you have any questions for me?</p> <p>Thank you for taking the time to take part in this interview. It has been really interesting hearing about your experiences.</p>

## **Appendix 9. Procedure followed to complete literature review**

### **Searching the literature**

My approach to the literature search was based on the principles of a systematic literature review as outlined by Cronin et al (2008).

I identified the relevant databases both for topic and general subject area. In total, 6 searches were conducted (with the first being a combined search of three databases). The databases searched were; British Education Index, Education Resources Information Centre, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, Web of Science and PsycInfo. Please refer to Chapter 2 (literature review) for further details about the individual papers.

In line with Cronin et al (2008)'s guidance, I chose key words and search terms to ensure I conducted a structured approach to searching the available literature. I kept a spreadsheet which included tables outlining the individual search terms and how many papers were found for each (please see below). I created these for each database searched in order to keep track of the literature found. I have also included an exclusion and inclusion criteria table which was used to review abstracts of the papers found.

Where possible, I limited the results to include peer-reviewed papers only. I also only searched for papers in the UK or England as this was the basis for my thesis. I limited the searches to key stage 1 and EYFS due to these being the age ranges I was interested in for this research project. It would not have been helpful to see older year groups as these were not my target demographic. I limited the year of the studies to the last 10 years to ensure the papers were as up to date and relevant as possible.

**Combined search of British Education Index, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and Child Development and Adolescent Studies last conducted on 04.11.2022:**

<b>Search term</b>	<b>Number of hits</b>
1. Play Based Learning* or Play* or play based pedagogy*	123,425
2. Teacher*	672,302
3. Combine 1 and 2 with and	36, 050
4. Attitude* or view* or experience* or perception* or belief* or voice* or perspective*	924,456
5. Combine 3 and 4	19, 188
6. Key Stage 1* or early years*	15, 227
7. Combine 5 and 6	593
8. Limited to 2012 year to 2022	346
9. Only peer reviewed papers	314
10. English language	210
11. United Kingdom* or UK* or Brit* or England*	110
12. Duplicates removed	90
13. Abstract search for relevance	9

## Search of Web of Science database on 11.11.2022:

Search term	Number of hits
1. Play Based Learning* or Play* or play based pedagogy*	2, 277, 812
2. Teacher*	326, 711
3. Combine 1 and 2 with and	21, 223
4. Attitude* or view* or experience* or perception* or belief* or voice* or perspective*	5, 485, 746
5. Combine 3 and 4	13, 079
6. Key Stage 1* or early years*	542, 062
7. Combine 5 and 6	645
8. Limited to 2012 year to 2022	569
9. Only peer reviewed papers	Database didn't allow for this option
10. English language	536
11. United Kingdom* or UK* or Brit* or England*	69
12. Abstract searched for relevance	3

## Search of PsycINFO database last conducted on 11.11.2022:

Search term	Number of hits
1. Play Based Learning* or Play* or play based pedagogy*	13,228
2. Teacher*	48,653
3. Combine 1 and 2 with and	233
4. Attitude* or view* or experience* or perception* or belief* or voice* or perspective*	94,162
5. Combine 3 and 4	22
6. Key Stage 1* or early years*	10,912
7. Combine 5 and 6	1
8. Limited to 2012 year to 2022	1
9. Only peer reviewed papers	1
10. English language	1
11. United Kingdom* or UK* or Brit* or England*	1
12. Abstract search for relevance	1

Below is a screenshot to demonstrate how search terms were combined and Boolean operators were used such as 'and' & 'or' to broaden or refine the searches:

The screenshot shows the EBSCOhost search interface. At the top, there are navigation links for 'New Search', 'Subjects', and 'Indexes', along with a 'Sign Out' button. The main search area features the EBSCOhost logo and a search bar containing the query: 'Play Based Learning\* or Play\* or play based pedagogy\*'. Below the search bar, there are five rows of search terms, each preceded by an 'AND' operator and followed by a 'Select a Field (optional)' dropdown menu. The search terms are: 'Teacher\*', 'Attitude\* or view\* or experience\* or percepti', 'Key Stage 1\* or early years\*', and 'United Kingdom\* or UK\* or Brit\* or England\*'. A green 'Search' button is located to the right of the search bar. Below the search bar, there is a 'Clear' button with a question mark icon. At the bottom of the search area, there are links for 'Basic Search', 'Advanced Search', and 'Search History'. The interface also includes a '+' and '-' icon for adding or removing search terms.

**Inclusion and exclusion criteria for review of abstracts (grey literature and snowballing completed separately):**

Include:	Exclude:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Papers considering the views, experiences or attitudes of teachers</li><li>• Papers carried out in primary school settings</li><li>• Papers with a demographic of key stage 1 and/or early years</li><li>• Peer reviewed papers</li><li>• Papers written in English</li><li>• Papers concerning the UK and/or England</li><li>• Papers focused on Play Based learning, Play or a play-based pedagogy</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Non-peer reviewed sources or sources published prior to 2012 were omitted from the main literature search (grey literature search completed separately)</li><li>• Any papers not in English language</li><li>• Topics not relevant to education, child development or key stage 1</li></ul>

