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**An investigation into how sociodramatic play is planned for and implemented within the Early Years Foundation Stage and the perceived emotional and social benefits for children.**

by  
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## Abstract

*This research project aspired to investigate how sociodramatic play (SDP) is planned for and implemented within the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Previous and current literature was used to gain an overview around potential developmental benefits promoted through SDP, however, this project has a predominant focus on the perceived emotional and social developmental benefits for children in the viewpoint of EYFS teachers and teaching assistants. Additionally, within literature a range of diverse philosophies were evident as how to best plan and facilitate SDP, hence the desire to conduct a small-scale study, gaining the opportunity for critical discussion and analysis of how School E facilitated such practice. To triangulate and validate findings, this research used a range of instruments to collect results, including: questionnaires, document analysis, interviews and observations.*

*Through analysis of collected data, a number of findings appeared, such as the predominant child initiated focus placed on SDP, which did not include planning or adult presence; School E believed that adult presence and set planned activities limits children's potential emotional and social developmental opportunities. However, it simultaneously became apparent that the lack of child initiated planning resulted in the children who did not regularly engage with SDP not being identified or prompted to join. Thus, potentially missing vital emotional and social opportunities. A common theme also identified was the restricted knowledge possessed around how to plan, implement and accommodate such complex form of play, which, partnered with academic restraints, limits children's opportunities to engage in SDP. From this, recommendations were suggested with primary focus on creating more SDP opportunities for children and increasing practitioner knowledge when facilitating such practice.*

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## **1. Research Issue**

Sociodramatic play (SDP) involves: role play, symbolic play (using objects to support pretence) and peer interaction (Sluss, 2019). The aim of this research was to investigate perceived benefits of SDP surrounding children's emotional and social development, considering viewpoints of teachers and teaching assistants within the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), while simultaneously exploring how SDP is planned and implemented within practice. This study builds upon the research proposal submitted in SPE010: 'Using research to inform practice' (Essex, 2017).

## 2. Justification

### 2.1 International and National Research

The importance of play is globally acknowledged, however, what further amplifies its international significance is that it was internationally advanced. Firstly, with the work of international pioneer, Froebel (Best, 2016) who simultaneously acknowledged the importance of imaginative play and in correlation with Vygotsky, SDP (Bodrova, 2015). Subsequently, the development and implementation of Froebel's first German Kindergarten influenced a progressive global movement, vastly resulting in an international recognition of play, including SDP (Ødegaard, 2015; Yukiyo, 2015; Hoskins, 2016). Although SDP is internationally apparent, it is evident that surrounding practice may vary, depending on the country's philosophy of education (Tam, 2012; Hart and Tannock, 2013; Stetsenko and Ho, 2015).

Through international research, it appears that New Zealand, a perceived world leader in early childhood education, adopts a Te Whariki approach to education (Blaiklock, 2017). Interestingly, Australia and Sweden also adopt aspects of this philosophy; a play centred curriculum is collaboratively implemented; placing high emphasis on children's development and wellbeing, as opposed to solely academic achievements (ACARA, 2010; Taguma, Litjens and Makowiecki, 2013). Subsequently, curriculums collaboratively document the use of imaginative and SDP to facilitate healthy development of emotional and social wellbeing; thus, preparing children for formal schooling (AGDoE, 2009; Skolverket, 2010; NZME, 2017).

Similarly, England highly acknowledge the importance of SDP, specifically to aid emotional and social development (Bruce, Hakkarainen and Bredikyte, 2017). Such importance nationally advocated within the EYFS Statutory Framework (DfE, 2017) as the elements involved within SDP: role play, symbolic play and interaction, are highly accredited. Concurrently, within the guidance document, Development Matters, a stimulating role play area (in this study, referred to as a SDP area) is a documented suggestion when supporting children's personal, social and emotional development (DfE, 2012a). Evidencing that SDP is a highly regarded practice used to facilitate development.

However, a national contrasting factor is that, in England, academic requirements are more prominent at an earlier age, such as the early exposure to formal lessons (Roberts-Holmes, 2014; Boyd and Hirst, 2016). Although Ofsted (2015) acknowledge such academic requirements, it is documented that the perception of early education is based on the teacher's interpretation of the curriculum. This suggesting that, how SDP is facilitated and implemented goes beyond a country's philosophy on play; it is additionally how the educator interprets curriculum requirements, thus, placing further emphasis on adult role when planning and implementing SDP into the curriculum (Stanton-Chapman, 2014; Gaviria-Loaiza *et al.*, 2017).

