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# **Title: How do early years practitioners perceive the role of imaginative play in supporting the emotional development of children aged 3–5 years?**

## **1. Literature Review (1,089 words)**

Imaginative play is widely recognised as an important part of early childhood. It allows children to use their imagination, take on different roles and create situations based on their experiences. For children aged three to five, imaginative play may include pretending to be a parent, doctor or teacher, using one object to represent another, or creating stories with other children. Play provides opportunities for exploration, interaction and meaning-making and is considered important for children's learning and development (Bruce, 2012; Moyles, 2010).

Imaginative play is relevant to this study because it may provide opportunities for children to explore emotions, relationships and social situations. Emotional development is also important during the early years, as children are developing greater awareness of their own feelings and those of others. This literature review explores the relationship between imaginative play and emotional development while considering the role of early years practitioners. It provides the rationale for the research question: **How do early years practitioners perceive the role of imaginative play in supporting the emotional development of children aged 3–5 years?**

Imaginative play can be understood through key theories of child development. Piaget (1962) viewed symbolic play as an important aspect of cognitive development. Symbolic play involves using objects, actions or ideas to represent something different. For example, a child may pretend that a block is a telephone or take on the role of a doctor.

Vygotsky (1978) also recognised the importance of imaginative play but placed greater emphasis on its social nature. He suggested that children learn through interaction with others and that imaginative play provides opportunities to explore social roles, relationships and rules. Smidt (2016) similarly highlights the importance of social interaction in early childhood learning. Together, these theories suggest that imaginative play may support development through imagination and interaction. However, theoretical explanations alone cannot establish how imaginative play influences emotional development, making empirical research important.

Emotional development involves children's growing ability to recognise, express and manage emotions and respond to the emotions of others. Imaginative play may allow children to explore emotions within pretend situations, including fear, excitement, frustration or sadness. When playing with others, children may also negotiate ideas, manage disagreements and respond to different perspectives. Whitebread et al. (2017) highlight the importance of play in supporting social and self-regulatory development. Richard et al. (2021) also found that a pretend play-based intervention was associated with improvements in aspects of children's emotion comprehension. However, imaginative play should not automatically be assumed to improve emotional development, as its influence may depend on the type and quality of play.

Recent research provides further support for a relationship between pretend play and children's development. Smits-van der Nat et al. (2024) conducted a meta-analysis of 34 studies examining the relationship between pretend play and social competence among children aged three to eight years. The findings showed an overall positive relationship, which was stronger in studies considering the quality of pretend play rather than simply the amount of time children spent playing. This suggests that how children engage in play may be as important as how frequently they participate.

However, these findings should be interpreted carefully. Social competence is related to emotional development but is not identical to it, and the findings demonstrate an association rather than a

direct causal relationship. Other factors, including children's existing abilities and their wider environment, may influence both play and developmental outcomes.

Further evidence of this complexity is provided by Jaggy et al. (2023), who investigated the impact of social pretend play on preschool children's social development. The study found that play tutoring supported improvements in some aspects of social behaviour and peer relationships but did not show significant effects on the social-emotional skills measured. These findings suggest that pretend play may support some developmental outcomes more than others. Therefore, it would be too simplistic to claim that imaginative play improves all aspects of emotional development.

The role of early years practitioners is also important when considering how imaginative play is experienced and supported. Practitioners influence children's play by providing time, space and resources and by deciding when to observe, join in or step back. Bruce (2012) emphasises the importance of allowing children opportunities to explore actively, while Smidt (2016) highlights the value of adult support and interaction. Practitioners therefore need to balance supporting children's learning with allowing children freedom to develop their own ideas. Their beliefs and understanding may consequently influence the opportunities available to children. Research by Leung (2024) also suggests that pretend play can provide opportunities for children to express their thoughts and perspectives, highlighting the importance of how adults create and respond to play opportunities.