## Example of spreadsheets used for collating sources:

\*Those in red text were excluded due to lack of relevance/duplication

Author	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Overview	Context	Found by	Search source
<b>1. Fisher, Julie</b>	<b>2022</b>	To play or not to play: teachers' and headteachers' perspectives on play-based approaches in transition from the Early Years Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1 in England	International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education	Survey of KS1 teachers & interviews	KS1 classrooms and the perspectives of teachers and headteachers in adopting play-based practices at the start of primary schooling.	UK	Lit search	British Education index
<b>2. McInnes, Karen</b>	<b>2019</b>	Playful learning in the Early Years- Through the eyes of children	International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education	Photo elicitation procedure	Children and practitioners asked to look at similarities and differences in their views of play	UK	Lit search	ERIC
<b>3. Bilton, Helen</b>	<b>2020</b>	Values to stop play? Teachers' attitudes to the early years outdoor environment	Early Child Development and Care	Online survey	Teachers views on outdoor play in early years.	UK	Lit search	British Education index
<b>Bishop, Elizabeth</b>	<b>2020</b>	Using a cross-cultural conception of play to explore the perspectives of parents of Somali heritage and primary school practitioners in an English Primary School	Educational & Child Psychology	Focus group	parents of Somali heritage and primary school practitioners- cultural dimension of play and role o play in EY and primary	UK based - looking at culture Somali	Lit Search	ERIC
<b>4. Wood, Elizabeth</b>	<b>2019</b>	Unbalanced and Unbalancing Acts in the Early Years Foundation Stage: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Policy-Led Evidence on Teaching and Play from the Office for Standards in Education in England (Ofsted)	International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education	Survey	Report investigating role of play in EYFS and the impact of OFSTED expectations	UK	Lit Search	ERIC
<b>5. Nicholson, Philip</b>	<b>2019</b>	Play-based pedagogy under threat? A small-scale study of teachers' and pupils' perceptions of pedagogical discontinuity in the transition to primary school.	International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education	Interviews and questionnaire	Teachers' and pupils' perceptions of pedagogical discontinuity in the transition from reception to year 1 linking to play	UK	Lit search	British Education index
<b>6. Nuttall, Joce et al.</b>	<b>2015</b>	The role of motive objects in early childhood teacher development concerning children's digital play and play-based learning in early childhood curricula	Professional Development in Education		Study on teachers perspectives of digital play in early years and teache motives for prof development in PBL	UK	Lit search	British Education index
<b>7. Stirrup, Julie et al.</b>	<b>2017</b>	Learning One's Place and Position through Play: Social Class and Educational Opportunity in Early Years Education	International Journal of Early Years Education		Investigated play across 3 settings, looking at the influence of practitioner perceptions	UK and Wales	Lit search	ERIC
<b>8. Palaiologou, Ioanna</b>	<b>2017</b>	Assessing children's play: reality or illusion? The case of early years foundation stage in England	Early Child Development and Care	Participatory action research	Assessing how adults can help with child-initiated play and how they can alter environments to support this	UK	Lit search	ERIC
<b>9. Sarah Kate Kelly et al.</b>	<b>2022</b>	Early years and key stage 1 teachers' attitudes towards outdoor and online play	International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education	Online survey with 30 teachers	Gaining an understanding of teachers' attitudes towards outdoor an donline play	UK	Lit Search	Web of Science
<b>10. Mart, Mehmet and Waite, Sue</b>	<b>2021</b>	Degrees of freedom: reflections on perceived barriers to outdoor learning practice for early education in England and Turkey	Early Years An International Research Journal	Interviews and observations	Looking at the value of freedom and unrestricted play outdoors	UK and Turkey	Lit Search	Web of Science
<b>11. Prince, Heather</b>	<b>2019</b>	Changes in outdoor learning in primary schools in England, 1995 and 2017: lessons for good practice	Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning	Survey from Primary school teachers in 1995 and 2017	Investigating teacher views surrodning outdoor play and how it is used	UK	Lit Search	Web of Science



## Appendix 10. Coding example

Braun and Clarke (2021) offer numerous methods of coding data and are clear that the researcher can choose any that work for them. I decided to use an electronic method whereby I used the comment feature in Microsoft word to select sections of the individual interview transcript data and tag it with a code label. There are 2 kinds of codes (semantic and latent). Braun and Clarke describe semantic codes as participant-driven and showing explicitly expressed meaning. They stay close to the language used by the participant. A latent code on the other hand is researcher-driven and focuses more on a deeper and conceptual level of meaning. The boundaries between these two types of codes are not always distinct, and instead can be seen on a continuum. I have provided an example of a transcript below, with a demonstration of both a semantic and latent code.

### Key to code labelling- step by step process:

1. Identified the relevant passage of text and highlighted.
2. Gave it a letter (corresponding to the participant)  
e.g. Participant 1= A, Participant 2= B, Participant 3=C etc.
3. Gave it a number (eg. each new passage of text is a new number). If multiple codes are taken from the same passage of text i, ii etc are added so they can be later identified)- example is shown on page 195

Participant

In the early years anyway, cuz I'm obviously a year one teacher and before then I was a early years reception teacher.

0:1:1.780 --> 0:1:12.810

Participant 2

So in that role its welcoming children into an educational setting. It's that style of life. It's setting them up. It's the start of the journey. it's the pastoral stuff.