### 2.2 Personal Relevance

This emphasis correlated with the acknowledged limitation posed by teachers' restricted subject knowledge about SDP (Pellegrini, 2011; McCabe 2017) has deepened the desire to expand current knowledge, subsequently expanding professional development whilst concurrently acquiring the ability to provide effective SDP opportunities to aid emotional and social development- such practice mirrored through teaching standards 3B and 8D (DfE, 2011).

Although it is apparent that SDP practice may universally differ, it is recognised as a consistent facilitator to aid emotional and social development. With an increased subject knowledge of appropriate practice and benefits of SDP, I aim to fittingly implement this within future practice.

### 3. Literature Review

Academics continuously contend that it is near impossible to provide a single, acceptable definition of play due to a range of diverse philosophies (Crous, Coetzer and Heever, 1997; Pyle, DeLuca and Danniels, 2017). Eberle (2014) categorises this as the reason for several continuously refined definitions. However, Wördemann, Buchholz and Wiley (2009) advocate many of these attempts become turgid, lacking creativity and naturalness, aspects that should be at the heart of play. Considering this, a definition suggested by Froebel appears faultless, categorising play as: an enjoyable opportunity for the natural unfolding and growth of early development (Froebel quoted in Ellis, 2017).

The importance of play is globally apparent (Slot *et al.*, 2017; Edwards, 2017). This concept emerging from Froebel's theory of play which identified the relationship between play and development (Froebel, 1937 in Provenzo, 2009). Following this advancement, a child's right to play was recognised worldwide upon release of The Charter of Children's Rights (Unicef, 1989). This importance was additionally mirrored within the Early Years Statutory Framework (DfEE, 2000; DCSF, 2008). In a more recent context, 'playing and exploring' has been documented as a characteristic for effective learning (DfE, 2012b; DfE, 2014; DfE, 2017), thus reinforcing the invaluable opportunities children receive through play.

It is acknowledged that there are several recognised types of play (Yawkey and Pellegrini, 2017) which undoubtedly aid development (Montessori, 1973; Bruner, 1974; Lynch, 2015), however, the focus of this study is categorised under imaginative play. Where, children acquire pretence identities and situations through role play (Göncü and Vadeboncoeur, 2017). Subsequently, multiple perspectives advocate such pedagogy fosters creativity, simultaneously providing opportunities to practise vital life skills (Marks-Tarlow, Siegel and Solomon, 2018). This importance paralleled within EYFS Statutory Framework through the aspect of learning titled 'Being Imaginative' (DfE, 2017, p.12), with a key contributor to the Early Learning Goal highlighting the ability for self-expression through role play (*ibid*). Moreover, due to the limitless opportunities which arise throughout imaginative play, this widens the scope for EYFS assessment to be utilised (Taylor, 2013).

A form of advanced imaginative play is SDP, as children are participating in role play and symbolic play, while concurrently interacting with others (Sluss, 2019), these imperative concepts mirrored within Bruce's Features of Play (Stead and Kelley, 2015). Interestingly, Walker (2015) identifies that SDP opportunities are often facilitated through a designated themed area, including props. Vygotsky categorises this pretence as crucial for supporting development, highlighting the opportunity for key interaction supported through objects (Bodrova, 2015). This is mirrored through Piaget's perspective, saying that when children develop their semiotic function, the ability to mentally represent events and objects, only then they can positively participate in and benefit from SDP (Goldstein, Princiotta and Naglieri, 2015).

Fascinatingly, the advanced nature of SDP emulates diverse viewpoints regarding adult role when facilitating this provision. Meacham *et al.* (2016) highlight the significance of adult involvement, it is recognised that children may have difficulty engaging in SDP (Cochran, Nordling and Cochran, 2010; Swift, 2017). Bandura's social learning theory (1977) signifies adult modelling when introducing the SDP area is key (Seehagena *et al.*, 2017). However, Bruner and Vygotsky affirm that

adults should additionally adopt the role of active participant within SDP to continuously scaffold development (Smidt, 2011; Nordlof, 2014).

Alternatively, a recent study highlights the concern that adult involvement restricts children's control and understanding, heightening the risk of blind obedience and limited imagination (Ólafsdóttir *et al.*, 2017). In Wood's (2013) perspective, the adults' role is to facilitate a SDP environment, to promote play independence. Crowley (2017) advocates this pedagogy will result in children acquiring a deeper level of understanding as they are independently creating and participating in SDP, without pressure of adult involvement.

