

What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage?

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Dedication

For Isaac and Ezra - never stop playing!

For the educators who advocate for play, thank you!

For the children (past, present and future) – we *will* change the educational narrative to recognise the power of play in education!

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To the educators who spark awe, wonder, magic and curiosity in the minds of all those who cross your path, keep advocating for play. You really do put children first.

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Most importantly, to my boys. You are my inspiration and my motivation. Keep inventing, exploring, creating and playing in the way you want to. Continue to light up your imagination and create your own magic whilst being your authentic selves. I love you more than anything.

Abstract

This study explores the question 'What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage?' through a comprehensive examination of child development research, educational policy and neuroscience. It also explores the theories around decision making in educational leadership. Building upon the literature review, the research study collected quantitative and gualitative data through guestionnaires and interviews of school leaders in England. This data was analysed and evaluated in relation to the key threads which were identified to best explore the research question. They key threads identified and explored in the dissertation are: leaders' knowledge and experience; systems and politics; leaders' confidence and certainty in decision making; the impact of values, beliefs, perceptions and biases, and the significance of connections and collaboration. The dissertation, where possible, also considers the context and circumstances in relation to the participants involved within the study. It explores the significance of the findings for school leaders and the education sector, along with suggestions for further research. From going into teaching with the passion to support children in finding the magic of learning through play, I hope that, two decades later, this study can empower others to implement play-based learning beyond EYFS.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background Information

As school leaders navigate the complex landscape of education, the decisions they make can have a significant impact on a child's journey in education. This dissertation explores decisions that headteachers in England take when considering play as a pedagogical approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Through a comprehensive examination of research around the importance of play, the theories around decision making in educational leadership, and through a research study that join the two, I hope this dissertation identifies the nuanced choices that educational leaders make and the impact of such decisions, in relation to play-based learning beyond EYFS.

Understanding the decisions that educational leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond EYFS is timely. In the current post-pandemic educational landscape, we have seen an increase in the needs of children in school, both academically and in relation to their social, emotional mental health (Green et al., 2022). The impact of the increase in needs is far reaching: educators who are tirelessly supporting children to provide the best education they can, within the realms of statutory guidance; the wider school community who strive for positive change; day-to-day life for families of those with needs; and most importantly, the negative impact on the individual child (Spiteri et al., 2023). In addition to this, with staffing and retention issues, financial pressures, changes with OFSTED and a curriculum review looming under the new Labour government, there is an underlying current of determination from educators who want to drive substantial changes to positively impact the needs of our children in society. Despite the United Kingdom having the youngest starting age for Primary Education (Figure 1) at least twelve countries who start primary education later than they do in England are reported to have higher educational outcomes when looking at the average combined PISA scores for Maths, Reading and Science (OECD, 2023, p. 841). Though still not common practice in England, due to a combination of the above, play-based learning is becoming more evident beyond EYFS. Through identifying what impacts

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school leaders' decisions when considering learning beyond EYFS, I hope this dissertation will empower others to see the power in implementing play-based learning beyond EYFS.

Figure 1: Starting and ending age of students in compulsory education and by level of education (2019):

		Compulsor	y education	Primary	education	Lower second	lary education	Upper second	lary education
		Starting age	Ending age	Starting age	Ending age	Starting age	Ending age	Starting age	Ending age
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
OECD									
Australia		6	17	5	11	12	15	16	17
Austria		6	15	6	9	10	13	14	17
Belgium		6	18	6	11	12	13	14	17
Canada		6	16-18	6	11	12	14	15	17
Chie		6	18	6	11	12	13	14	17
Colombia		5	16	6	10	11	14	15	16
Costa Rica		4	16	6	11	12	14	15	16
Czech Republic		6	15	6	10	11	14	15	18
Denmark		6	16	6	12	13	15	16	18
Estonia		7	16	7	12	13	15	16	18
Finland		7	16	7	12	13	15	16	18
France	1.2	3	16	6	10	11	14	15	17
Germany		6	18	6	9	10	15	16	18
Greece		5	14-15	6	11	12	14	15	17
Hungary		3	16	7	10	11	14	15	18
loeland		6	16	6	12	13	15	16	19
keland		6	16	5	12	13	15	16	17
Israel		3	17	6	11	12	14	15	17
Italy		6	16	6	10	11	13	14	18
Japan		6	15	6	11	12	14	15	17
Korea		6	14	6	11	12	14	15	17
Latvia		5	16	7	12	13	15	16	18
Lithunia		7	16	7	10	11	16	17	18
Luxembourg		4	16	6	11	12	14	15	18
Mexico		3	17	6	11	12	14	15	17
Netherlands		5	18	6	11	12	14	15	17
New Zealand		5	16	5	10	11	14	15	17
Norway		6	16	6	12	13	15	16	18
Poland		6	16	7	12	13	15	16	18
Portugal		6	18	6	11	12	14	15	17
Slovak Republic		6	16	6	9	10	14	15	18
Slovenia		6	14	6	11	12	14	15	18
Spain		6	16	6	11	12	14	15	17
Sweden		6	15	7	12	13	15	16	18
Switzerland		4-5	15	7	12	13	15	16	19
Turkey		5-6	17	6	9	10	13	14	17
United Kingdom		4-5	16	4-5	10	11	13	14	17
United States		4-6	17	6	11	12	14	15	17

1.2 Main Research Question

The main question for this dissertation is: 'What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage?' Understanding the decisions that leaders make, and why those decisions were made, when it comes to learning through play beyond EYFS has not yet been researched extensively. The main research question will be discussed through the exploration of several key threads identified in Figure 2: leaders' knowledge and experience; systems and politics; leaders' confidence and certainty in decision making; the impact of values, beliefs, perceptions and biases, and the significance of connections and collaboration.

In addition to this, and underpinning the key threads, will be the consideration of individual contexts and circumstances, recognising that this can be a significant factor in decision making.

1.3 Conceptual Framework

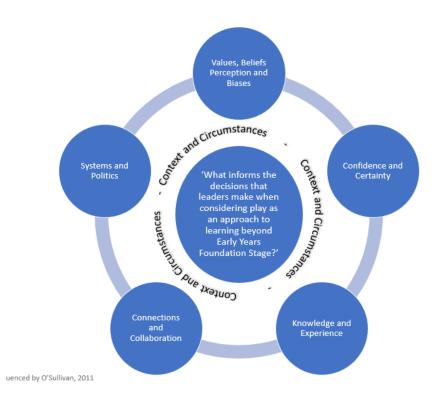
In order to answer the main research question, a range of research and theories will be considered within this dissertation. Dating back centuries, child centred philosophers and psychologists such as Piaget, Froebel and Vygotsky suggest that play is essential to a child's development and children have a natural desire to explore and play in all contexts and situations. Practitioners in EYFS often value the wealth of theories and framework of play in their day-to-day practice, however, due to demands of the curriculum, the English education system, and changes to expectations, more often than not, play stops at the end of EYFS (Fisher, 2020). Irrespective of research suggesting that play builds emotional regulation, resilience and helps regulate our nervous system (Fortune, 2022) and regardless of a growing understanding of the research from neuroscientists which discovered the prefrontal cortex of the brain is positively impacted by play, stimulating the growth of new neurons (Pellis & Pellis, 2013), learning through play tends to end within education before children's brains are ready for it to stop. In addition to the above, educational policy is a crucial factor when considering why play often ends at the end of EYFS. In 2010, the Cambridge review (Alexander, 2010) suggested that play should extend beyond EYFS, however the study, which included contributions from 1,052 organisations, "was frozen in the pre-election period...and was never taken up again" (Fisher, 2020, p. 9). Instead, we find ourselves at a time where government documentation, such as Bold Beginnings (Ofsted, 2017) or Best Start in Life (Ofsted, 2022) influence decisions around formal learning, not just from Year One but, within the last year of EYFS (Reception) for some schools. This dissertation will explore the existing theories around learning through play and identify why schools often move straight into traditional teaching in KS1 and continue to implement a formal approach throughout the following key stages.