0:1:14.440 --> 0:1:22.270

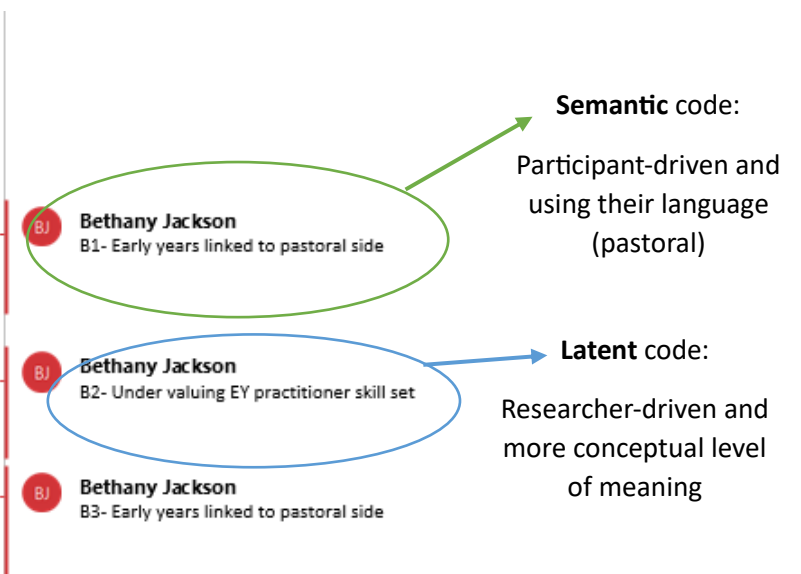
Participant 2

It's making you know, people always say, you know what, what do you do all day? And I say, well, I teach children to be nice and to read a bit and count a bit. And that's pretty much it, you know.

0:1:26.840 --> 0:1:37.650

Participant 2

So that's early years education in a nutshell really. You know how to make them nice people, how to get out and get on with each other and to I suppose just be that conduit into their school journey.



Researcher

Mm-hmm.

0:5:36.40 --> 0:5:49.770

Participant 2

It really comes down to I've had two varied experiences, it's the contrast between the years I did in play work and I did a Play diploma and the kind of culture around play and the value assigned to play.

0:5:53.550 --> 0:5:53.910

Researcher

Mm-hmm.

0:5:50.970 --> 0:6:5.420

Participant 2

And philosophically, what play means, if that makes sense? to what teaching is about and what play in a teaching world looks like, and what teachers think play is defined as and they're two completely different worlds.

0:6:8.190 --> 0:6:15.740

Participant 2

I think coming from a play background I would definitely say that there isn't an awful lot of play based practice in teaching. You know, I see a lot of playful learning. If that makes sense, I'll say it's playful learning rather than play based learning.

0:6:24.510 --> 0:6:26.880

Researcher

And what do you think the difference is between those for you?

BJ

**Bethany Jackson**

B11- Play culture is important

BJ

**Bethany Jackson**

B12- Discrepancy between understandings of play and PBL in different sectors

BJ

**Bethany Jackson**

B13i- Teaching lacks PBL

BJ

**Bethany Jackson**

B13ii- Change in language- playful learning in schools (different to PBL)

BJ

**Bethany Jackson**

B13iii- Change in language- playful learning in schools (different to PBL)

The yellow circles here show an example of how the transcript codes have been labelled. Participant B here has different codes but all within the same passage of text. They therefore all have the number 13 and then followed by i, ii, iii (roman numerals). I could then use these to cross reference at a later stage and identify the passage of text each code originated from should I require it (e.g. when developing themes).

## Appendix 11. Clustering and categorising codes.

**Phase One:** After the initial codes had been created from each participant's transcripts, I used Microsoft Excel to cluster the codes. These clusters can be seen in the below excel document under code number and code description. In the below screen shot the code numbers in column A are shown for each participant (for demonstration purposes- you can see an example of the codes taken from participant A). The code description is the label (code) that can be found on the individual interview transcript. In line with guidance from Braun and Clarke (2021b), I then moved towards viewing these on a more macro scale. I was looking for any connections that might develop into broader patterns of meaning. I used the collated codes (code descriptions) to explore any broad ideas that a number of different codes could be clustered around. These are shown through the 3 levels of categories detailed below:

**Category 1- general area:** topic under discussion

**Category 2- general effect:** specific area of impact

**Category 3- specific effect:** specific belief conveyed

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Code Num	Code description (full code)	Category 1-general area	Category 2- general effect	Category 3-specific effect
2	A1	Teacher in facilitator role	Teacher role	Facilitator	
3	A100	PBL requires the right environment eg. Space	School environment	Need Space	
4	A101i	Staff misunderstanding what PBL is and what it looks like	Definition of PBL	Individual Interpretation	Misunderstanding
5	A101ii	Lack of training on PBL	Expectations of PBL	Requires Training	
6	A102i	Play offers safety to explore	Enhancing learning	Benefits of Play	Exploration
7	A102ii	PBL develops communication skills	Perceptions of PBL	Advantages	Communication
8	A102iii	Access to different learning opportunities and environments	Enhancing learning	Opportunities and Environments	
9	A102iiii	PBL develops social skills	Perceptions of PBL	Advantages	Social Skills
10	A103i	Time constraints in school	External pressures on teacher	Access to Resources	Time
11	A103ii	Access to different learning opportunities and environments	Enhancing learning	Opportunities and Environments	
12	A104i	Access to different learning opportunities and environments	Enhancing learning	Opportunities and Environments	
13	A104ii	Curriculum and formal assessments causing pressure	External pressures on teacher	Curriculum Demands	
14	A10i	More time and freedom during COVID	COVID	Change to School Life	more time & freedom
15	A10ii	Time constraints	External pressures on teacher	Access to Resources	Time
16	A11	Curriculum and formal assessments causing pressure	External pressures on teacher	Curriculum Demands	
17	A12	Time constraints	External pressures on teacher	Access to Resources	Time
18	A13i	Reduce workload to increase quality	Potential improvement	reduce workload	increase quality of education
19	A13ii	Quality of experience versus quantity	Children's experiences	quality over quantity	
20	A14	Unrealistic expectations on children	Children's experiences	Expectations of Children	Unrealistic
21	A15	Unrealistic expectations on children	Children's experiences	Expectations of Children	Unrealistic
22	A16	Supportive Headteacher is important	Senior leadership	Headteacher	support is important
23	A17	Trust and flexibility from SLT helps	Senior leadership	SLT	trust and flexibility important
24	A18	Challenges with parental communication	External pressures on teacher	Parental Expectations	
25	A19	Support staff are needed	External pressures on teacher	Access to Resources	Staff