Rousseau, Froebel and Dewey conclude that if children are simultaneously provided with freedom and necessary guidance, development will thrive (Cutter-Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014). However, research conducted by Loizou (2017) confirms that to effectively implement this philosophy, teachers require further pedagogical support, due to the uncertainty of when to engage.

Similansky (1968) and Nwokah (2010) advocate that when facilitating SDP, the planning stage is continuous yet imperative; there are frequent changes of children's roles, themes and interests. However, collating with Loizou's (2017) study, Smith (2013) advocates that limited practitioner experience or knowledge of SDP also impacts this process, acknowledging that professionals may adopt the view that child initiated play cannot be formally planned for by documenting activities and aims, due to lack of adult presence. However, the vitality of sociodramatic planning, child initiated or adult led, is echoed by Bayley and Featherstone (2013) to ensure a continuously engaging curriculum, tailored to children's interests. A persistent acknowledged challenge when planning and implementing SDP is increased academic demand, as SDP opportunities are likely to be limited or planning overlooked in order to conform to academic requirements, leading to SDP becoming unfocused (Schuster and Ashburn, 1992; Onchwari and Keengwe, 2018).

It is internationally recognised that SDP is exceedingly advantageous when supporting children's emotional and social development (Scrafton and Whittington, 2015; Gestwicki, 2017); although aspects interlink, these will predominately be discussed as separate factors to promote clarity.

When deliberating the emotional benefits promoted through SDP, Piaget's egocentrism hypothesis is pertinent; he states that meaningful encounters promote the ability to decentre (Newman and Newman, 2016). With Banerjee (2016) promoting the use of SDP to support such opportunity in light of participants' viewpoints and emotions, Watanabe and Kuczaj (2013) expand this further, advocating that through pretence, children partake in opportunities to adopt emotions during play, which concurrently provides opportunities for participants to practise how to appropriately react to displayed emotions. A study conducted by Morris *et al.* (2013) affirms in such situations, children observe behaviour of experienced participants to scaffold and develop understanding. Subsequently, Douglas and Stirling (2016) affirm that through pretence, practice and scaffolding, children will become increasingly responsive to emotional cues and feelings.

As a result of this understanding, children learn to identify and suitably react to peer emotion, resulting in positive relationships (Biddle *et al.*, 2014; Rudel-Steinbauer, 2017). This achievement is concurrently recognised within the EYFS Development Matters (DfE, 2012a) through the 40-60-month target focused on attempting empathy. However, in the same criteria a diverse concept is documented - fixating on a child's emotional reaction within a difficult situation (*ibid*), which, goes beyond understanding and identifying emotion. This requires a more advanced skill, self-

regulation: the ability to appropriately control and regulate one's emotions (Robson, 2016). Subsequently, although an advanced concept, studies (Matthews, 2008; Pyle and Bigelow, 2014) mirroring Vygotsky's (1967) view state that SDP is a consistent facilitator; sociodramatic experiences reduce the abstractness of self-regulation by providing a unique, motivating opportunity where children develop skills through imaginary roles and situations.

Moreover, various studies reveal association between self-regulation and development of social competence, children have the ability to control their emotions, leading to the knowledge of how to display them in a social situation (Broekhuizen *et al.*, 2016; Veiga, Neto and Rieffe, 2016).

Several studies have reported correlation between social competence and SDP (Howes and Matheson, 1992; Eric and Cowell, 2013; Fung and Cheng, 2015). Social competence refers to the understanding and implementation of appropriate emotional and social behaviours required for social adaptation (Jones, Greenberg and Crowley, 2015). However, due to the complexity of social situations, Spivak and Farran (2016) brand this as an arduous concept. Research conducted by Smilansky (Brain and Mukherji, 2005) and more recently, McLeod (2017) identifies possible reasoning for this, affirming that children have limited exposure to such situations as demanding interactions are often done so out of child view. Not suggesting that children should be exposed to such experience, the use of scaffolding within SDP was recommended to model socially correct behaviours through pretence.

