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Do children learn better through play-based learning?

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Literature Review

Introduction

Play-based learning (PBL) has long been foundational in early childhood education within the UK's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). This pedagogical approach merges structured and unstructured play to support children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. The Education Development Trust (2024) emphasises play's role across EYFS areas, from communication and language to physical development and understanding the world. However, following the COVID-19 pandemic, significant developmental concerns have emerged, particularly regarding social communication skills due to early social isolation (Byrne et al., 2022). This review evaluates recent research on PBL, analysing its effectiveness and highlighting research gaps that warrant further exploration.

Rationale and Relevance

PBL's increasing prominence in early years education, notably in Wales, requires careful scrutiny. The Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021) promotes a holistic, learner-centred approach closely aligned with PBL principles. Likewise, Wales's funded non-maintained nursery settings identify play as integral to developmental pathways, including communication, exploration, and physical development (Welsh Government, 2022). However, despite strong advocacy in educational policy (Welsh Government, 2021, 2022), existing empirical evidence on the long-term academic outcomes of PBL remains mixed, as highlighted by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2023) and Pyle et al. (2018). Investigating these varied findings and clarifying existing knowledge gaps is essential to determining the specific conditions under which PBL optimally enhances children's learning.

Cognitive and Academic Development

Research by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2023) consistently identifies structured, educator-guided play as beneficial to cognitive growth, particularly literacy and numeracy, reporting that effectively implemented PBL can advance academic progress by approximately four months. However, the EEF also highlights that effectiveness heavily depends on educators' skills and training. Similarly, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) underline that inconsistent application can significantly affect developmental outcomes, reinforcing the importance of professional development. This aligns with the Welsh Government's (2020) emphasis on skilled adult interaction in play-based contexts to enhance foundational skills. Thus, the effectiveness of PBL relies significantly on the quality of implementation, teacher competence, and resource availability, indicating variability as a key challenge.

Social and Emotional Development

PBL significantly benefits children's social-emotional development, enhancing empathy, emotional regulation, and relationship-building skills through collaborative interactions (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). The British Psychological Society (BPS, 2023) supports this, highlighting PBL's effectiveness in building resilience and emotional competence. Both align well with the Curriculum for Wales (2021), which prioritises emotional well-being. Moreover, the Department for Education (DfE, 2024) confirms PBL's effectiveness in meeting the EYFS prime areas: communication, social and emotional skills, and physical development. However, while Whitebread et al. (2017) advocate socio-dramatic play for emotional and social growth, effective outcomes depend on consistent and skilled adult facilitation, highlighting the critical role of educators.

Language and Communication Development

Play offers a conducive environment for language acquisition, allowing children natural opportunities to develop vocabulary and communication skills (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). The Curriculum for Wales prioritises communication competence, supporting the use of play for real-world language practice. The Ofsted (2024) report stresses increased language delays post-pandemic, necessitating richer, play-oriented language environments. Gray and Crittenden (2023) alongside Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) underscore the essential role of educator interaction in scaffolding language learning, aligning with curriculum guidance advocating responsive teaching strategies. This comparison highlights that while the environment for language development is optimal in PBL contexts, effectiveness hinges on educator responsiveness and intentional facilitation.

Curriculum and Policy Alignment

The Curriculum for Wales (2021) strongly aligns with PBL through its emphasis on experiential, inquiry-based, and child-centred learning, supporting creativity and critical thinking (Rule, 2006). Bruce (2011) reinforces this by stressing the integration of creativity, play, and first-hand experiences in effective early education. However, despite policy alignment, Wood (2014) identifies tension arising from the emphasis on school readiness and formal assessments, potentially undermining PBL's implementation. The Welsh Government's (2022) guidelines for nursery settings advocate open-ended, exploratory learning, yet practical challenges remain in balancing policy ideals with external accountability pressures. This tension illustrates a significant challenge in translating supportive policy into consistent practice.