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In addition to exploring research around learning through play mentioned above, other frameworks discussed in this assignment will link to decision making. One important aspect of being a school leader is the ability to make effective decisions for the children, stakeholders, and communities that the school serves. Drawing upon research which indicates the importance of decision making within educational leadership (Amalia et al., 2020; Kinchington, 2023; O'Sullivan, 2011), this dissertation will consider a range of decision making models and approaches. It will also explore perceptions and biases in decision making, the importance of collaboration and the importance of leaders' confidence in the decisions being made. This dissertation will discuss decision making frameworks in relation to the complexities of educational leaders' making decisions whether or not play-based learning should continue beyond EYFS.

The framework illustrated in Figure 2 below, has been developed by combining findings from the literature review alongside the analysis of research. Figure 2 illustrates the complexities in exploring the question *What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage?*' and identifies the main threads of this study: leaders' knowledge and experience; systems and politics; leaders' confidence and certainty in decision making; the impact of values, beliefs, perceptions and biases, and the significance of connections and collaboration.

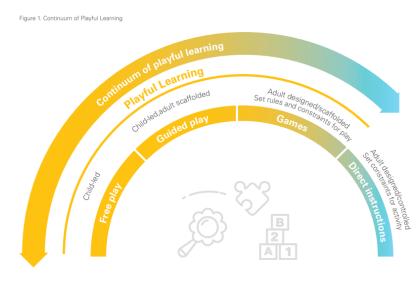
Figure 2: Conceptual framework illustrating the complexities of decision making in relation to play based learning beyond EYFS



1.4 Play-based learning definition

For the purpose of the dissertation, the definition of play-based learning will be: *an approach where children are able to develop concepts, knowledge and skills through play.* There are differing views on defining what play-based learning is, with suggestions that free play is most important and not as beneficial if adults are involved within the play, however, research explores how there is, at times, need for adult involvement in play as it is a continuum (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Play is often child initiated, though at times it may have an element of adult led as the continuum can incorporate various levels of adult involvement in play-based learning (Figure 3). The aim of igniting intrinsic motivation, curiosity and active engagement in the learning process remains at the forefront of play-based learning whilst, at the same time, fostering a love for learning, deeper understanding of concepts, knowledge and skills.

Figure 3: Continuum of Playful Learning (Yee et al., 2022)



Source: Adapted from Zosh, Jennifer N., et al. Learning through play: a review of the evidence. LEGO Foundation, 2017

1.5 Structure of Dissertation

Following this introduction, Chapter Two will consist of two literature reviews, the first exploring existing theories and research around the importance of play, and the second will provide insights into frameworks around leadership and decision making in education. There will also be the discussion around the links that could be drawn between decision making frameworks that educational leaders may use in relation to whether or not they choose to take play-based learning beyond EYFS. Chapter Three will explore the research design in exploring how leaders make choices in relation to play-based learning. The chapter will look at the research paradigm, the methodological choices during the study, and the ethical considerations. Chapter Four will analyse and evaluate the data collated from questionnaires and interviews which headteachers in England volunteered to participate in and draw links with the literature review. Finally, Chapter Five will summarise the key findings of the study, answering the research question *'What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond EYFS?*' and discuss limitations of the study. The conclusion will also consider recommendations for future research and reflect on the overall dissertation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review

This chapter will explore two key areas of literature. Firstly, the literature around playbased learning beyond the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and, secondly, the chapter will review the literature which explores how educational leaders make decisions. Within both, I will consider the main theories, gaps in research and what is needed to further understand what informs the decisions that leaders make when considering learning through play beyond EYFS.

2.2 Systematic review on play-based learning beyond EYFS

The systematic research review focuses on identifying what has been written about play based learning beyond EYFS, this is to recognise what information is already available to help support leaders in making their decisions about whether or not play based learning should continue beyond EYFS. The research review initially intended to be a review of literature around leaders' perceptions of play-based learning beyond EYFS, though the initial search found there was very little written on this. Whilst understanding that not all research linked to the topic can be covered in a literature review, especially within qualitative research (Holley & Harris, 2019), the keywords, databases searched, and the parameters for the search were amended to widen the literature review and expanded to look at play-based learning beyond EYFS. Key educational policies and papers were also integrated into the review.

The research review identified the significance of several theorists, regularly referred to when looking at play-based learning after the EYFS and explores how those theories have evolved over time. The review considers the reasons for learning through play beyond EYFS and the barriers that have been identified in theoretical, and some empirical, research. The research review also explores the relevant policy, research and information from England's Government and considers how these compare to other countries within the UK.

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2.3 Significant research which explore play-based learning beyond EYFS

Child development theorists and researchers are at the forefront of practice within EYFS, many of these theories also explain how children learn through play beyond the age of EYFS, however, the practice we see in classrooms beyond EYFS does not always consider these theories (Bryce-Clegg, 2017; Fisher, 2020; Quirk & Pettett, 2021). The foundations of play are based on the classical childhood development theorists and psychologists, such as Froebel, Vygotsky, and Piaget. Froebel's principles around play typically cover birth to around 8 years, creating the first Kindergarten school for children aged four to seven (McNair & Powell, 2021). He rejected the traditional role where teachers viewed the children as passive learners (Bowlby, 2016) and emphasised the importance of play in childhood (Rose, 2022). Vygotsky (1978) explored how learning requires relationships and interaction, elements that can be found within play. He considered the notion of how children develop their play through interaction with children, educators, parents, and other adults (Nicolopoulou, 1993). Vygotsky also connected creativity with the imagination element of play; he suggested that sociodramatic play benefits children through their primary school years, (Bodrova & Leong, 2024). However, within the current education system, most sociodramatic play is not used for learning beyond EYFS.

One of the most prominent play theorists mentioned in much of the research in the literature review was Piaget (1929), Piaget's theory of play contributes to his larger theory around cognitive development, which explores four stages that a child goes through to develop their cognition: Sensorimotor Stage; Preoperational Stage; Concrete Operational Stage, and Formal Operational Stage. Piaget (1952) emphasized the importance of giving opportunities for play to allow for children to explore, experiment, and understand the world around them as and what is appropriate for each individual child within each stage. We notice that Piaget (1952) does not suggest that play ends when children reach the age of four or five. Other researchers such as Montessori, Loris Malaguzzi and Blenkin (Bradbury & Swailes, 2022) have variations within their theories

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on play. However, the commonality between them all is that they suggest learning through play is essential for a child's development and it should continue beyond EYFS.

2.4 Benefits of play-based learning beyond EYFS

The research review identified many ways why play is a universal phenomenon and should be the main teaching practice for all early childhood settings from birth through to eight (NAEYC, 2020). As with all mammals, play is a primal drive in the limbic system of our brains (Panksepp & Biven, 2012), an evolutionary survival trait (Kingston-Hughes, 2022) which not only supports children's bones, lungs, and heart development but also the brain development. Neuroscientists explore how play positively impacts the prefrontal cortex of the brain, stimulating the growth of new neurons (Pellis & Pellis, 2013) and helps with higher learning. Research, which dates back centuries, suggests that play is essential to a child's development and more recent research suggests play has been shown to support children's development in an unprecedented number of areas, such as those linked to motor, cognitive, social, and emotional skills (UNICEF, 2018). Research over the last few decades identifies how play supports development of children's: language and communication (Lepisto, 2019); creativity (Whitebread & Basilio, 2013); problem solving (Ramani & Brownell, 2013); self-regulation (Savina, 2014): emotional understanding and wellbeing (Berk et al., 2006; Wieder, 2017) and theory of mind (Smith, 2005). In contrast, children who do not engage in social play are more likely to demonstrate mental health and wellbeing issues; problems with peer relationships, and poor academic outcomes (Coplan & Arbeau, 2009; Rubin et al., 2009) impacting difficulties within childhood and beyond.