Furthermore, sound social competence provides foundation for the development of social negotiation skills, such as deliberating storylines or roles (Goswami, 2011; Qu *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, when a disagreement occurs, children will appropriately express their displeasure and receive others' suggestions (Fisher, 2015). In consideration of Freud's psychodynamic theory (1920s), such interaction confirms the development of the third personality structure, the superego; the child is beginning to understand and conform to social rules when planning and participating in SDP (Lightfoot, Cole and Cole, 2013). However, as SDP commonly involves the same participants (Sluss, 2014), Piaget affirms a potential restraint of such practice; advocating that the ability to participate in discussion is dependent on the group and their willingness (Fromberg and Bergen, 2015). Alternatively, Hart and Nagel (2017) state that restrictions are in fact executed by the teacher, who is likely to instinctively resolve conflict, limiting opportunity for children to meet these EYFS criteria (DfE, 2012a).

To conclude, SDP offers children an imaginary, supportive environment to develop emotional and social skills (Abeles, 2016). Regrettably, findings document children who are not exposed to SDP opportunities may experience social anxiety due to an inability to interact and regulate emotions (Nilsen, 2017). Moreover, it is apparent that adult roles and planning are disputed and can either significantly enhance or hinder developmental opportunities. This being the reason for an investigation into how SDP is planned for and implemented within the EYFS, while concurrently exploring perceived social and emotional benefits.

#### 4. Research Questions

Newman (2013) advocates that effective research questions are confined in order to maintain the research focus and clarify what information needs to be investigated. The research questions for this study are documented below:

- 1. How is SDP planned for and implemented within the setting?
- 2. Do teachers believe that SDP is more effective in promoting emotional and social development when opportunities are formally planned for or solely child initiated?
- 3. What are the perceived emotional and social benefits supported by SDP?

## **5. Methodology**

The conducted research adopted a mixed methods approach through a predominantly interpretative paradigm, with slight positivist focus, as data collected was primarily qualitative, centred around practitioner opinion (Walther *et al.*, 2017) with slight quantitative numerical attention (Goertzen, 2017). Although Mukherji and Albon (2018) acknowledge the viewpoint that such contrasting paradigms cannot be used concurrently, Whiteman (2015) advocates that a high standard of research uses aspects from both viewpoints, thus strengthening findings by unravelling qualitative viewpoints behind the quantitative data. This enables a deeper understanding through the use of questionnaires, document analysis, interviews and observations (Brown, 2014; Ling and Ling, 2017) to answer research questions 1 and 2, and the use of questionnaires, interviews and observations to answer research question 3. Because I used the two diverse paradigms and a range of research instruments, I am using triangulation of my findings, which Drouin (2015) and Johnson *et al.* (2017) advocate and value as a means to increase their findings.

### **5.1 Questionnaires**

Questionnaires are commonly used within educational research to collect a wide sample and identify common themes within research (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). Gómez-Galán (2016) advocates that such research is likely to involve participants' knowledge, opinions and professional strategies, hence the suitability to this study. Questionnaires were distributed to 17 prior or current EYFS staff members with focus on such elements. However, through piloting it was apparent that the closed nature of certain questions prohibited the opportunity to document such aspects, which Hackshaw (2015) and Serrat (2017) categorise as a common research error, signifying that literature often idealises the concept of concise questionnaires to increase accessibility. Johnson and Christensen (2017) however contradict this, advocating that effective questionnaires contain a balance of both open and closed questions to provide a holistic viewpoint.

Subsequently, the implementation of a mixed methods approach was evident through the use of closed, quantitative rating scale questions which allowed the researcher to statistically correlate the degree a statement was agreed/disagreed with (Johnson and Christensen, 2017), while simultaneously ensuring the implementation of open, qualitative questioning to provide exposure to participants' philosophies (Sibinga, 2018). Such process proved effective upon analysis as quantitative data promoted the opportunity for identification of prominent viewpoints, thus providing overlying themes to correlate with qualitative opinions (Morgan, 2014).

As a result of questionnaire expansion, the risk of a low response rate increased (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2017). To accommodate such a prospect, the original sample size of 10 was increased by 7, resulting in the return of 9 questionnaires, averaging at a 52% response rate which enabled a wider sample to be analysed, increasing reliability (Privitera and Ahlgrim-Denzell, 2018). Through the received questionnaires, common themes were identified and incorporated within interview questions for further probing.