**Phase Two:** Once I had created the 3 categories, I filtered the above excel document so that the full code description column was no longer visible. I could only see the clustered codes in their category descriptions (e.g. I could see all of the category 1, 2 and 3 descriptions on one document- see below image). At this phase, I looked at the different categories and made initial groupings based on similar meaning and patterns. I have provided a key to the colour coding to show my initial ideas for potential future themes.

**Key to colour coding:**

- Resources
- Perceived advantages of PBL
- Skill development
- Struggles
- Pastoral/SEMH
- Perceptions of the curriculum
- Miscellaneous- not sure yet

4	Approach to curriculum	Ability Led	Academic Catch-Up	Adaptability
5	Children's experiences	Abrupt for a Purpose	Academic Prioritised	Additional Pressure
6	COVID	Access to Resources	Access to Resources	Back to Basics
7	COVID	Active Learning	Adult Support	Bad Timing
8	Definition of PBL	Adaptability	Age-Related	Communication
9	Enhancing learning	Adaptability of PBL	Attention Span	Developmental
10	Expectations of PBL	Adaptable to Curriculum	Beneficial Resources	Developmental and Social
11	External pressures on teach	Adult Input based on Child	Budget	Independence
12	Format of teaching	Advantages	Can be hindrance	Language
13	No Code Needed	Advantages for Older Children	Child Expectations	Losing Key Beneficial Aspects
14	PBL example	Age-Related	Child Led	Lower Attention Span
15	Perceptions of PBL	Attitude to Play	Child Preference Important	Memory and SEMH
16	Play	Authority	Children don't Understand	Misunderstanding PBL
17	Potential improvement	Balance Required	Cohort-Specific Negatives	No space for PBL
18	Purpose of education	Beneficial Resources	Communication	No time for PBL
19	Role of school	Benefits for all Ages	Critical Skills	Only Temporary Academically
20	Role of teacher	Benefits of Play	Emotions	PBL
21	School environment	Boundaries Important	Empathy	Physical Development
22	Senior Leadership	Challenge is Good!	Enjoyable	Play
23	Teacher experience	Change to School Life	Evolution of Teaching Style	Play and Social
24	Teacher role	Child Autonomy	Expectations on Children	Play-Based to Didactic
25	Transition	Child Experiences	Exploration	Processing
26	UK system	Child Freedom	Exploration and Confidence	Resilience
27	(blank)	Child Happiness	Extra Programmes	SEMH
28	<b>Grand Total</b>	Child Interests	Focus on Wellbeing	Set-Structure not Possible
29		Child Led	Formal Setting Better	Sharing not Allowed
30		Class Culture	Government show Low Value	Social
31		Collaborative Working	Guaranteed Success	Y1 Minimal (blank)
32		Create Positive Environment	Inclusivity	(blank)
33		Curriculum Demands	Increase quality of education	<b>Grand Total</b>
34		Curriculum needs to be Adaptable	Increased Digital Skills	
35		Curriculum Prioritised	Independence	
36		Curriculum should be Adaptable	Individual Differences	
37		Curriculum too Narrow	Individual Differences between Schools	
38		Different Child Retention	Language	
39		Differing views of Importance	Less PBL	
40		Differing Views of Play	Less Time	
41		Difficulties	Life Skills	
42		Disadvantages	Lowered Expectations	

Collaborative Working	Guaranteed Success	Y1 Minimal (blank)	
Create Positive Environment	Inclusivity	(blank)	
Curriculum Demands	Increase quality of education	<b>Grand Total</b>	
Curriculum needs to be Adaptable	Increased Digital Skills		
Curriculum Prioritised	Independence		
Curriculum should be Adaptable	Individual Differences		
Curriculum too Narrow	Individual Differences between Schools		
Different Child Retention	Language		
Differing views of Importance	Less PBL		
Differing Views of Play	Less Time		
Difficulties	Life Skills		
Disadvantages	Lowered Expectations		
Educating Parents too	Misunderstanding		
Enabler	More Formal		
Encourager	more time & freedom		
Expectations of Children	National Curriculum		
External Pressures	Natural		
External Pressures on Teachers	Need High Quality		
Extra Resources Required	Negative Impact		
EY Emphasis on Pastoral	Observable Development		
EYFS training crucial	Only certain cohorts allowed		
Facilitator	Opposing View		
Feeling Conflicted	Out of Control		
Feeling Undervalued	Overwhelming for Children		
Flaws in System	Parental Expectations		
Flexibility	Parents are not Teachers		
General Fear	Pastoral Staff		
Guide	Real World Application		
Headteacher	Recycling		
Holistic Development Important	Repetition		
Impact of Child Context	Role of Adult		
Impact of Home	Safe place		
Impact of Home Schooling	SALT		
Impact of School	School show Low Value		
Inclusivity	SEMH		
Individual Differences	Skills Acquisition		
Individual Interpretation	Skills Negatively Impacted		
Instructor	Social Skills		
Lack of Autonomy	Soft Interpretation		
Lack of Direction	Staff		
Leader	support is important		
Limited Resources	Support Staff can hinder		