Research goes beyond suggesting play is key for all early childhood settings, stating how it is also essential for older children. Play is so fundamental to child development that it is specified in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as Article 31 (UN, 1989). Children's right to play is protected by international law and is subsequently absolute (Waters-Davies, 2022) and cannot be removed from childhood. We know that, "Play must be the right of every child. Not a

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privilege. After all, when regarded as a privilege, it is granted to some and denied to others, creating further inequalities" (Souto-Manning, 2017, p. 785) and, therefore, a number of children will need further support to implement their right to play. (Waters-Davies, 2022). Research indicates that play can be more effective than many traditional interventions in terms of supporting all children to learn (Atkinson et al., 2017; Murphy, 2022) and there is a strong rationale in recent research to ensure that play is given the priority it deserves in the lives of all of our children (Kingston-Hughes, 2022). This needs to be considered as a factor when deciding how children learn beyond EYFS. However, the recognition of the importance of play for children's learning has not yet been reflected in accountability structures, assessment and pedagogical approaches or the curricula design within English education systems (Courtois et al., 2024).

2.5 Changing perceptions on play from the government

In 1998 the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) published the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998), shortly followed by the National Numeracy Strategy (DfEE, 1999) which were teacher led documentation for Year One upwards and "highly prescriptive" (Fisher, 2020, p. 5) in the way in which it was expected to be delivered. Around the same time, the government introduced statutory outcomes for Reception (DfEE, 1996) and, by creating *'Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage'* (QCA & *DfEE, 2000*) a divide between Reception and Year One was also created (Fisher, 2020).

Following this, the Rose Review (Rose, 2007) suggested that the goals at the end of the Foundation Stage were unachievable for many children and also suggested that "the Early Years Foundation Stage and the renewed literacy framework must be compatible with each other" (Rose, 2007, p. 70). The Cambridge review (Alexander, 2010) built upon this and suggested that play should be extended beyond EYFS, however the study, which included contributions from 1052 organisations, did not continue after the coalition government in 2010 (Fisher, 2020). The changes to the National Curriculum in 2014 (DfE, 2014) increased the focus on subject and reinforced the view that "a successful education [is] passing exams" (Parker & Leat, 2021, p. 165)

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whilst EYFS, as mentioned, became involved in the government agenda of ensuring Reception teachers should prepare the children to be school ready. Bradbury (209) argues that early childhood education in England has become increasingly 'schoolified,' with the role of play being diminished within reception. However, as Fisher (2020) explores, the data in relation to the school readiness agenda identifies that there are many children in England who do not achieve the Good Level of Development at the end of EYFS, yet they were not aligned with the increase in National Curriculum expectations. This poses the question, why, if children are not achieving their ELGs, are we moving away from play during critical milestones in children's development?

In the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008), the first guidance which covered birth to five for all providers, play was a central principle in underpinning both the delivery of the EYFS and the development and learning for young children. Yet in 2011, the Early Years Foundation Stage Review stated that the areas of learning "must be delivered through planned, purposeful play, with a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities" (Tickell, 2011, p. 19). Around the same time, a government report claimed that the main aim for the foundation stage was to "produce high levels of 'school readiness' for all children' (Allen, 2011, p. 19) and by 2015, the Ofsted guidance 'Teaching and Play in the early years – a balancing act?" (Ofsted, 2015) described successful provision as having literacy and maths as a priority, and taught sessions based on learning objectives should be included within EYFS. Jarvis (2018) argues that Ofsted's subsequent 2017 research on the reception years' curriculum (Ofsted, 2017) signalled "an underlying policy shift" (Jarvis, 2018, p. 301) as 'Bold Beginnings' (Ofsted, 2017) stated that reading is at the core of the reception curriculum and advocated heavily for adult-led learning through direct instruction. Jarvis (2018) conducted an analysis of a series of Ofsted reports and recommendations, she felt there was an "unevidenced attack" on play-based pedagogy with a disregard for research findings about how children learn.

As mentioned, despite the United Kingdom having the youngest starting age for primary education (Figure 1) at least twelve countries, who start primary education later than they do in the United Kingdom, are reported to have higher educational outcomes when looking at the average combined PISA scores for Maths, Reading and Science (OECD, 2023). Yet, in the current post-pandemic educational landscape, we have seen an increase in the needs of children in school, both academically and socially (Eboo Alwani et al., 2024). Within the decisions made when considering play-based learning beyond EYFS, leaders need to consider how many countries across the world advocate for play, not least the other three countries within the United Kingdom: Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

Northern Ireland's Foundation Stage Curricular Guidance (CCEA, 2023) provides guidance for the Foundation Stage (ages 4 - 6). Their curriculum states that children learn best when they "are involved in play that is challenging, takes account of their developmental stage and needs and builds on their own interests and experiences" (CCEA, 2019, p. 15). In 2010, Wales became the first country in the world to pass a law on children's play (Play Wales, 2024). Following this they have since developed a curriculum to align with a play-based approach (Hwb, 2020). The curriculum gives teachers freedom to teach children aged 3-16 in a way that supports all their learners and the government advise that, as part of their school day, children have a right to be given time and space to play. In Scotland, the Early Years are seen to span pre-birth to the ages of 8 and the Scottish Government and local partners state they will continue to promote play-based learning, including in early primary. They suggest "there is no longterm advantage to children when there is an over-emphasis on systematic teaching before 6 or 7 years of age" (Education Scotland, 2007, p. 6) and believe early learning and primary school transition is "smoother for the child if play remains and continues as the main vehicle for their learning in P1 (Year 1) and beyond" (Education Scotland, 2020, p. 45). Though England's DfE have not explicitly stated children should start formal learning in Year One, when the DfE's frameworks and guidance are contrasted with the

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other countries of the UK, it is apparent that we have significant gaps within the documentation in England in reference to play-based learning beyond EYFS.

Despite the 'school readiness' agenda in England, some schools have made the decision to consider the research and are embedding play-based approaches all the way through primary (Ward, 2019). In their decisions about play, leaders need to consider that paragraph 186 in Ofsted's EY Inspection Handbook states "Teaching is a broad term that covers the many ways in which adults help young children learn." (Ofsted, 2024b). In addition, the statutory EYFS framework (DfE, 2023b) states that the government "does not prescribe a particular teaching approach. Play is essential for children's development. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play and learning that is guided by adults" (DfE, 2023b, p. 17). Likewise, the National Curriculum states that it "provides an outline of core knowledge around which teachers can develop exciting and stimulating lessons to promote the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills as part of the wider school curriculum" (DfE, 2014, p. 6), but nowhere does it explicitly state how this should be taught. With the removal of statutory assessment at the end of Key Stage One (Standards and Testing Agency, 2023); a curriculum review instigated by the newly elected political party, Labour (DfE, 2024), and an increase in recognising the importance of evidence informed practice as a profession (Education Endowment Foundation, 2024), leaders in education can no longer ignore the need to explore the benefits of play for all learners.

2.6 The barriers to play based learning beyond EYFS

An NFER study found the majority of Key Stage One (KS1) teachers felt it was difficult to move from a play-based approach in the Foundation Stage to a more formal learning environment (Sanders et al., 2005). The research around transition into Key Stage One suggest that this is due to the barriers to implementing play-based learning such as: Ofsted; statutory assessments; knowledge; workload, and implicit messages from governments (Ephgrave, 2017; Fisher, 2020; Quirk & Pettett, 2021). Fisher (2022) highlights the "persistent tensions between teachers' theories and beliefs about play, and

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their classroom practice" (Fisher, 2022, p. 804) which is likely due to the context of policy and curriculum pressures in England (Bottrill, 2018). Other barriers identified in research are listed as: the role of the adult; parental expectations, and a top-down approach to learning (Woods, 2018). One of the most significant barriers to play based learning, though there is currently limited research, are the views, perceptions and decision making from headteachers and senior leaders around play-based learning. Fisher (2022) suggests that leaders' own knowledge and experience impacts decisions on whether or not they support play-based learning. Fisher's study (2022) identified that 98% of teachers in Year One and Two whose children did not play every day felt that "headteachers not giving support" was the main reason their children did not have the opportunity to play. However, of those schools where headteachers did embrace play in Key Stage One, they either had experience of teaching in the early years or they had listened and learnt from teachers who advocated for play in Key Stage One (Fisher, 2022). This suggests that if senior leaders do not fully embrace the decisions for play based learning, then the impact of this will be evident within classroom practice and with individual children.