Recent research by Vasilopoulos et al. (2026) is particularly relevant because it explores educators' perspectives on pretend play in early childhood settings. The study found that educators generally valued pretend play, although practices ranged from child-led to more adult-guided approaches. Practical and environmental factors also influenced how pretend play was supported. This suggests that practitioners may value imaginative play but still face challenges in supporting it.

However, the study was conducted in Australia and cannot automatically be applied to early years settings in Wales. It also explored pretend play generally rather than specifically examining its role in emotional development among children aged three to five. Nevertheless, it highlights the importance of exploring practitioners' perspectives, as their beliefs and experiences may influence how imaginative play is understood and supported.

The Welsh context is also relevant. Donaldson (2015), the Welsh Government (2022) and the Welsh Government (2024) emphasise child-centred learning, wellbeing and children's holistic development. The Welsh Government's Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan further highlights the importance of high-quality and play-based opportunities for young children. However, policy support for play does not necessarily explain how individual practitioners understand imaginative play or whether they perceive it as contributing to emotional development. Differences in practitioners' experience, training and confidence may influence how imaginative play is supported.

Overall, the literature suggests that imaginative play may provide opportunities for children to explore emotions, relationships and social situations. Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) provide theoretical explanations for the importance of symbolic and social play, while recent research suggests that the relationship between pretend play and development is positive but complex. Although existing research provides useful evidence about imaginative play and children's development, there is still a need to understand how early years practitioners perceive its role in supporting emotional development, particularly within the Welsh context. The proposed qualitative study will therefore explore the views of early years practitioners working with children aged three to five in Wales.

## 2. Methodological Considerations (1,563 words)

This research project will explore the question: **How do early years practitioners perceive the role of imaginative play in supporting the emotional development of children aged 3–5 years?** The study will use a qualitative research approach and collect data through semi-structured interviews with approximately six to eight early years practitioners working in Wales. Participants will be selected using purposive sampling. This section explains and evaluates the chosen research approach, sample, method of data collection and triangulation.

### Research approach

A qualitative approach has been selected because the purpose of this research is to explore practitioners' perceptions, experiences and understanding of imaginative play. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding how people interpret their experiences and make meaning of their social world (Bryman, 2016). This is appropriate because the study asks how practitioners *perceive* the role of imaginative play rather than attempting to measure its direct effects on children's emotional development.

Practitioners may have different understandings of imaginative play depending on their experience, training and the settings in which they work. A qualitative approach allows participants to explain these views in their own words and may provide a deeper understanding of why they support imaginative play in particular ways. It also allows unexpected issues to emerge, such as the influence of time, resources, training or adult involvement.

A quantitative approach was considered but was not selected. Quantitative research generally involves collecting numerical data to measure variables, identify patterns or examine relationships between factors (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). For example, a quantitative study could measure how frequently practitioners use imaginative play or ask a larger sample to rate their views. However, numerical data would provide less opportunity to explore why practitioners hold particular views or how they understand their experiences.

Nevertheless, qualitative research has limitations. The findings from a small sample cannot be assumed to represent all early years practitioners in Wales, and the researcher's own assumptions may influence the interpretation of the data. It is therefore important for the researcher to remain aware of personal views and ensure that interpretations are supported by participants' responses. Despite these limitations, a qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of practitioners' perspectives rather than produce statistically generalisable findings.

### Sample and sampling

The proposed sample will consist of approximately **six to eight early years practitioners** who currently work with children aged between three and five years. Participants will be recruited from early years settings in Wales. Where possible, practitioners will be recruited from more than one setting to include a range of experiences and perspectives.

This sample is appropriate because early years practitioners work closely with young children and may observe, support or participate in imaginative play as part of their everyday practice. They are therefore able to provide relevant perspectives about how imaginative play may support children's emotional development.

Purposive sampling will be used to select participants. This involves selecting individuals because they have particular characteristics, knowledge or experiences relevant to the research topic (Cohen,

Manion and Morrison, 2018). In this study, participants will be selected because they work directly with children aged three to five and have experience of early years practice.