### **5.2 Document Analysis**

In partnership with questionnaires, document analysis was implemented through examination of medium and short-term planning, which enabled the researcher to gain insight into SDP planning and preparation. As this was an early years focused, small scale study, two plans from both nursery

and reception were examined to provide an overview throughout the EYFS. When recording such findings, a document analysis form was used to ensure school confidentiality through the deduction of a planning format, school name and logo (Basit, 2010), while simultaneously guaranteeing key points were investigated (Mayan, 2009). Correspondingly, the chosen format permitted clear analysis due to the divided layout (Hancock and Algozzine, 2017), however, Barth *et al.* (2016) affirm that, unaccompanied, document analysis provides no opportunity to expand or query findings, thus restricting research. Be that as it may, within this study, the ideology underpinning document analysis was to provide the researcher with an opportunity to observe planning and identify gaps between practitioner intentions and implementation, therefore permitting the opportunity to identify inconsistent factors and prominent discussion themes to probe within interview, practice highly supported by Fitzallen, Reaburn and Fin (2014) and Gibton (2016) to extend understanding and validify research.

### **5.3 Interviews**

In Merriam and Tisdell's view (2016) the correlating use of questionnaires, document analysis and interviews allowed for holistic interpretation of the topic, as one group interview with two EYFS teachers was used to discuss any factors that had arisen within prior research. Originally, the researcher's aspiration was to conduct two individual interviews. Due to the nature of research and teacher time constraints (McConnell, 2013) it became apparent that conducting a semi-structured, group interview was a more fitting approach. In Rabbidge's (2017) and Gulliksen and Hjordemaal's (2016) perspective, such an interview is a guided conversation which significantly enhances discussion and answers, due to participants communicating with one another, as well as the researcher, thus, resulting in increased exposure to similar or alternative viewpoints (Newby, 2014), while simultaneously increasing participant accessibility through one conducted interview, reducing time constraints (George, 2013).

Through piloting it was evident that, as two viewpoints were being discussed, the initial plan to record findings in written form limited conversation flow due to recording being the researcher's priority (Burton, Brundrett and Jones, 2014). Consequently, the use of a dictaphone was implemented and was much more effective as it allowed the researcher to be an active participant within conversation (Wellington, 2015) and later analyse findings through listening to the recording, noting key findings under the appropriate colour coded questions- promoting accessibility when findings were correlated (Jarvis *et al.*, 2013).

### **5.4 Observations**

Once findings were identified, two observations (one in each EYFS year group) were used to observe a group of four children engaging in SDP, correlating the discussed practice highlighted through questionnaires, document analysis and interviews. This is a research approach highly supported by Lambert (2012) as it provides a rounded understanding of practice. Subsequently, due to the nature of research, a semi-structured observation was implemented to allow new concepts to emerge and research to consciously evolve (McGrath and Coles, 2015). Concurrently, this also permitted the researcher to freely document issues relevant to the topic (Kerr, 2017).

Throughout observations, a non-participant observer role was adopted, where the researcher merely observed the situation and did not participate (Hewitt-Taylor, 2011). Curtis, Murphy and Shields (2014) identify a limitation with such approach, stating that the opportunity to gain an in-

depth understanding of practice is unlikely to arise, as with participant observers. However, when a specific aim was considered, which was to observe how the school facilitates and plans for SDP, researcher involvement posed a threat to the validity of research through the risk of acting as an influential factor (Markula and Silk, 2011), which, potentially, would have changed the dynamic of play, changing an originally child initiated activity into an adult led activity. Although most appropriate, a concern of adopting a non-participant role was children displaying alternative behaviours due to obvious observer presence, known as the Hawthorn effect (Paradis and Sutkin, 2016). However, in Carspecken (1996) and Salkind's (2010) perspective, the researcher being a familiar member within the setting would have allowed children to become accustomed to researcher presence, thus displaying natural behaviours.

Moreover, Nishishiba, Jones and Kraner (2014) recognise that a non-participant observer role ensures the researcher's availability to document findings. Upon recording such findings, an event sampling approach was adopted (Franklin, Allison and Gorman, 2014) where relevant occurrences were noted within the appropriate section, which consequently provided opportunity for precise and clear analysis.

## 6. Validity and Reliability

Maxwell (2012) advocates that validity is promoted through a research instrument suitably measuring its intended purpose, which in Merten's (2015) view, increases the reliability of research. Reliability is defined as the extent of which this valid information is correlated through separate instruments and occasions.