2.7 Systematic review for decision making in educational leadership

Through the literature review, I recognise the importance of a leader's decision in how the school approaches learning beyond EYFS. Therefore, a second systematic research review was carried out focusing on identifying research which explored decision making in educational leadership. An initial search identified that there was no research specifically about leaders' decisions around play beyond EYFS. The keywords, databases searched for, publications and the parameters for the search were amended to widen the literature review. Some of the research identified was not specifically in relation to the English education system. This is, again, due to the limited research on headteacher's decision making in England.

2.8 Decision making in education

Decision making is one of the most important aspects of a headteacher's role, but it can be particularly complex, especially in the current educational landscape (Chitpin, 2020; Male, 2004; Shaked & Schechter, 2019). When looking at decision making, we know school leaders make many low level, routine decisions daily, some of which may happen automatically. However, they also need to make more complex decisions which can alter the educational direction for the children and the staff within their schools and are more likely to need thought and consideration. The focus, for this research, will be on the more complex decisions rather than the smaller, routine choices, though there will be some overlap.

The National Professional Qualification: Headship (DfE, 2020a) and the National Professional Qualification: Executive Leadership Framework (DfE, 2020b) mention that, when making decisions, headteachers must consider: the law and statutory information; financial budgets, and data and assessment. Both frameworks also mention that they are accountable for all decisions and that decisions around implementation must be "effective evidence-informed decisions" (DfE, 2020a, 2020b); Walker and Dimmock (2002) state that decision making is central to the role of headteachers in England and, the expectation is still that Headteachers are the people who make the decisions (Law & Glover, 2000; Male, 2004) despite the role changing over the years.

Research recognises that there are many influencing factors on a leaders' decision making such as: distributed leadership; involvement of teachers; resources; curriculum; local communities; parents, and government policies (Ni et al., 2017) yet the amount of training available on decision making for school leaders is minimal (Kinchington, 2023). Due to the current educational landscape, headteachers are expected to make more demanding decisions (Shaked & Schechter, 2019) but school leaders are not given access to any specific training linked to decision making within government led education qualifications.

The Non statutory Headteachers' standards (DfE, 2020c) suggest how headteachers are expected to consistently attain "high standards of principled and

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professional conduct" (DfE, 2020c). It states that headteachers: must accept responsibility; use effective processes of evaluation, and develop evidence-informed strategies for sustained school improvement (DfE, 2020c) however, decision making is not explicitly mentioned anywhere within the standards. It is becoming increasingly evident that, "school leaders need additional decision-making frameworks to enable them to succeed" (Shaked & Schechter, 2019, p. 575) but this does not appear to be available within the realms of government led leadership training.

2.9 Decision Making Frameworks and approaches

Though there are limited decision-making frameworks specific to education, there are many models which can be used to support leaders in education to make decisions. This section will explore the literature around the more common decision-making frameworks that may be appropriate for use within education; this includes, but is not limited to: rational decision making, including specific framework within this approach; bounded rotationality; political approached, collaborative decision-making approaches; intuitive decision-making approaches, and ethical decision making.

2.9.1 Rational approach to decision making

The rational approach to decision making identifies the importance of a decision-making process which: defines the problem; identifies alternatives to a problem; evaluates the solutions and selects which solution to use. For example, Simon (1977) suggests a four-step rational process which incorporates intelligence, design, choice and review rational approaches to decision making have been favoured within the limited research of decision making in education as many feel "decisions should be rational rather than intuitive" (Law & Glover, 2000, p. 18). However, the amount of time that a rational approach can take and the complexities of implementing the approach (O'Sullivan, 2011) can be perceived as barriers.

Though a common approach, rational models do not always consider how individual perceptions can alter the decisions that are made (O'Sullivan, 2011). In pure rational decision-making approaches, it is assumed that leaders know all the possibilities,

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the consequences, preferences for each consequence and can determine the preferred alternative (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2001). However, individual perceptions can be influenced by background, experiences, and social influence, (Berger, 2017). In addition to this, leaders' underlying self-perception, and the role they assign themselves to, impact the decisions they make (Kinchington, 2023). This, in turn impacts the possibilities, the consequences, the impact of the alternatives within the decision, and the preferred choice of a decision. Though the decision maker may or may not be consciously aware, they cannot easily separate their own perception from informing the decisions they make (Dane & Pratt, 2007; Hoy & Tarter, 2011), therefore the rational approach to decision making may be altered from perceptions and bias regardless of decision-making frameworks being applied. The rational approach is argued to be the best approach for decision making in education due to the systematic process, however, as O'Sullivan (2011) identifies, there is a need to explore other approaches to decision making.

Chiptin (2020) describes a decision-making approach called the Objective Knowledge Growth Framework (OKGF) which takes a rational approach in the process of decision making, similar to Simon (1977). However, the approach also suggests that leaders should seek the views of others within the decision-making process and apply a distributed leadership model alongside the rational model. This encourages educators at all levels of leadership to seek advice and alternative choices from colleagues in differing roles and positions, including those who have resolved similar problems (Chitpin, 2020). The approach reduces the impact of individual perceptions which also lessens the blame culture often seen in schools (Chitpin & Jones, 2015) as other individuals are contributing to the decision being made.

Another rational model to decision making used within education is the systems thinking approach. It is similar to the process of OKGF, yet it expands on the above with reference that decision making should be ongoing; regularly identifying connections and patterns then drawing upon a variety of knowledge, situations, and values within the context of which the decision is being made (Shaked & Schechter, 2019; Sumbera et al., 2014). Both OKGF and a systems thinking approach, however, support dialogue

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between peers which are no longer focused on a pure rational model where the leader is seen to have all the answers but moves towards leaders being interested in the ideas of others (Kensler, 2012) supporting a move towards an evidence-based approach in schools.

The OKGF and the systems thinking approach described above, though they take into consideration the views of others and acknowledge that leaders do not know all possibilities or outcomes, are still classed as rational approaches. Albeit they are based more closely to work on bounded rationality (Simon, 1990), which suggests that knowing every single alternative is not required in decision making. Several researchers, however, do not consider bounded rationality to be any different to the rational approach (Das & Teng, 1999; Turpin & Marais, 2004). Therefore, looking at approaches other than the rational approach may be worth exploring in relation to school leaders' decision making.

2.9.2 Other approaches to decision making

What separates the two examples outlined above from the rational approach is that they consider the views of others, increasing the possibility of alternative solutions being found. This draws parallels with both the collaborative decision-making approach and the blended approach to decision making which suggests decision making should be based on a continuum of approaches (Simon, 1987) and a combination of "intuition, common sense, and systematic thinking" (Klein, 2010, p. 105). For a blended approach or a collaborative decision-making process to be effective, the groups' collective understanding of how to make decisions, along with an awareness that perceptions can influence decisions is important. There is, however, in any decision- making process, a level of unconscious bias, in terms of how much influence the people within the group have in relation to the decision- maker and vice versa. As the headteacher, ultimately, must accept responsibility (DfE, 2020c), influence and power are another element to consider when thinking about collaborative decision making in education (Lucas & Baxter, 2011). The position of those making the decision may not have equal power with the headteacher, therefore the headteacher usually has to make the final decision due to their role within the school.

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When collaborating on decisions within education there is, in part, a consideration needed of the political approach to decision making as it can be a "continuous battle between different coalitions" (Turpin & Marais, 2004, p. 145) due to differing views, opinions and the desire to influence others. The political view may also be unconsciously influenced by the national picture of education, it may be more micro-level in relation to the school's values, assumptions and priorities, and there can sometimes also be an element of self-serving, or conscious influence within the decisions being made (Turpin & Marais, 2004). There is a political element to decision making within education due to the policies and direction from the government and with it being a public body, a collaborative approach will help in reducing assumptions and perceptions, however, political influence will be a factor within the decision.