Critical Perspectives and Limitations

Although PBL is beneficial, implementation varies depending on educator training quality and resource availability (EEF, 2023). These variations can lead to unequal developmental outcomes, reflecting Siraj-Blatchford et al.'s (2002) earlier findings. Furthermore, Wood (2014) notes that educators often face pressures to prioritise measurable academic outcomes over less quantifiable benefits of play. Additionally, Pyle et al. (2018) argue that PBL research often overlooks cultural and socio-economic factors influencing play practices, underscoring the need for contextually nuanced research to understand PBL's effectiveness fully.

Conclusion

This review illustrates that PBL positively impacts children's cognitive, social-emotional, and language development, aligning well with the Curriculum for Wales. Recent research by Fisher et al. (2022) further supports these findings, emphasising the effectiveness of PBL in promoting holistic early childhood development. However, implementation variability remains a significant barrier, primarily influenced by educator competence, training, and external assessment pressures. The OECD (2023) has similarly identified educator training as a critical determinant of successful play-based learning implementation internationally. The Curriculum for Wales offers a strong theoretical foundation for PBL, but further research is essential to ensure consistent and effective application across diverse educational settings. Addressing training disparities and mitigating external pressures on educators will be crucial for maximising the benefits of play-based learning in early childhood education.

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Methodological Considerations

This research project adopts a qualitative methodology, underpinned by a constructivist paradigm, to explore whether children learn better through play-based learning (PBL). A qualitative approach is particularly suited to investigating the intricate and socially constructed nature of early years education. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative methods prioritise depth and meaning, capturing the subjective experiences and perspectives of participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). This is especially valuable in early childhood contexts where learners' developmental progress is multidimensional and influenced by social, emotional, and cultural factors.

Sample

The sample for this study will consist of six early years practitioners employed within a maintained nursery school in South Wales. Participants will be selected using purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling in which individuals are chosen based on specific characteristics and relevance to the research topic (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2016). All participants will have a minimum of one year's experience delivering play-based learning under the Curriculum for Wales or EYFS framework.

This sample size, while small, is appropriate for qualitative research, where the goal is to achieve depth rather than breadth (Denscombe, 2021). The selected practitioners are likely to provide rich, experience-based insights into the implementation and perceived outcomes of PBL in their settings. Children and parents were not included in the sample due to ethical and logistical considerations. Gaining informed consent from children, alongside ensuring safeguarding measures, introduces complex variables that are beyond the current scope. Similarly, while parents could offer valuable perspectives, they do not have direct pedagogical responsibility, which limits the relevance of their contributions to the core research aim.

Purposive sampling was selected over random or stratified sampling as it allows the researcher to draw from a targeted population with expertise in the research subject. Probability-based methods, although valuable in large-scale studies aiming for generalisability, are less suited to the context of small-scale, in-depth educational research where understanding participant perspectives is key (Silverman, 2020). In addition, this purposive approach facilitates the inclusion of a range of practitioner perspectives, allowing for diversity in experience and pedagogical philosophy to emerge within the data. This not only enhances the richness of the findings but also supports a more balanced representation of practice across different classroom environments. Selecting practitioners who are directly involved in the day-to-day delivery of play-based learning ensures that the insights collected are grounded in lived realities rather than theoretical assumptions. This is particularly important in

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educational research where policies may not always align with the realities of implementation on the ground (O'Toole and Beckett, 2016).

Chosen Method

The primary method of data collection will be semi-structured interviews. These are widely used in educational research because they strike a balance between flexibility and consistency. A set of open-ended questions will guide the conversation, allowing for probing where necessary to clarify responses or explore emerging themes (King and Horrocks, 2010). Interviews will be conducted in a private setting within the nursery environment to ensure confidentiality and reduce participant anxiety. Each will last between 30 and 45 minutes and will be audio-recorded and transcribed with participant consent.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen over other qualitative methods such as unstructured interviews or focus groups for several reasons. Unstructured interviews, while open-ended, may not provide sufficient focus to ensure all research objectives are addressed. Focus groups, though useful for generating discussion, can be influenced by group dynamics and may inhibit individual participants from expressing honest or critical views (Bryman, 2016).