As all instruments were interlinked and used to answer research questions 1 and 2 and three instruments were interlinked to answer research question 3, this further supported the use of triangulation while increasing the reliability of research; correlated information had been identified throughout a range of instruments (Clark and Jasawb, 2014). However, due to the complexity of analysing multiple instruments (Teddie and Tashakkori, 2009), the method of colour coding questions within questionnaires and interviews to the corresponding research question strengthened the internal validity (Hennessy, 2014) as it ensured instruments fulfilled the suited purpose. Subsequently, this also allowed the researcher to distinguish the desired purpose for gathered information (Coles and McGrath, 2010). Such an approach also supported external validity when analysing and examining results as findings from document analysis and observations were colour coded to correlate with the appropriate research question, thus, ensuring gathered information was valid (Lichtman, 2013).

While conducting such research, a threat to reliability was posed due to the role of an individual researcher; Archibald (2016) states research is more reliable when findings are correlated or strengthened by an additional investigator, termed as investigator triangulation. However, due to staff commitments it was not possible to have a second researcher. As a result of this, several alternative measures were taken to increase reliability, such as ensuring that, although different classes, both observations were conducted within the same environment (the SDP area) (Reutzell, 2013) and consisted of the same time duration and time of day, ensuring equal situations (Thyer, 2010). Furthermore, completed interview transcripts, document analysis forms and observation forms were readily made available for participants (as they ensured confidentiality) to ensure the findings were a true reflection of practice- promoting reliability, and that participants' answers/contributions were understood in the intended way, increasing the validity of researcher perceptions (Bullock and Russell, 2012).

A method recommended by Derrick (2016) and Nollmeyer and Bangert (2017) to reduce the risk of invalid and/or unreliable data, is piloting. It allows the researcher to identify any errors or threats to research before it is conducted. Throughout research, all instruments were piloted which promoted identification of such elements. A crucial identification being unintentional researcher bias within part A of the questionnaire, as statements only surrounding formally planned SDP offering improved experiences for children were documented, thus, potentially influencing the participant and the validity of their answers (Pigott *et al.*, 2013), while simultaneously decreasing the reliability of information collected. Thus, as a result of piloting, alternative viewpoints were also added by a statement focusing on child initiated SDP, to ensure participants were not influenced (McClean, 2012).

## 6.1 Ethics

Lambert (2012) defines respectable ethical practice as ensuring the conducted research or researcher's presence does not disadvantage or pose risk to participants. During completion of the ethical approval form a range of potential risks were identified, accompanied by solutions to eliminate such aspects. Thus, ensuring participants' wellbeing and rights were priority throughout research.

Prior to commencement of research, informed consent was gained from the headteacher of School E. As a result of receiving informed consent for school participation, active consent was gained by research participants, notifying all of their right to withdraw at any time throughout the research, practice that the British Education Research Association (2011) deem as vital. To ensure children's holistic understanding of the right to withdraw, this was explained using age appropriate language before the observation began, with the observation being carried out in a relaxed manner, which enabled the children to become at ease (National Childrens Bureau, 2011). This correlated with the previously considered familiarity the children had with the researcher and eliminated any distress children may have felt in an unfamiliar observation situation (Christensen and James, 2017).

Throughout all research instruments, participant confidentiality and anonymity was ensured through confidential storing of instruments within a locked draw (Latz, and Mulvihill, 2017), while simultaneously, deducting names and/or key information about participants and the school (Martella *et al.*, 2013). In Suter's (2012) view, the fact that all participants were aware of this procedure would have allowed them to feel more comfortable to participate and willingly share information. A specific consideration highlighted within the ethical approval form was ensuring that participants were willing to be recorded during interview. To address this concern, the above protocol was followed as participants were read the procedure and asked a second time if they still wished to continue, thus gaining active consent- see interview transcript.

## **7. Research Findings**

### **7.1 How is SDP planned for and implemented within the setting?**

To draw a reliable conclusion, questionnaires and interviews were used to provide the researcher with knowledge of overlying themes and the opportunity for further discussion. To validate the received information, observations and document analysis were used to witness discussed factors within practice.

Through analysis of questionnaire responses, it was evident that members of staff believed that SDP is sufficiently implemented within the setting. However, findings highlighted participant uncertainty surrounding the sufficiency of SDP planning, which in Loizou's (2017) perspective, could be due to practitioners' limited exposure to appropriate planning procedures. Nevertheless, when correlating questionnaire responses with document analysis findings, it appeared evident that the process adopted to change the SDP area was understood by all respondents and was apparent within the medium-term plan, as this was a termly or half termly occasion to correlate with the current thematic topic. Alternatively, such practice contrasts with Nwokah's (2010) view, that SDP is most effective when tailored to children's current interests, which interestingly was also documented within a questionnaire response, advocating that dependent on the topic, "children may need a little more encouragement" to participate. Thus, implying a prolonged topic is likely to hinder engagement, which in Nilsen's (2017) perspective, will result in vital emotional and social opportunities being missed.