Purposive sampling is more suitable than random sampling because the study does not require a representative sample of the general population. Instead, it requires participants who can provide relevant information about imaginative play within early years settings. Roberts-Holmes (2018) highlights the importance of making realistic decisions about access and participant recruitment in early years research. Selecting participants with relevant experience should therefore help ensure that the information collected is meaningful to the research question.

A sample of six to eight participants is considered manageable for a small undergraduate research project. Semi-structured interviews require time to arrange and conduct, and a smaller sample allows greater attention to be given to individual participants' responses. However, the small sample is also a limitation, as the findings cannot be generalised to all practitioners. Participants who agree to take part may also already have an interest in imaginative play, which could influence the range of views collected. Recruiting participants from different settings and with different levels of experience may help provide a wider range of perspectives, although it will not make the sample representative.

The purpose of the sample is therefore not to make broad claims about all early years practitioners but to develop a deeper understanding of how a small group of relevant practitioners perceive imaginative play and its possible role in emotional development.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews have been selected as the main method of data collection. This method involves preparing broad questions while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions and explore issues raised by participants. Similar topics can therefore be discussed with each participant while still allowing them to explain their individual views and experiences.

Semi-structured interviews are appropriate because practitioners' perceptions are central to the research question. Participants may be asked how they understand imaginative play, whether they believe it supports children's emotional development and how they support imaginative play within their settings. Follow-up questions can allow participants to provide examples and explain their responses in greater detail.

An important advantage of interviews is that they can provide detailed information that may not be obtained through short or fixed responses. Bell (2014) explains that interviews can be useful when researchers want to explore participants' experiences and perspectives in depth. Interviews also allow the researcher to seek clarification if a participant raises an important issue, reducing the need to make assumptions about what participants mean.

However, interviews also have limitations. They can be time-consuming to arrange and conduct, particularly when participants have busy professional schedules. Participants may also provide answers that they believe are professionally acceptable rather than describing their actual views, particularly when discussing their professional practice.

The researcher may also influence responses through the wording of questions, tone of voice or reactions. To reduce this possibility, questions will be open-ended and neutrally worded. Participants will be reminded that there are no correct or incorrect answers and that the study is interested in their individual perspectives. A consistent interview schedule will also be used to ensure that similar topics are explored with all participants.

Despite these limitations, semi-structured interviews are considered appropriate because they provide a balance between consistency and flexibility. They allow the research question to be explored directly while giving participants sufficient opportunity to describe their experiences in their own words.

### **Alternative method: questionnaire**

A questionnaire was considered as an alternative method of data collection. Questionnaires can be useful because they allow researchers to collect information from a larger number of participants and can be quicker to distribute. This may be convenient for early years practitioners who have limited time.

A questionnaire could provide a broader overview of practitioners' views. For example, participants could be asked to rate their agreement with statements about imaginative play and emotional development. However, closed questions may limit participants to predetermined answers and may not explain why they hold particular views. Open-ended questions could provide more detail, but responses may still be brief and the researcher would not have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions or seek clarification.

A questionnaire could therefore provide greater breadth but less depth. For this study, depth is considered more important because the research aims to understand how practitioners make sense of imaginative play within their professional practice. Semi-structured interviews are therefore better suited to the qualitative focus of the research.

However, choosing interviews means that fewer participants can be included, potentially resulting in a narrower range of perspectives. This demonstrates that no single method is without limitations. The chosen method must be appropriate for the research question rather than being considered better than all alternatives.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation refers to the use of more than one method, source, researcher or theoretical perspective when investigating a research topic. Its purpose is to examine an issue from different perspectives and potentially increase confidence in the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). For example, a researcher could combine interviews with observations or questionnaires.

Methodological triangulation was considered but will not be used in this study. The main reason is that the research focuses specifically on practitioners' perceptions. Semi-structured interviews directly address this aim by allowing practitioners to explain their views and experiences.