Observations and questionnaires were also considered but ultimately rejected. Observations would require sustained access to classroom settings and may compromise the naturalness of children's interactions due to the researcher's presence. They also raise ethical challenges related to filming or recording young children. Questionnaires, typically more suited to quantitative research, offer limited scope for exploring nuanced perspectives. As such, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate tool for accessing the rich, contextual data required for this study (Denscombe, 2021).

Additionally, the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to tailor follow-up questions based on participant responses, encouraging a more conversational tone. This adaptability is especially valuable when exploring educational philosophies or reflective practices, which often emerge in nuanced and complex ways (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). To further support reliability, an interview guide will be piloted prior to the main data collection phase. This allows for refinement of questioning techniques and ensures that the line of inquiry remains aligned with the study's aims while accommodating the personal and professional language familiar to early years practitioners.

Limitations and Biases

Despite their strengths, semi-structured interviews are not without limitations. One of the key concerns is the potential for social desirability bias, where participants may provide responses they perceive as professionally acceptable rather than completely truthful (Robson and McCartan, 2016). This is particularly relevant in educational

contexts where practitioners may feel pressure to present themselves or their practice in a positive light.

Additionally, the Hawthorne Effect may influence participant responses. This phenomenon occurs when individuals alter their behaviour or answers because they are aware of being observed or studied (McCambridge, Witton and Elbourne, 2014). To mitigate this, the researcher will clearly communicate the purpose of the study, ensure confidentiality, and create a comfortable interview environment. The Halo Effect is another risk, whereby the researcher's perceptions of the participant influence the interpretation of data. To counter this, interview data will be transcribed and coded systematically, and peer checking will be employed where feasible.

Another limitation relates to the small, context-specific sample, which limits the generalisability of findings. However, qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisation but rather for analytic generalisation, whereby insights can inform practice in similar contexts (Patton, 2015).

Triangulation

Triangulation enhances the credibility and reliability of qualitative research by integrating multiple data sources, methods, or researchers (Flick, 2018). Although this study will not employ methodological triangulation due to time and resource constraints, it will incorporate analyst triangulation. This involves a second researcher reviewing the interview transcripts and coding, thereby reducing individual bias in the interpretation of findings.

Data will also be cross-referenced with relevant literature on PBL to ensure consistency between empirical findings and existing research. This approach supports a higher level of validity by demonstrating that the data is grounded both in participant experiences and in established theory (Silverman, 2020).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity is fundamental in conducting research, particularly when it involves professionals working with children. Ethical approval will be obtained through the appropriate institutional procedures. Participants will receive detailed information sheets and consent forms outlining their right to withdraw at any time, assurances of confidentiality, and the use of data solely for academic purposes.

Additionally, care will be taken to ensure that the data collected is stored securely in line with GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018). Audio recordings and transcripts will be anonymised and kept in password-protected files. Participants will also be invited to review their interview transcripts to verify accuracy and provide any additional insights, a process known as member checking, which supports the credibility of the research (Bryman, 2016).

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Transparency and respect for participant autonomy will be prioritised throughout the research process. Building trust is essential to obtaining honest and meaningful responses, particularly when addressing sensitive issues such as pedagogical effectiveness or professional challenges in early years practice.

Justification of Research Design

This qualitative research design is well-suited to the study's aim of understanding whether children learn better through PBL. It allows for in-depth exploration of practitioner beliefs and experiences, which are essential in unpacking how PBL is implemented and perceived in early years settings. By using purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews, the study balances structure with flexibility, providing a coherent yet adaptable framework for gathering meaningful data.

In rejecting other methods such as large-scale surveys or structured observations, the researcher prioritises depth and relevance over breadth and generalisability. The inclusion of triangulation and clear ethical safeguards further strengthens the integrity of the research process.