Questionnaire data also evidenced a varied response as to whether SDP opportunities are regularly available for children. Subsequently, through document analysis it was apparent that SDP is included within School E's weekly plans, but in reception the only allocated time was three sessions a week, during free-flow play. Whereas, within nursery, daily opportunities were documented to engage with SDP. This correlated with a continuously identified restraint posed by academic demands and formal lessons (Schuster and Ashburn, 1992; Onchwari and Keengwe, 2018). This ideology was further validated within interview, as teachers advocated that this restriction was indeed caused by academic activities or lessons, a factor which does not inhibit nursery practice; formal lessons are not yet implemented.

Despite limited time opportunities, it was stated within interviews and questionnaires that all SDP activities have aims to ensure the area is facilitated accordingly, practice highly supported by Bayley and Featherstone (2013). Alternatively, document analysis paralleled this statement as, for a child initiated activity, no aims or objectives were evident on planning. Interestingly however, when observing a child initiated session, the aims were verbally communicated to the children through the reminder that "if we're in the home corner, we're travel agents", yet no presence was implemented to ensure children remained on task; emphasising Onchwari and Keengwe's (2018) concern of unfocused SDP. Conversely, when analysing a planned adult led activity, the objectives and aims were apparent, highlighting Smith's (2013) acknowledgement that child initiated play is unlikely to be formally planned for due to lack of adult presence.

## **7.2 Do teachers believe that SDP is more effective in promoting emotional and social development when opportunities are formally planned for or solely child initiated?**

Document analysis allowed the researcher to gain an overview of planning procedures, with questionnaire responses and interview probing providing an understanding of practitioners' philosophies. These instruments were additionally triangulated with observations to analyse if findings correlated with practice.

Analysis of questionnaire statements 3 and 4 highlighted mixed philosophies as to whether formally planned or solely child initiated SDP provides improved experiences for children, which in Smith's (2013) perspective, could be a result of limited experience of SDP. However, although two respondents answered neutral to both statements, within the qualitative section of the questionnaire, on question 2 the two provided answers were either 'both' or 'child initiated', meaning all participants recognised child initiated SDP as important, whether alone or within the 'both' category. Alternatively, as evidenced prior, document analysis connotated that child initiated SDP was not planned for, which arose query when considering that adult led SDP was planned for- leading to researcher query surrounding if child initiated SDP was viewed at a reduced significance.

As a result of contrasting findings and the queries which arose from questionnaires and document analysis, this was further probed within interview. It then became evident that Teacher A and B do not formally plan for specific emotional and social opportunities as, in their perspectives it limits potential emotional regulation and social negotiation opportunities, recognised by Vygotsky (1967) and Goswami (2011), as they do not have the opportunity to debate and implement SDP, which Qu *et al.* (2015) categorise as a vital to aid such development.

However, within interview a contrasting factor was apparent, with the celebration that "SDP with the right group of children is amazing". When correlating this with Piaget's acknowledgement that the standard of SDP is dependent on the group of children (Fromberg and Bergen) and Sluss's (2014) identification that often it is the same participants in SDP, this resulted in a query surrounding the planning and practice implemented for those who are not regular participants and therefore, are not receiving the recognised emotional and social opportunities. Subsequently, observations validified such views as new children joining SDP was a rare occurrence, but interestingly, they were not prompted to. Nevertheless, Smilansky (1968) recognises the importance of continuous planning surrounding children's interests and involvement, which insinuates that planning should accommodate and incorporate all pupils.

Evidently, when facilitating emotional and social development, child-initiated SDP was School E's favoured method, adhering to the views of Woods (2013) and Crowley (2017) as it allows children to gain a deeper understanding. However, as Swift (2017) recognises, some children find engaging in such play difficult, which is where Rousseau, Froebel and Dewey (Cutter-Mackenzie *et al.*, 2014) advocate the importance of necessary guidance, to not only stimulate the "right group of children", but also support those who require further encouragement.

### 7.3 What are the perceived emotional and social benefits supported by SDP?

As in research questions 1 and 2 it was established that teachers do not plan for emotional and social opportunities, document analysis was not required for these findings. Instead, questionnaires, interviews and observations were triangulated to investigate the perceived emotional and social opportunities from the viewpoint of teachers and teaching assistants.