Adding observations of children during imaginative play could provide useful information about children's behaviour, but it would not necessarily provide evidence about practitioners' perceptions and could change the focus of the study. It would also require additional planning and ethical considerations. Similarly, combining interviews with questionnaires could provide both depth and breadth but would increase the amount of data collected and may not be manageable within the practical limits of a small undergraduate research project.

Instead, the study will focus on collecting detailed information through one method that is closely aligned with the research question. Different perspectives may still be included by recruiting practitioners with different levels of experience and, where possible, from more than one setting. This will allow similarities and differences between participants' views to be explored.

The decision not to use methodological triangulation is therefore based on the purpose and practical scale of the research rather than the belief that triangulation is unnecessary. Although triangulation can strengthen a study by providing different forms of evidence, a single qualitative method is considered appropriate here because semi-structured interviews directly address the aim of exploring practitioners' perceptions.

### **3. Ethical Considerations (1,486 words)**

Ethical considerations are important in research involving early years practice and young children. This proposed study will explore how early years practitioners perceive the role of imaginative play in supporting the emotional development of children aged three to five years. Although children will not directly participate, their welfare remains relevant because practitioners may refer to their professional experiences of working with children and families. The research must therefore protect participants, avoid unnecessary harm and ensure that information is managed responsibly. The study will follow university ethical procedures, relevant data protection legislation and the *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (BERA, 2024). Ethical approval will be obtained before participants are recruited or data are collected.

#### **Informed consent and voluntary participation**

All participants must provide informed consent before taking part. Participants will receive a participant information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, what participation involves and how the information collected will be used. BERA (2024) emphasises the importance of ensuring that participants understand the nature of the research before agreeing to participate.

The information sheet will explain that participants will take part in a semi-structured interview about their views and experiences of imaginative play and its possible role in supporting children's emotional development. It will provide information about the expected length of the interview, audio recording, confidentiality, data storage and the use of quotations. Participants will have the opportunity to ask questions before deciding whether to take part.

Written consent will be obtained before the interview begins. However, consent should not be viewed as a one-time event. Participation must remain voluntary throughout the research process. Participants will be informed that they can refuse to answer individual questions, pause the interview or stop participating without pressure to continue.

Participants will also be informed about their right to withdraw and how they can do so. Any withdrawal deadline will be clearly explained because, once data have been anonymised and included in the analysis, it may no longer be possible to identify and remove an individual participant's information.

The researcher must also recognise when a participant no longer wishes to participate. This may be shown by declining the invitation, not returning a consent form or asking to withdraw before or during the interview. The researcher should also respond to signs of discomfort or hesitation by checking whether the participant wishes to continue. No participant should feel pressured to answer questions or remain involved.

As participants will be adults, they can provide consent for themselves. Children will not be interviewed or observed, meaning that parental consent and child assent are not required. However, participants will be reminded not to disclose unnecessary identifying information about children or families.

## **Confidentiality and anonymity**

Confidentiality and anonymity are important because participants may discuss experiences from their professional practice. Participants should be able to express their views without concern that their identity or workplace will be identified.

Participant names will not appear in interview transcripts or the final research project. Pseudonyms or participant numbers will be used instead. Names of settings, colleagues, children and families will also be removed. Any quotations included in the final project will be anonymised, and unnecessary identifying details will be removed.

Participants will be encouraged to discuss experiences generally rather than provide confidential information about specific children or families. If unnecessary identifying information is shared, it will be removed from the research data where possible.

However, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed without limits. If information is disclosed that raises a serious safeguarding concern or suggests that a child may be at risk of harm, the researcher may have a responsibility to report this through appropriate university or safeguarding procedures. Participants must therefore be informed about these limits before providing consent. It would be unethical to promise complete confidentiality if information may need to be shared to protect a child.

The researcher should understand the relevant safeguarding procedures before conducting interviews and know who to contact if a serious concern arises. The researcher should not investigate the concern independently but should follow the appropriate reporting procedures.