Intuitive decision making, unlike political decision making, is not usually about conscious influence but is often an approach which is not referred to as favourably within research. Intuitive decision making is faster to implement as it does not follow a clear process that other approaches, such as a rational approach, does (Calabretta et al., 2017). As with rational decision making, there can also be an element of unconscious bias within intuitive decision making (Suveren, 2022) however, this can be reduced with collaborative decision making and networking with others regarding their decision making (Matzler et al., 2007). Considering this, choosing either the rational or intuitive approach over the other can create tension and negatively impact decision making (Smith & Lewis, 2011), though the suggestion that the rational approach and intuitive decision-making complement each other (Calabretta et al., 2017) is worth exploring. Consciously applying a rational, logical approach alongside the intuitive reaction can support in ensuring the final solution is more effective as both can often be used without awareness: within rational decision making, individuals tend to look for the information that confirms what they believe to be true and try to adjust it (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). Even without awareness, those who approach decision making rationally will still tend to rely on some level of intuitive strategies due to the influences over our lives. Intuitive and rational approaches are concurring strategies in teachers' decision-making (Vanlommel

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et al., 2017) which are hard to separate from one another. Consequently, it would be difficult to prove that rational approaches have no element of intuitive decision making within the model, regardless of whether the process of conscious or unconscious decision making occurred.

In addition, researchers suggest that ethics should be part of all decision making (Arkan et al., 2023). Ethical considerations ensure that decisions are made with fairness, integrity, and respect for all stakeholders involved within the school or academy. Some researchers argue that ethical considerations take longer and can disrupt the decision-making process, leading to more opportunity to become self-serving within the decision (Moore & Tenbrunsel, 2014). However, in a recent study, Arkan et al. (2023) found no evidence that deliberation causes harm in making ethical decisions, nor does ethical decision-making suggest the decision maker is more likely to become self-serving. Research suggests that, in the current educational climate, and with society becoming more demographically diverse we need to ensure educators understand the importance of ethics within the decisions being made (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) also explore the importance of educational leaders developing relationships with others and jointly considering ethical decisions, rather than making them in silo.

Though the research identifies many different approaches to decision making, the approach to take within education must consider the individual situation alongside the context of the specific organisation (O'Sullivan, 2011). Decision making is complex but what is clear from the research is that the rational approach alone would not benefit schools, however a continuum in approach or a dual process which considers collaboration across the team would be beneficial. In addition to this, an awareness of ethics, politics, biases, complexity of the decision and factors within the situation will help headteachers within the decisions they make.

2.10 Factors informing decision-making in education

Research that considers the factors which inform decision making in education is relatively limited, but a study by Kinchington (2023) examines the factors that contribute

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to the decisions that leaders make. The study also considers the way decisions made by educational leaders impact the staff, school community and, most importantly, the children. This study identifies that school leaders' decisions are made dependent on experience and context (Figure 4). The study considered 'the greater good;' ethical considerations; the values of the school, and the values of the individual leader. This links back to the research regarding individual perceptions, beliefs and values (Vanlommel et al., 2017) considering that leaders' perceived identity and the role they take within their school impacts the way in which a headteacher makes a decision (Kinchington, 2023).

Figure 4: Factors Informing Decision Making (Kinchington, 2023)

Factor cited as informing decision-making	% indicating the degree to which the factor was identified as informing SL decision-making
Experience and taking the context into account	100%
Based on past decisions made within the school	70%
Taking into account the views of other staff	65%
Wisdom	64%
Training (in terms of developing process skills eg analysis and deconstruction of novel problems, rather than offering set solutions)	50%
Expediency	43% but 'try not to'

Table 3. Factors informing decision-making.

Another factor identified to inform decision making was decisions that have been made in the past – as Hoy and Tarter (2011) suggest, previous decisions and learnt experiences can impact how a leader decides. This, at times, may not be conscious or may be done intuitively (Suveren, 2022) but in Figure 4 we can see previous decisions was a factor that impacted 70% of decisions that school leaders made. Headteachers felt "a good decision is one where you can justify your actions while maintaining your values as a person and as a Headteacher" (Kinchington, 2023, p. 848) recognising that decision making is often linked to previous experiences; perceptions of self and selfefficacy (Röhl et al., 2022), along with emotions; beliefs and values (Al-Tarawneh, 2012).

However, this also links to research on risk judgement in decision making where decision makers consider the probability of winning, losing or receiving nothing; considering what the expected gain or expected loss may be within making a decision (AI-Tarawneh, 2012; Luce & Weber, 1986). Being risk adverse or risk seeking, which are

often impacted by accumulated learning and experience (Weber & Milliman, 1997), may also impact decision making depending on other factors involved. For example, the trust in which the decision maker has in the others involved can impact the perceived risk in the decision being made (Bormann et al., 2021). Collaboration and the views of others is of high consideration within decision making, impacting 65% of decisions made in Kinchington (2023) study.

In addition to this, within the English education system, the internal and external high stakes accountability system will impact an individual's view and how they make decisions as it 'fundamentally influences the school leader's philosophy and the basis on which decisions are made" (Kinchington, 2023, p. 838). This links back to risk judgement; however, it also links to a political approach to decision making (Turpin & Marais, 2004) which, in education, is likely to be a key factor in decision making. Due to the education system, another factor that impacts decision making is that of confidence; Peters (2022) proposes that the greater amount of confidence someone has in a decision is usually due to the accuracy, or certainty, within the decision being made, though it can also be due to evidence, time and decisions made by others. Confidence in decision making can be increased through an individual's own knowledge and understanding as agency and autonomy increases (Porcenaluk et al., 2023). It is not surprising to see that Continuous Professional development (CPD) was another factor that impacted 50% of leaders' decision making in the study above (Figure 4)

Many leaders know that decisions should be made ethically and holistically yet on average "school leaders reported making 46 decisions each day" (Kinchington, 2023) therefore time and the type of decision are a factor that impacted headteacher's decision making. The demand on a headteacher in making so many decisions and having ultimate responsibility, despite collaboration with others, will be a factor that impacts the decisions being made for all school leaders. Due to this, another factor which impacts leaders' decision-making is confidence and certainty in the decision being made. "Instances where a justification for a decision made could not be justified made the school leaders 'very uncomfortable'"(Kinchington, 2023, p. 848), as insecure decision making reflects

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the reputation of the school and becomes a reflection on the headteacher themselves. Though many factors can influence a leader's decision, what remains clear is that decision making is a huge part of being a school leader.

2.11 Conclusion of Literature Review

In identifying the types of frameworks that school leaders may use to inform decision making and the factors that may impact the decisions made, we can draw conclusions that the more leaders are aware of how to make decisions, the more likely they will take a holistic approach to decision making. However, frameworks to make decisions within education are not well known and the research which explores CPD around decision making for leaders is limited.

The other element that emerges from the research is that headteachers recognise they are ultimately responsible for the decisions made, regardless of collaborative approaches that are implemented. However, collaboration and connections can reduce the impact of individuals perception and biases on the decisions made. In addition to individual contexts, the systems, and politics which education is surrounded by, is another factor which influences the decisions that leaders make, as it impacts the amount of confidence and certainty, they have within the decisions made.

If we look specifically at leaders' decisions around play-based learning beyond EYFS, we know that the research around decision making for this is even further reduced. Decisions around play-based learning beyond EYFS may not be straight forward due to the many factors as identified above alongside more specific barriers linked to knowledge and experience of play-based learning. However, as a child's early years are fundamental in shaping their future, the decisions made around how children learn at this point within their journey should not be taken lightly. If research suggests leaders' own knowledge and experience may impact on decisions of whether or not they support play-based learning, (Fisher, 2022) then further research and identifying how this could be addressed is key to our understanding.