Furthermore, this design acknowledges the dynamic and socially constructed nature of early learning environments. It values the voices of practitioners and seeks to represent the complexity of their work, which is often reduced in purely outcomes-focused evaluations.

In conclusion, this methodological approach is grounded in robust academic principles and tailored to the specific demands of early years research. It enables a contextually rich investigation into PBL, with the potential to inform both practice and policy. Through thoughtful design, rigorous ethics, and reflective analysis, the study will contribute valuable insights into how play-based learning shapes educational outcomes in early childhood settings.

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Ethical Considerations and Data Management

Conducting research in educational contexts, particularly when it involves human participants such as educators or children, requires a high level of ethical responsibility. This section outlines the approach to research ethics and data handling for this study, focusing on principles drawn from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) Research Integrity and Ethics Policy (2022), the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the Data Protection Act (2018). These frameworks provide the foundation for safeguarding participants' rights and ensuring that research is carried out responsibly, lawfully, and transparently.

Research Integrity and Ethical Approval

This study will adhere to the UWTSD Research Integrity and Ethics Policy, which sets out expectations for responsible research conduct. Ethical approval will be sought from the university's Research Ethics Committee prior to any data collection. The committee will assess the study's aims, methodology, participant recruitment procedures, and risk management strategies to ensure compliance with institutional standards (UWTSD, 2022). Ethical approval is a necessary step not only to safeguard participants, but also to uphold academic integrity and public trust in educational research (BERA, 2018).

Research integrity involves ensuring honesty, rigour, transparency, and accountability throughout the research process. Researchers must avoid misconduct such as plagiarism, data fabrication, or selective reporting. The project will demonstrate integrity through accurate reporting of findings, transparency about methods and limitations, and clear documentation of decisions made throughout the study (Resnik, 2020).

In addition to ethical approval, a thorough risk assessment will be carried out to identify and address potential ethical dilemmas that may arise during the research process. This includes the potential emotional impact on participants when reflecting on their professional practice, particularly if they have faced challenges implementing play-based learning. The researcher will remain alert to any signs of discomfort and will offer participants the opportunity to pause or withdraw at any point. This is in line with the ethical principle of beneficence—maximising benefit while minimising harm (BERA, 2018).

Ethical research also involves cultural and contextual sensitivity. Practitioners come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and the researcher will remain mindful of how language, tone, and questioning may be interpreted differently. Respecting the dignity and autonomy of all participants is central to ethical practice (British Psychological Society, 2021). Training on cultural competence and inclusive research practices will inform the interview approach to ensure that no participant feels marginalised or misunderstood.

Moreover, ethical considerations extend beyond the immediate research process. The dissemination of findings must also be handled with integrity. The final report will ensure that quotes and interpretations are faithfully represented, and feedback will be sought from participants if their views are presented in case studies or extended examples. This helps ensure transparency and mutual respect, fostering a research relationship built on trust and shared purpose (UWTSD, 2022).

Informed Consent

A cornerstone of ethical research is informed consent. According to BERA (2018), participants must be provided with comprehensive information about the research, including its purpose, methods, benefits, risks, and their rights. In this study, all participants—early years practitioners—will be given a detailed information sheet and a consent form. The language used will be clear and accessible, avoiding academic jargon. Time will be allowed for participants to consider the information, ask questions, and decide freely whether to participate.

Consent will be voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time, without explanation or penalty. This aligns with Article 7 of the GDPR (2016), which states that consent must be freely given, specific, informed, and unambiguous. Furthermore, participants will not be deceived or misled, and no incentives will be offered that could coerce participation.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Protecting participant anonymity and ensuring confidentiality are ethical obligations and legal requirements. All data collected will be anonymised through the use of pseudonyms, and no identifying information will be included in any published material. Audio recordings of interviews will be transcribed and immediately pseudonymised. Original recordings will be stored securely and deleted once transcription is complete.