## Appendix 12. Creating initial themes.

**Phase Three:** After I had made the preliminary links between coded categories and colour coded, I transferred these into another excel document to show the groupings (initial themes) more clearly. Any categories I was unsure about where they fitted, were left in the miscellaneous category at this stage in the process. Please see example below:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Perceived advantages of PBL</b>	<b>Skill development</b>	<b>Pastoral/SEMH?</b>	<b>Struggles</b>	<b>Perceptions of the curriculum</b>	<b>Miscellaneous - not themes right now</b>
2	Access to Resources	Enhancing learning	Ability Led	Child Freedom	External pressures on teacher	Currently?	<i>Role of teacher</i>
3	Beneficial Resources	Potential improvement	Child Autonomy	Child Happiness	Format of teaching	Approach to curriculum	Role of teacher
4	Collaborative Working	Advantages	Prime Areas in EYFS	Child Interests	Authority	Abrupt for a Purpose	Teacher role
5	Extra Resources Required	Advantages for Older Children	Attention Span	EY Emphasis on Pastoral	Class Culture	Curriculum needs to be Adaptable	Enabler
6	EYFS training crucial	Benefits for all Ages	Increased Digital Skills	Holistic Development Important	Curriculum Demands	Curriculum Prioritised	Encourager
7	Limited Resources	Benefits of Play	Language	Communication	Different Child Retention	Curriculum should be Adaptable	Facilitator
8	Need Space	Challenge is Good!	Skills Acquisition	Critical Skills	Differing Views of Play	Curriculum too Narrow	Guide
9	Opportunities and Environment	Create Positive Environment	Language	Emotions	Difficulties	Differing views of Importance	Nurturer
10	PBL Specific Spaces	Flexibility	Processing	Life Skills	Disadvantages	Flaws in System	Observer
11	Provision of Resources	Needs and Child Led	<b>Negatives</b>	SEMH	Educating Parents too	Not only Academic	Instructor
12	Require Training	Positive Attitudes	<i>Skills Negatively Impacted</i>	Focus on Wellbeing	External Pressures	Not only Attainment	Leader
13	Requires Training	Preparation for Real World	<i>Lower Attention Span</i>	Independence	External Pressures on Teachers	Outcome Demands	Prompter
14	Whole School Approach	Promote Adaptability		Empathy	Feeling Conflicted	Outcome ignores Holistic	Supporter
15	Access to Resources	Promotes non-Academic skills		Enjoyable	Feeling Undervalued	Outcome Led	Responsibility to children
16	Adult Support	Purpose Driven		Social Skills	General Fear	Outcomes	Meeting Needs
17	Beneficial Resources	Purpose Led		Communication	Impact of Child Context	PBL only KS1	Self-Awareness
18	Budget	Purpose Led		Developmental	Impact of Home	Priority of School	Scaffolding
19	Extra Programmes	Relationship Building		Developmental and Social	Impact of Home Schooling	Shift in Focus	
20	Less Time	Exploration		Memory and SEMH	Impact of School	Some Approaches Stay the Same	<b>Children</b>
21	more time & freedom	Guaranteed Success		Physical Development	National Curriculum Expectations	Too Abrupt	Children's experiences
22	Safe place	Inclusivity		Play	Parental Expectations	Viewed as Regressive	Child Experiences
23	support is important	increase quality of education		Play and Social	Performance Measurement	Academic Catch-Up	Expectations of Children
24	Support Staff can hinder	Observable Development		Independence	Reality does not reflect guidance	Academic Prioritised	Individual Differences
25	Time	Real World Application		Resilience	reduce workload	Age-Related	Individual Differences
26	Time to Deliver Curriculum	Active Learning		Social	School Differences	Child Preference Important	
27	Bad Timing	Adaptability		SEMH	School Specific Differences in App	Formal Setting Better	<b>Other school staff</b>
28	Losing Key Beneficial Aspects	Adaptability of PBL		Turn-Taking	Struggle	More Formal	Senior Leadership
29	No space for PBL	Adaptable to Curriculum		<b>Negatives</b>	Value is Age Dependent	National Curriculum	Headteacher
30	No time for PBL	Adult Input based on Child		<i>Lack of Autonomy</i>	Can be hindrance	Themes	Teacher
31	Sharing not Allowed	Modelling		<i>Lack of Direction</i>	Child Expectations	Unrealistic	Teachers
32		Child Led			Children don't Understand	<b>What is needed future?</b>	SLT
33		Inclusivity			Cohort-Specific Negatives	Balance Required	Pastoral Staff
34		Play is Important			Expectations on Children	Change to School Life	Staff
35		Practical Aspect of PBL			Government show Low Value		SALT
36		Practical Elements			Misunderstanding		

## Appendix 13. Redefining themes and adding initial subthemes.

**Phase Four:** The next phase after creating preliminary themes was to identify any subthemes. I went through each theme and broke it down into further sections based on shared meaning and patterns within the data. The initial subthemes can be seen below:

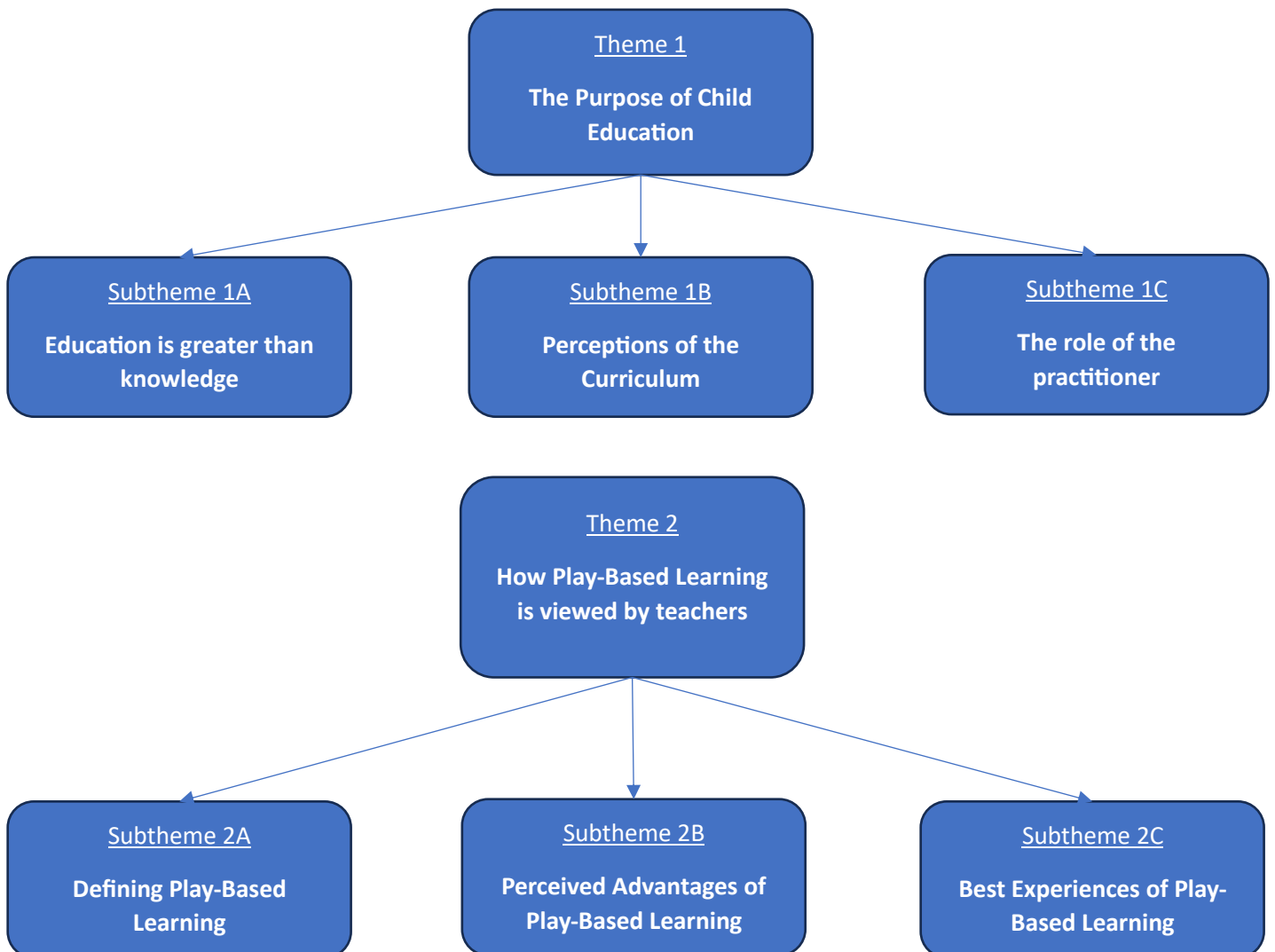
→ Example of preliminary theme
→ Example of preliminary subtheme