In summary, to answer the question: 'What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation

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Stage?' the main findings of the literature review which will be explored further are identified in Figure 2 and outlined below as follows:

- Leaders' knowledge and experience
- Systems and politics the impact of the English education system
- Leaders' confidence and certainty in decision making
- The impact of values, beliefs, perceptions and biases
- The significance of connections and collaboration

The study being undertaken will explore the key threads above, alongside the individual context and circumstances of the school, in order to understand what impacts leaders' decisions on play-based learning. From this a common understanding can begin to form in relation to why some schools continue with play-based learning within England, but others do not.

Chapter 3: Research Design

3.1 Introduction to Research Design

The literature review for this study has highlighted several key threads which explore the research question 'What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage?', identified in Figure 2. The literature review has been significant in identifying existing gaps within research, instrumental in developing threads to support the gaps without limiting the study, and key to refining the research methodology.

This chapter will discuss the methodological approach within this research study. It will begin by discussing a variety of research paradigms and the approach taken within the research. It will then consider how the participants for the research were enlisted and explore the methods of collecting data for the research, followed by exploring the ethical considerations and issues around validity and reliability within this study.

3.2 Research methodology

Research paradigms are fundamental in that they form the philosophical basis of a research project whilst influencing and establishing the foundation for the methodologies. Research paradigms encompass a set of beliefs and assumptions that guide the research, (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and it is important that the paradigm used supports how we see the world and how the views of the world are obtained (Chapman et al., 2005).

The different paradigms available for research are varied, the key paradigms that have drawn most traction over the last few decades tend to be positivism and interpretivism (Pham, 2018). Positivism, in relation to sociology, takes a realist perspective where they believe research should be objective free, measurable and the structure of society is more important than individual human behaviour (Chapman et al., 2005) The postpositivist paradigm builds upon this and suggests that no answer can be absolute as objectivity is almost impossible to achieve (Panhwar et al., 2017) due to individuals having different realities and the absolute truth not possible to obtain.

Interpretivism takes a relativist stance in that it recognises there are multiple realities within a situation, but we can look at research to try and make sense of the perceived reality within that moment of time (Chapman et al., 2005). Within the literature reviewed, due to the nature of the research around play based learning, most research studies use the interpretivism view as multiple realities are explored. The systematic research review identified that the literature relied on analysing human behaviour and evaluating responses to questions to deepen the understanding in the area of study which is in line with researchers' thoughts around interpretivism (Chapman et al., 2005; Holley & Harris, 2019). As this research study focuses on the understanding of a specific situation which is dependent on human behaviours, the paradigm it uses is interpretivism. Using the interpretative paradigm gives the opportunity to explore multifaceted layers of meaning across the existing research and the data collected, (Bhattacherjee, 2012). It also fosters an appreciation of the complex and subjective experiences of human behaviours within looking at decisions made within the educational leadership landscape.

3.3 Data collection methods

The research conducted mainly resulted in collecting qualitative data. The reason for using qualitative data was to ensure that the situation could be understood from multiple perspectives. It was also to ensure participants could have their voice included within the research (Creswell, 2013) whilst ensuring the collective findings were interpreted and not generalised (Lichtman, 2014). As my research includes a questionnaire, some of the data collected has been presented numerically (Axinn & Pearce, 2006) and therefore, quantitative data has also been collated as part of the study. Though, in the past, there have been researchers with strong opinions on the type of paradigm used or the data collected, more recently research identifies that there is no general way to conduct or collect qualitative research (Holley & Harris, 2019, p. 6) with most researchers "now accept[ing] that it is sensible to use a mixture of methods" (Chapman et al., 2005, p. 22)

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with all approaches supporting the reader to see validity in the conclusions (Firestone, 1987). Though the research collected has produced qualitative data, the embedded mixed method has been used to strengthen the qualitative data with quantitative data to present information of greater depth.

Conducting the research electronically with 33 primary school or academy leaders across England was chosen based on the time frame and length of the dissertation (Cohen et al., 2017). The number of participants was also considered based on ensuring the number was large enough to generate rich data, though not so large as to result in an excess of data (Cohen et al., 2017). The school leaders were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that participants were relevant to the study (Hartas, 2010). The criteria to complete the online survey specified that participants were currently: a head of school; headteacher; executive headteacher; chief or deputy chief executive officers of a school or an academy in England. This was to ensure that, when looking at the factors that impact decisions made, the participants were all in roles with autonomy over whole school decisions that they make.

The method of data collection was via an electronic questionnaire with a mixture of open and closed questions. Whilst questionnaires are effective in collecting data, there can be some limitations due to the questionnaire being artificial in design, meaning it may create artificial results (Chapman et al., 2005). This can be due to participants' interpretation of questions, participants reluctance to be truthful or rushing, resulting in a lack of detail in the open questions or errors within the multiple-choice questions. In addition, the wording of the questions within the questionnaire were considered and simplified (Oppenheim, 1992) to reduce the burden on participants' giving long answers if there was no need i.e., if the data will be condensed.

Another limitation of this, however, was that the leaders who chose to partake in the questionnaire may have been more inclined to do so if they had strong feelings towards having their views heard or an interest in the topic (Albaum & Smith, 2012). Additionally, potential participants may have felt that it was not applicable for them if they did not implement play-based learning, often this can be from misunderstanding of the

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initial request (Williams et al., 2007). Careful wording of the participation request ensured that the research design considered how the sample could attract a range of participants; the word 'play' was removed from the participation request and the request ensured it did not show bias towards one way of learning over another. Despite the possible limitation, the ease of circulating an electronic questionnaire meant the reach of the questionnaire increased, meaning data validity and reliability was improved. This was increased further by ensuring there was the opportunity for anonymity within the questionnaire as providing an email address or any other identifiable data was optional. The qualitative data collected was from a range of participants across England, allowing for rich data to be analysed and evaluated.

Though online questionnaires mean that you cannot always verify the identity of the person who is being interviewed (Chapman et al., 2005), this limitation was reduced as the online questionnaire was shared on an educational platform. The strengths of sharing this online also meant bias between the participants and researcher was reduced due to the anonymity within the questionnaires and, in turn, this may have increased the validity of the data collected. Though other forms of data collection, for example, ethnography or case studies, may have been an approach for this research study, the demands of the timeframe for the research would not have been met (Holley & Harris, 2019). In addition, opinions and bias may have been more evident due to the removal of anonymity between participant and researcher within collecting responses. Though each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, and no method could ever be absolute in objectivity, the questionnaire ensured a range of data was collected that allowed for comparability and scalability of data across separate groups and contexts.

Within the research, there were also semi-structured interviews with a small sample of school leaders who identified that they were willing to be interviewed when completing the questionnaire. Though this meant the sample was narrowed, due to the time constraints, it ensured the participants who volunteered were willing to expand on the answers given within the questionnaire. We organised for 6 participants to be interviewed online but, due to time constraints and demands of being a school leader,

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this was reduced to 4 participants. A limitation here was that the 4 who had volunteered to be interviewed had all implemented play beyond EYFS and those that were not able to be interviewed were those who had indicated on the questionnaire that they did not implement play-based learning beyond EYFS. Nevertheless, the transcriptions of the interviews have enabled rich, qualitative data to support the findings from the questionnaire.

Though questionnaires limit knowing what the thought process is within the mind of participants (Hardy & Ford, 2014), semi structured interviews were used to develop the answers given in the questionnaire. It allowed for the individual participant to talk about their own experience (Holley & Harris, 2019) without being fully restricted by a structured interview. There is a limitation with semi structured interviews if the interviewer influences the participant when adapting the questions without prior planning (Chapman et al., 2005), however a structured interview would not allow for the researcher to ask the participant to expand on any thoughts or ideas that the participant has. A semi structured interview allowed for in-depth information being collected (Mashuri et al., 2022) by allowing for flexibility within the questions.

The questions within the interviews were open ended and interpretive in style to reduce participant's modifying their answer (Butin, 2009). As questionnaires can limit participants' answers, the opportunity for participants to expand on their answers allowed for a deeper understanding of responses given within the questionnaire, for example to gain new insights (Axinn et al., 1991). A limitation of the interviews was the time intensive nature (Axinn & Pearce, 2006) and due to the time available for this dissertation to be written there was a limit to the number of interviews that occurred. However, rather than being influenced by the thoughts of others within focus groups, interviews allowed for participants to explore their individual situation without another dominating the group (Holley & Harris, 2019). By having the time to share their own views without interruption (Chapman et al., 2005) the influence from others was reduced and the data collated was high quality.