Confidentiality will also extend to how data is shared within the research team. Only the principal researcher and academic supervisor will have access to the raw data. As outlined in the UWTSD (2022) data management policy, data will be stored on encrypted, password-protected devices. Any physical documentation (e.g., consent forms) will be stored in a locked cabinet, accessible only to the researcher.

Data Collection and Storage

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews, recorded with the consent of each participant. As per GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018), personal data must be collected and processed lawfully, fairly, and transparently. Interview

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transcripts will be stored on university-approved secure storage systems and backed up according to UWTSD's data management guidance.

Data will be retained for no longer than necessary. For this undergraduate project, data will be kept until the assessment is marked and verified, after which it will be deleted or destroyed securely. This complies with the principle of data minimisation, which aims to limit the retention of personal information (ICO, 2023).

Participants' Rights and Access to Data

Under GDPR, participants have the right to access, rectify, or erase their personal data. They also have the right to restrict or object to processing and the right to data portability (ICO, 2023). In this study, participants will be informed of these rights and provided with contact details to make a data access request.

Participants will also be offered the opportunity to review their own interview transcript. This process, known as member checking, supports the accuracy of data and enhances the credibility of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Corrections or clarifications suggested by participants will be respected and incorporated appropriately.

Working with Vulnerable Groups

Although this study does not directly involve children, the research context includes early years settings where children are present. Therefore, it is essential to apply heightened ethical sensitivity to the environment. Practitioners may discuss individual children during interviews, and steps must be taken to avoid indirect identification. Any reference to a child's characteristics, behaviour, or background will be anonymised.

Safeguarding responsibilities remain in place, even in indirect research. Should a participant disclose information that raises a safeguarding concern, the researcher is obliged to follow appropriate reporting procedures. This will be clearly communicated to participants during the consent process (NSPCC, 2024).

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The ethical conduct of research also requires self-awareness. The researcher must be conscious of their own position, beliefs, and assumptions and how these might influence the research process. Reflexivity will be embedded throughout the study via a reflective journal, where the researcher will document thoughts, decisions, and potential biases (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

This reflexive practice also helps to reduce the influence of the Halo Effect, where a participant's positive or negative traits can bias the researcher's interpretation. Recognising these unconscious tendencies allows the researcher to adopt a more balanced, transparent analytical approach (Robson and McCartan, 2016).

The Hawthorne Effect

One limitation in research involving interviews is the Hawthorne Effect, where participants alter their responses because they are aware of being studied (McCambridge, Witton and Elbourne, 2014). In this project, the researcher will minimise this effect by building rapport with participants and conducting interviews in familiar, relaxed environments. Emphasising the non-judgemental and exploratory nature of the study will also encourage more candid responses.

Academic Responsibility and Honesty

In accordance with the UWTSD Research Integrity Policy, the researcher must demonstrate academic honesty at all times. This includes citing all sources accurately, avoiding plagiarism, and acknowledging limitations. Results will be reported truthfully, without exaggeration or omission. Any unexpected findings or deviations from the research plan will be documented transparently.

Ethical responsibility also includes crediting contributions from participants and academic support staff appropriately. Where peer debriefing or triangulation methods are used, these will be acknowledged in the final write-up. Ethical research is not only about following rules but about upholding the values of respect, trust, and professionalism (BERA, 2018).

Conclusion

In summary, the ethical framework for this study is robust, drawing upon institutional, national, and international guidelines. The research design is constructed to ensure respect for participants, confidentiality of data, and transparency throughout the process. Ethical approval, informed consent, and secure data handling form the foundation of this project's integrity.

By adhering to policies from UWTSD (2022), BERA (2018), GDPR (2016), and the Data Protection Act (2018), the study will protect participants' rights and deliver research that is responsible, respectful, and ethically sound. Ethical research is not an add-on; it is a fundamental part of scholarly practice that shapes every stage of the research journey.

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