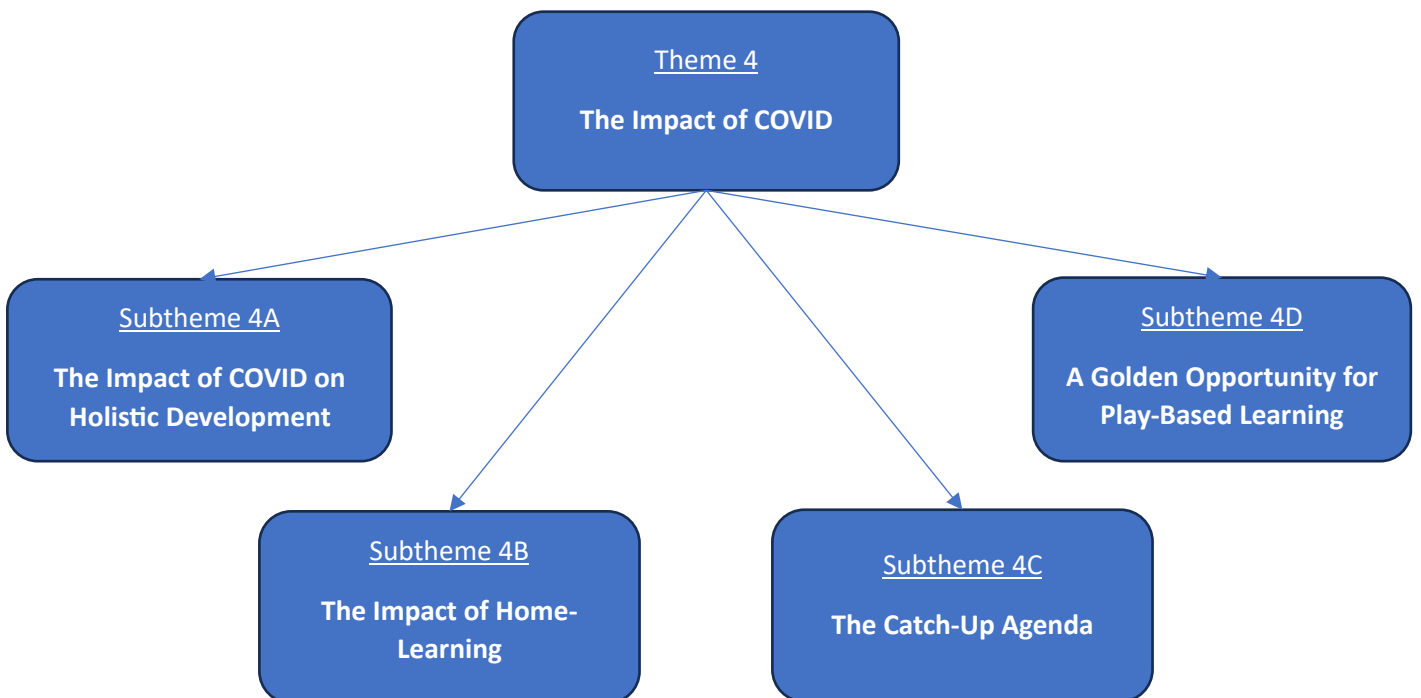
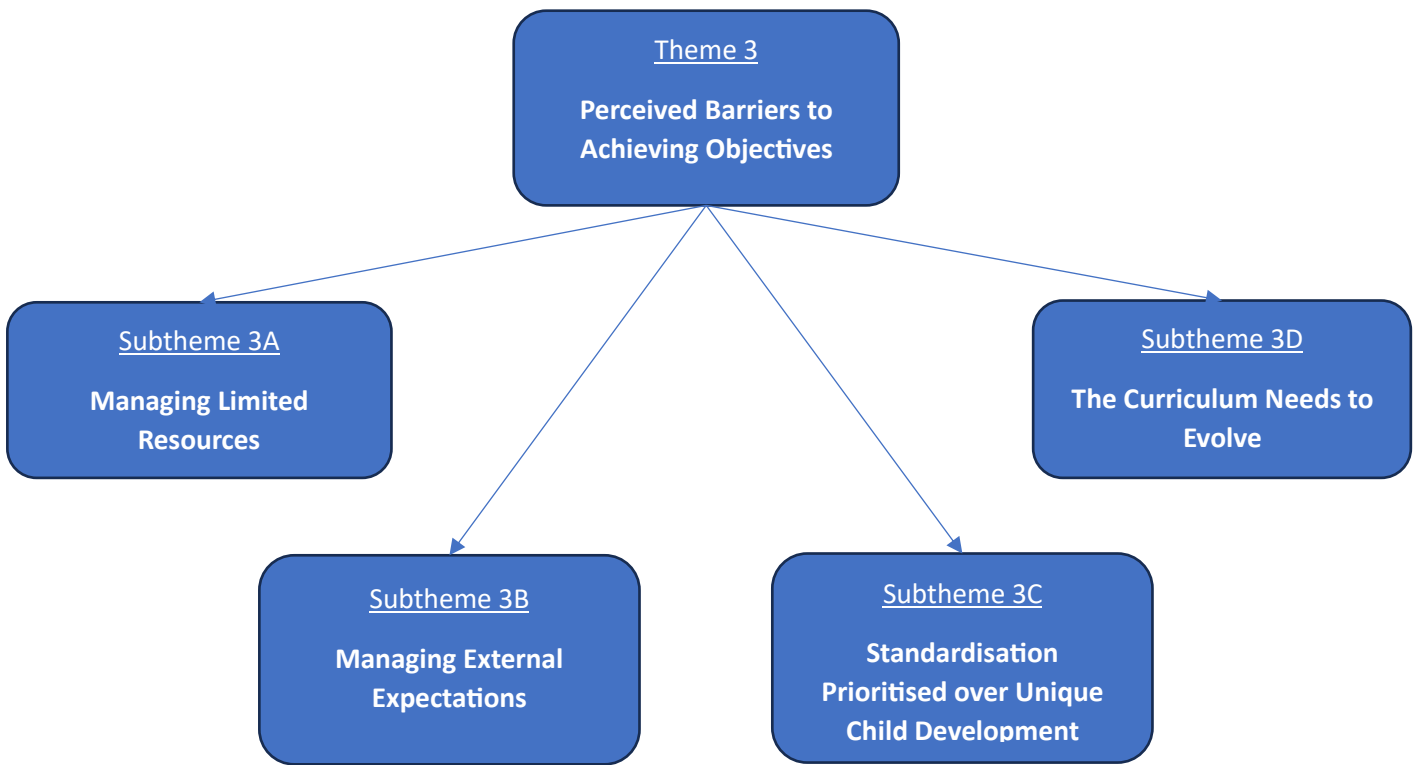
A	B	C	D	E	F	G
<b>Resources</b>	Perceived advantages of PBL	Skill development	Pastoral/SEMH?	Struggles	Perceptions of the curriculum	Miscellaneous - not themes right now
Schools	Adaptability/Application to RW	Negatives	Play	External (outside of school)	Academia & outcomes prioritised	Role of teacher
Need Space	Benefits for all Ages	Skills Negatively Impacted	Child Freedom	External Pressures	Outcome Demands	Role of teacher
PBL Specific Spaces	Flexibility	Lower Attention Span	Child Happiness	External pressures on teacher	Outcome ignores Holistic	Teacher role
Safe place	Preparation for Real World		Child Interests (move to purple column)	External Pressures on Teachers	Outcome Led	Enabler
Open to the Environment	Promote Adaptability		Holistic child development	Impact of Child Context	Outcomes	Encourager
No space for PBL	Real World Application		Holistic Development Important	Impact of Home	Academic Catch-Up	Facilitator
People	Adaptability		Communication	Impact of Home Schooling	Academic Prioritised	Guide
Consistent working	Adaptability of PBL		Critical Skills	Educating Parents too	National Curriculum	Nurturer
Adult Support	Adaptable to Curriculum		Emotions	National Curriculum Expectations	Curriculum Prioritised	Observer
Support Staff can hinder	Person-centred		Life Skills	Parental Expectations	Changes need to be made	Instructor
support is important	Adult Input based on Child		SEMH	Performance Measurement (CROSSOVER WITH INTERNAL SCHL)	Balance Required	Leader
EYFS training crucial	Child Led		Focus on Wellbeing	School Differences	Change to School Life	Prompter
Require Training	Needs and Child Led		Independence	Reality does not reflect guidance (COULD BE INTERNAL SCHL)	Age-Related	Supporter
Requires Training	Child Led		Empathy	Government show Low Value	Shift in Focus	Responsibility to children
External? (access)	Advantages for Older Children		Enjoyable	Only certain cohorts allowed	Flaws in System	Meeting Needs
Access to Resources	Development of skills ?		Social Skills	Parental Expectations	Not only Academic	Self-Awareness
Beneficial Resources	Challenge is Good!		Communication	Difficulties	Not only Attainment	Scaffolding
Extra Programmes	Promotes non-Academic skills		Developmental	Disadvantages	Too Abrupt	Children
Provision of Resources	Relationship Building		Developmental and Social	Struggle	Curriculum needs to be Adaptable	Children's experiences
Access to Resources	Exploration		Memory and SEMH	Parents are not Teachers	Curriculum should be Adaptable	Child Experiences
Beneficial Resources	Active Learning		Physical Development	Value is Age Dependent	Child Preference Important	Expectations of Children
Extra Resources Required	Observable Development		Independence	Internal (within school)	Curriculum too Narrow	Individual Differences
Internal (school)	Ability Led		Resilience	Format of teaching	Contrasting views on best approach	Individual Differences
Time	Child Autonomy		Social	Authority	Formal Setting Better	Other school staff
Time to Deliver Curriculum	Prime Areas in EYFS		SEMH	Curriculum Demands	More Formal	
Bad Timing	Attention Span		Turn-Taking	Impact of School	Abrupt for a Purpose	Headteacher
Less Time	Increased Digital Skills		Play and Social	reduce workload	Differing views of Importance	Teacher
more time & freedom	Language		EY Emphasis on Pastoral	School Specific Differences in Approach	PBL only KS1	Teachers
No time for PBL	Skills Acquisition		Negatives	Child Expectations	Approach to curriculum	
Budget	Language		Lack of Autonomy	Differing Views of Play	Priority of School	Pastoral Staff
Whole School Approach	Processing		Lack of Direction	Expectations on Children	Some Approaches Stay the Same	Staff
Limited Resources	Practicality			School show Low Value	Viewed as Regressive	SALT
Unsure? Refer to data?	Practical Aspect of PBL			Internal (within school- classroom specific)	SLT	Descriptors?/random/ not sure what ref
Sharing not Allowed	Practical Elements			Class Culture	Senior Leadership	COVID
Losing Key Beneficial Aspects	Practical instead of Questioning			Cohort-Specific Negatives		COVID