## **Reducing risk to participants**

The proposed study is considered relatively low risk because adult practitioners will be discussing their professional views and experiences. However, participants may feel uncomfortable discussing their professional practice or worry that their responses could be judged negatively.

Some discussions may also involve difficult experiences relating to children or families. To reduce this risk, interview questions will be open-ended, respectful and non-judgemental. Participants will be reminded that there are no correct or incorrect answers and that the study is interested in understanding different perspectives.

Participants will be able to skip questions, pause or end the interview at any time. The researcher should not pressure participants to provide further details if they appear uncomfortable.

Protecting anonymity may also reduce concerns about professional judgement. However, anonymity may be more difficult to maintain with a small sample if particular experiences or job roles make an individual recognisable. The researcher should therefore carefully consider the amount of detail included in quotations and remove information that could indirectly identify participants or settings.

The interview will avoid requesting confidential details about specific children or families. This will help protect children who may be indirectly discussed and reduce the risk of confidential information being shared unnecessarily.

## **Reducing risk to the researcher**

The wellbeing and safety of the researcher must also be considered. Face-to-face interviews should take place in an appropriate professional environment and follow university guidance on researcher safety. Where required, the researcher should inform an appropriate person, such as a supervisor, about the interview arrangements.

If interviews are conducted online, an approved and secure platform should be used. Privacy, recording and the suitability of the interview environment should also be considered.

A further potential risk is the disclosure of unexpected safeguarding information. Before beginning data collection, the researcher should understand the relevant procedures and know how to respond appropriately. The researcher should not investigate concerns or take on a role beyond their competence but should report information through the appropriate procedures.

Professional boundaries are also important. The researcher should make clear that the interview is for research purposes and that they are not acting as a counsellor or providing professional advice. If a participant becomes upset, they should be allowed to pause or end the interview.

The researcher's own beliefs about imaginative play may also influence the research process. Reflexivity is therefore important to help reduce the possibility of asking leading questions or interpreting responses according to personal expectations.

## **Reducing risk to the university**

The researcher also has a responsibility to reduce potential risks to the university. Research conducted unethically could harm participants and damage the university's reputation. Ethical approval must therefore be obtained before recruitment or data collection begins.

The researcher should follow university procedures and relevant ethical guidance throughout the project. This includes ensuring that participants understand what they are agreeing to, protecting confidential information and managing data responsibly.

There is also a risk to the university if confidential information about participants, settings or children is disclosed inappropriately. This can be reduced through careful anonymisation, secure data storage and limiting access to authorised individuals.

Research integrity is also important. Findings should be presented honestly and accurately, and participants' views should not be selectively changed or misrepresented. These measures help protect participants and maintain the integrity and reputation of the university.

## **Data collection and storage**

Research data must be collected and stored in accordance with ethical guidelines and relevant legislation. The proposed study will follow the Data Protection Act 2018, UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and university policies regarding research data management.

Participants will be informed about what information will be collected, why it is needed and how it will be used. If interviews are audio recorded, participants will provide consent before recording begins. Recordings will be transcribed, and identifying information will be removed during anonymisation.

Research data will be stored securely on password-protected, university-approved systems. Access will be limited to the researcher and authorised individuals, such as the supervisor where appropriate. Identifiable information, including consent forms, will be stored separately from anonymised interview data where possible.

Confidential data should not be stored on unsecured devices or shared through insecure methods. Any physical documents will also be stored securely.

Participants will be informed about how long their data will be retained and what will happen to it after the research project has been completed. Data will be retained and deleted in accordance with university policy. Providing this information before participation supports informed consent and allows participants to understand how their information will be managed.

Overall, this study requires careful consideration of informed consent, confidentiality, safeguarding, risk and data protection. Although children are not direct participants, ethical responsibilities towards them remain relevant because practitioners may discuss their experiences of working with children and families. By obtaining informed consent, protecting anonymity, reducing risks and managing data securely, the proposed research can be conducted in a responsible and ethically appropriate manner.

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