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The interviews were recorded and transcribed on Microsoft Teams, this was to ensure convenience for those who were willing to be interviewed, to reduce any anxiety or bias within answers from being interviewed in an unfamiliar environment and to also ensure transcription is more effective and time efficient. Within the participant information provided, I ensured that participants involved in the interviews understood the risks included in recording interviews and what had been done to mitigate this, for example: secure ICT systems, recordings deleted after transcription, participants can check their transcripts etc. I ensured that the detailed participant information sheet was reiterated at the start of the interview and that participants were reminded about the risks and the way we were mitigating these.

To ensure the wording of questions was accurate, impartial, understood by participants and likely to produce useful data, piloting the questionnaires and the interviews were an essential part of the process. The participants for the pilot gave clear, concise, and honest feedback; ensuring I could reflect and make changes to the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. By doing the pilot, it supported the validity of questions and ensured more opportunity for reliability in the answers of the questionnaire. As Oppenheim (1992) suggests, I designed the original questions for the pilot to be more open-ended then, following the pilot, these responses were used to change some questions to include multiple-choice answers, or develop others to include further supplementary questions. As the research paradigm is interpretivist, the questionnaire was designed to allow participants to explore their own thoughts and beliefs in relation to the research question. Though multiple choice questions may influence the answers that participants provide (Oppenheim, 1992) there were still some multiple choice questions which allowed me to collect quantitative data that supported the qualitative data, for example, whether or not the participant's teacher training included EYFS. The pilot also identified that the definition of play-based learning was different for different individuals, so the survey information was amended to include a definition (Section 1.4) to ensure all participants were clear on the definition of playbased learning for this study.

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In addition to piloting the questionnaires and the interviews, piloting an analysis of the data was considered, for example: when asking '*Did your teacher training programme include EYFS*?' the multiple-choice question analysis identified that further adaptation was needed so that the answers 'yes' or 'no' were extended to ask 'Yes-EYFS as a specialism' or 'Yes – mainly primary' to ensure more specific information was collated. Consideration of open ended and multiple-choice questions was also considered. Though multiple choice meant that analysis would be more straight forward, the answers given to open ended questions were based on participants' own knowledge. If it had been multiple choice participants may have selected answers that they had not thought of without the options being given. This led me to change the question '*What do you feel are the benefits to play based learning beyond EYFS*?' from multiple choice to an open-ended question in order not to influence the choices given. It was also reworded so that it stated '*Do you feel there are benefits to play based learning beyond EYFS*? *If yes, please specify*.' This was in order to reduce the element of and not lead participants to give specific responses or influence them.

3.4 Legitimacy and ethical considerations of the research

Research methodology and data collection discusses the legitimacy in terms of validity, reliability and limitations within the research process. Consideration needs to be given to the time in which the data was collected as it was collected during the run up to a general election which triggered a degree of uncertainty across the educational landscape. However, the validity of the data, within that moment of time was an accurate reflection of the uncertainty felt within the profession.

Ethical considerations for the research undertaken is of utmost importance. Firstly, all participants who engaged with the research gave free and informed consent. Research identifies that the concept of informed consent and the concept of complexities surrounding informed consent have troubled researchers for the past few decades (Brown & Perkins, 2019). As consent can be open to interpretation, I ensured that participants understood what they were being asked to engage in, consent to and that they were comfortable in participating.

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All participants gave consent via an electronic consent form; however, consent was also asked for again before submitting the questionnaire, at the start of the interview, during and again at the end. To ensure wellbeing and transparency, participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any point during the journey. Though the questionnaire and the interviews were not on an emotionally demanding issue that may have provoked any anxiety or distress in individuals, all involved in the study were reminded at several opportunities that they could withdraw from the research project at any point if they felt it was likely to cause upset or stress (Dahal, 2024). In addition to confidentiality and ensuring that free and informed consent was acquired, the participant information sheet ensured that all participants understood the risks involved with digital questionnaires (Singh & Sagar, 2021) and knew what had been done to minimise risk: e.g., checked that the data was not being stored by third parties and was in line with GDPR laws.

The study took measures to safeguard an individual's identity: unless an email address was provided, participants were not identifiable within the study. Though extremely important to consider, protected characteristics did not need to be identified within this study as they did not play a key part within the research. For those that did provide an email or gave personal information, this was anonymised and removed before analysis of data. To ensure that the participants remained anonymous yet had a voice throughout, I renamed each participant using a letter from the alphabet.

Another ethical consideration, as mentioned, is that of bias; there is an element of bias within many aspects of educational research (Adelson, 2013). The notion of power, or the perception of influence, is often a limiting factor in that participants may watch what they say however this was mitigated within the research by ensuring that questions did not steer particular responses. Participants were reminded of anonymity in the hope that knowing their answers could not be traced back to them would ensure that participants were honest and transparent within the questionnaire and the interview.

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3.5 Conclusion of Research Design

To summarise the research design, this study used the research paradigm of interpretivism in order to understand human behaviours, and complexities across the research (Bhattacherjee, 2012). The data collected and analysed is mainly qualitative, though there is an element of quantitative data within the study which has allowed for a more in-depth analysis surrounding the factors that impact leaders' decisions (Chapman et al., 2005). Electronic questionnaires and a semi-formal interview have been used to gather the data as these worked best within the time limit and with the qualitative data needed. A range of strategies have been put in place to ensure validity, reliability, and ethical considerations within the study. The research design has identified and helped to mitigate most potential limitations with the research, however, due to timing the number of interviews had to be reduced. If the study were to be completed again then I would have ensured more time was allocated to interviewing participants so that further qualitative data could be collected.

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis of Research

4.1 Introduction to Results and Analysis of Research

This chapter will consider the analysis from the research undertaken and the findings from the literature review in relation to the research question 'What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage?' As the research methodology states, the research conducted has produced mainly qualitative data, therefore, the thematic analysis method will be used for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns across the data set as it is a flexible approach which helps in seeking to identify themes that support the interpretivist paradigm of capturing the diversity of the human experience (Guest et al., 2012). Though some researchers have said that the lack of structure within the thematic analysis approach reduces the opportunity to compare or synthesise to other research (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by coding and through interpretation, thematic analysis will ensure that the analysis of research will identify patterns whilst drawing upon the lived experiences of individual participants, their reality and the comparison between other participants in the study. The results, in addition to being influenced by the participants' reality, will also be influenced by an element of researcher judgement when identifying the research themes and whether it captures the overall research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, as mentioned within the literature review, all decision making has an element of perception, belief and bias, yet an awareness of this and being mindful of ethics will reduce the element of individual perception.

In relation to the research question, the main threads to this study emerged from the literature review. To build upon existing research, it was decided that the data would be analysed based on consideration of the main threads (Figure 2), whilst also considering individual context and circumstances to ensure that additional significant findings outside of the main threads were not disregarded. The main threads identified were:

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- Leaders' knowledge and experience
- Systems and politics the impact of the English education system
- Leaders' confidence and certainty in decision making
- The impact of values, beliefs, perceptions and biases
- The significance of connections and collaboration

These threads were illustrated by a quote taken from a participant who completed the questionnaire:

"The key barrier is the lack of understanding from staff about how children learn through play, the educational theories behind this and what it looks like in practice. This isn't a criticism of them but a [criticism of the] gap in training for teachers and the lack of available CPD. I am not sure if I ever see CPD offered through our LA on this beyond EYFS. The pressures of the curriculum and OFSTED also mean that as a Headteacher, I'm not confident enough to take the risk in changing what we do." (Participant X).