## Appendix 14. Final theme mappings.

The final stage through the findings chapter and discussion chapter, was linking the themes to different participant quotes and the research questions. At this stage, the names for the themes and subthemes changed in accordance with re-familiarisation with the data set and redefining meanings.

These have been linked and discussed in relation to the research questions (please refer to chapter 5).







## Appendix 15 Participant Summary Report

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### 'A study exploring teachers' attitudes towards Play-Based Learning in England'

#### Participant Summary Report

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you again for taking part in the above research and providing valuable information regarding your attitudes towards play-based learning. Below, you will find a summary of the main aims and key findings of the research alongside ideas for next steps within your schools and practice.

#### Main aims of the research

The main aim of the study was to explore the attitudes of primary school teachers towards play-based learning. A secondary aim was to explore their beliefs regarding the impact of COVID-19 on primary school education. I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven Key Stage 1 teachers. The interviews were focused on teachers' attitudes towards, and experiences of, play-based learning, constraints they were subject to, and views regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### Key findings from the research

The findings indicate that teachers understand the role that play has in children's development and an enthusiasm to harness its power in learning. Teachers' priority was the holistic development of well-rounded, happy and capable children. However, the main constraint in achieving this was the feeling of pressure from senior leadership teams and government/OFSTED.

Teachers also expressed a lack of time, resources and support and a lack of consensus amongst practitioners within schools. It was also found that COVID presented an opportunity for play-based learning to be expanded within schools, however this opportunity was not utilised for various reasons.

#### Ideas for future practice within schools

**Whole school approaches:** It would be useful for schools to have access to specific training packages on play-based learning which can be tailored to the individual needs of the school. The training package would need to be taught at a whole-school level to ensure all staff feel confident in the value of PBL and understand their roles.

**Parent and carer friendly training:** It would also be useful for a specific training package to be delivered to parents and carers who are interested in further understanding of PBL and its benefits.

**Support from the Educational Psychology Service:** Schools could receive support from their Educational Psychology Service (although the offer may differ depending on local authority and capacity) to help develop a whole school approach and expand all practitioners' knowledge about PBL.