Questionnaire results evidenced that all 9 respondents identified some benefit of using SDP to support children's emotional and social development. However, when considering this with the highly advantageous emotional and social benefits documented by Piaget and Vygotsky (Goldstein, Princiotta and Naglieri, 2015; Bodrova, 2015) and the wide recognition within literature (Scrafton and Whittington, 2015; Gestwicki, 2017), the fact that the majority of respondents only selected 'agree', again reiterates Smith's (2013) view of limited practitioner knowledge regarding potential opportunities promoted by SDP, a restriction that Loizou (2017) advocates is due to limited support when facilitating such complex play.

An overlying theme which appeared in questionnaires is that SDP provides children with the opportunity to practise vital life skills, an advantage also reiterated within literature (Marks-Tarlow, Siegel and Solomon, 2018). Fascinatingly, 5/9 respondents correlated this with ability to understand and appropriately react to peer emotion, a correlation simultaneously documented by Rudel-Steinbauer (2017). As a result of further probing within interview, it was advocated that such understanding can be demonstrated by children showing empathy and an attempt to comfort others, both of which were evident within observation, specifically by Child A. In Watanabe and Kuczaj's (2013) perspective, this understanding is a result of children having the opportunity to practise recognition and response in pretence situations, once they have decentred (Newman and Newman, 2016). Additionally mentioned within a questionnaire response, was a child's ability to control their own emotions, referred to by Garland (2014) as self-regulation, which Vygotsky (1967) and Matthews (2008) emphasise can also be supported through SDP, as did Teacher A.

A theme specifically identified from questionnaire analysis was that SDP provides children with opportunities to practise social skills. When asked to expand within interview, Teacher A and B collaboratively stated that this occurs through negotiating and discussing character roles and story lines. Nevertheless, Qu *et al.* (2015) affirm that to develop these social negotiation skills, children firstly need to be socially competent, a developmental benefit which was not mentioned throughout research. However, a social benefit recognised by Fisher (2015) was touched upon in two questionnaires, stating that children deal with issues, such as conflict. A benefit simultaneously witnessed during observation as two children both wanted to be the travel agent. After a heated discussion, the compromise was made that "I do it, then you, then me", thus meeting the EYFS Development Matters criteria surrounding resolving conflict (DfE, 2012a), subsequently, eliminating Hart and Nagel's (2017) concern, that opportunities to meet such criteria are often restricted by teacher involvement, as it was observed that the teacher was monitoring this conflict and seizing the assessment opportunity, but did not get involved.

Although various emotional and social benefits were discussed, the predominantly identified opportunities were those documented within the EYFS Development Matters (DfE, 2012a), as, emotional identification and management were noted as well as social negotiation and resolution in a difficult situation.

## **8. Conclusion**

Although this research was conducted within one setting, it is recognised that collected findings have a strong correlation with literature. Thus, strengthening the validity of findings and increasing the generalisability of research.

Through research, it appeared that School E does not plan for potential emotional and social SDP opportunities due to their philosophy that advanced development occurs through child initiated SDP, stating that such development is less likely to occur when led by an adult. Subsequently, this philosophy promoted solid opportunities for the learners involved. However, the lack of adult presence or prompting new members, insinuates that SDP opportunities were not holistically utilised.

Additionally, a recognised factor was that there appeared to be uncertainty regarding appropriate SDP planning and practice, a possible reason for this may be practitioners' restricted knowledge surrounding SDP. Moreover, academic constraints appeared to hinder SDP opportunities within School E; reception had reduced opportunities in comparison to nursery, due to formal lessons. This suggest that, as children advance through school, less opportunities to support emotional and social development are provided, as academic progression takes the focus.

Despite this, the importance of SDP was sufficiently noted by staff members. However, when correlating such acknowledgements with literature, it appears that there is opportunity for further development. Although a range of emotional and social opportunities were recognised, the majority were from the EYFS Development Matters criteria, resulting in a query surrounding if a deeper understanding of additional benefits is possessed.

### **8.1 Recommendations**

- The school should consider conducting further training to increase staff knowledge surrounding SDP and the potential emotional and social benefits for children.
- EYFS meetings should be considered to ensure all staff are aware of a consistent planning procedure to eliminate uncertainty.
- The school should consider the use of adults within SDP when necessary, to support children who find engaging in SDP difficult, ensuring equal opportunities.
- Due to time constraints within reception, the class could consider opening the SDP area at an additional time during the day, by rotating non-core activities.

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