This extract provides an insight into the rich qualitative data that the research has provided around the thoughts of current headteachers in England on play-based learning beyond EYFS. To explore this further we will consider the themes above individually, in addition to the context and situation of participants. The analysis of the literature review and the data collated will answer the above themes in relation to the main research question *'What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage?'*

4.2 Leaders' knowledge and Experience

Of the 33 school leaders who participated in the questionnaire, all were in senior leadership positions within a school or academy trust. 27 (82%) were headteachers, 3 (12%) were executive headteachers or executive officers and 2 (6%) were head of schools. The range of year groups in which they had taught throughout their career

varied, with 55% having taught in EYFS for at least one year, 85% having taught in KS1, 85% having taught in KS2, and 6% having taught in secondary for a year or more. Those who had taught in EYFS had all taught in another year group for at least one year but not all those who had taught in KS1, KS2 or Secondary had taught in EYFS. Within their teacher training 12% (n=4) of individuals had trained in EYFS as a specialism, 58% (n=19) had some EYFS training but their specialism was primary, and 30% (n=10) had no EYFS training as part of their teacher training. 42% of participants had attended CPD on learning through play after their qualification. Overall, 31% (n=10) of participants stated that they do not implement play-based learning beyond EYFS, and 69% (n=23) of participants implement play-based learning to varying degrees: implementing play during the transition into Year One; throughout the whole of Year One or throughout the whole of Year One and Two. In addition, one school implement elements of play-based learning beyond Year Two.

The data was analysed further to explore the potential impact of leader's experience and knowledge of EYFS on their decision making. 70% (n=7) of those who had no training in EYFS continued with play-based learning in KS1, however 50% (n=5) only did so at the start of Year One to aid transition whilst 20% (n=2) continued throughout Year One and Two. This was similar for those who trained with EYFS as their specialism and those who had some EYFS training (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of Participants' teacher training and the decision to implement play-based learning beyond EYFS

Play based learning beyond EYFS					
Trained in EYFS within ITT	Limited play after EYFS	Play at transition into Y1 for part of the year	Throughout Y1	Throughout Y1 and Y2	
No 33.3% (n=10)	30% (3)	50% (5)	N/A	20% (2)	
Yes- mainly primary 58% (n=19)	32% (6)	21% (4)	21% (4)	26% (5)	

Yes – EYFS as	25% (1)	25% (1)	50% (2)	N/A
specialism				
12 %				
(n=4)				

Though training specifically in EYFS does not appear to be a deciding factor in whether or not leaders implement play beyond EYFS, there are three factors which need to be considered here. Firstly, there were only four participants that had trained with an EYFS specialism, meaning the sample size was relatively small which may impact findings (Staller, 2021). In addition, as the research methodology explained, the aim was to ensure that the questionnaire was not targeted at those who implemented play-based learning, however, naturally, those who are passionate about play are more inclined to partake in a voluntary questionnaire as it interests them (Albaum & Smith, 2012). Finally, as we have considered, individual context and situations may also influence decision making (O'Sullivan, 2011). Therefore, looking further at the data collected around additional Continuous Professional development (CPD) in play-based learning and experience of teaching in EYFS was worth considering.

Of the 18 who have taught in EYFS, 28% (n=5) had selected that they do not have play-based learning beyond EYFS, however, two of the 5 had also stated that they have a play-based approach to learning at the start of Key Stage One. Therefore, the research suggests that, of the 18 individuals who have taught in EYFS within their career, only 16% (n=3) participants did not continue with any play-based learning beyond EYFS. In contrast with this, 15 individuals had not taught in EYFS within their career and 40% (n=6) of participants did not have play-based learning beyond EYFS (Table 2).

The study identifies teaching in EYFS increases the chances that a leader may make the decision to implement play-based learning beyond EYFS by 24%. Within the interviews, Participant H explained that though they were KS2 trained and had never taught for a lengthy period in EYFS, they swapped with the reception teacher for a term to develop their knowledge, prior to being a headteacher. They explained: **"The biggest thing that influenced me was going into EYFS and doing it. It took me going down**

to EYFS to realise the importance, that you need it – the play – the children need play to learn." (Participant H).

This anecdotal evidence supports other research, for example Fisher (2022) suggests experience in EYFS is a significant factor in decisions to continue with play-based learning beyond EYFS.

The study also looked at the difference between those participants who had attended external CPD on play-based learning since qualifying as a teacher and compared this to those who had not had any training. 39.5% (n=13) of individuals identified they had external CPD and 85% (n=11) of those who received training continued with play-based learning beyond EYFS. The two individuals who do not currently implement play-based learning beyond EYFS explained the steps they were taking to implement a play-based approach for this academic year and the main reasons they had not yet done so beforehand was due to staff not yet understanding play-based learning. Therefore, all 13 individuals who have had external CPD on play beyond EYFS were attempting to implement play beyond the end of EYFS. 77% (n=10) of participants who have had external CPD implement play throughout the whole of Year One (rather than for part of the year) and 46% (n=6) implement play-based learning throughout Year Two. When looking at the 7 participants who have had in house training, the picture is similar. 86% (n=6) of participants who have had in house CPD for play based learning have implemented play-based learning beyond EYFS. (Table 2). One participant who had not implemented play-based learning stated, "I need to encourage staff to partake in specific CPD and facilitate the time and resources for staff to develop their understanding and commitment to play based learning beyond EYFS." (Participant AG). In comparison, of the 13 participants who have not had training in play-based learning after qualifying as a teacher, 54% (n=7) of participants do not have play-based learning beyond EYFS, all 7 participants stated that their own or staff knowledge and experience was one of the reasons for not implementing play beyond EYFS.

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	Trained in EYFS ITT	Trained in EYFS as part of Primary ITT	Not trained in EYFS ITT	External CPD in play after qualifyin g	Internal CPD in play after qualifyin g	No CPD in play after qualifyin g	Taught in EYFS	Not taught in EYFS
Percen tage of particip ants	12% (n=4)	58% (n=19)	30% (n=10)	39.5% (n=13)	21.% (n=7)	39.5% (n=13)	55% (n=18)	45% (n=15)
Percen tage of particip ants that engage d in play beyond EYFS	75% (n=3)	68% (n=13)	70% (n=7)	100% (n=13) * *Two who stated they do not have play are impleme nting play this academi c year	86% (n=6)	54% (n=7)	83% (n=15) * *Two who stated they do not have play are impleme nting play this academi c year	60% (n=9)

The data from this study reveals that most leaders who have taught in EYFS or who have had training since completing their teacher training qualification on play-based learning, have implemented, or are looking at how to implement play-based learning beyond EYFS. This research is in line with the thoughts of Fisher (2022) who stated headteachers either had experience of teaching in Early Years or had learnt from colleagues who had. As already mentioned, the sample of leaders who participated in the study were from across England, however, a wider sample to explore the motivation of participants who had chosen to have training in play-based learning after their initial teacher training would be of value. It would also be worth researching the impact of CPD on play based learning beyond training on decision making Though this study does not explore why some schools choose to stop play based learning during Year One, previous studies have looked at this and identified that it is due to schools feeling that they should be getting children ready for learning in Year Two (Ephgrave, 2017; Quirk & Pettett, 2021). Considering the removal of statutory KS1 tests (Standards and Testing Agency, 2023), it may also be useful to consider the impact of training staff across the school in play-based learning.

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4.3 Systems and Politics - The impact of the English Education System

When looking at research around the barriers of implementing play beyond EYFS, the English education system is a significant barrier to decisions that leaders make (Bottrill, 2018; Fisher, 2020; Quirk & Pettett, 2021). Though there are many factors that impact a leader's decision making (Ni et al., 2017), when participants were asked *'What factors impacted your decision around whether or not play-based learning should continue beyond EYFS?'* 61% (N=20) mentioned the current education system, 46% (n=15) stating OFSTED particularly impacted their decisions and 24% (n=8) stated that statutory documentation impacted their decision. (Figure 5). Participant A, who stated there is limited play after EYFS in their school, explained that the decision was due to a range of reasons but one of the biggest reasons was due to the current statutory curriculum, OFSTED, and the education system in England.

"We'd have too much to get through if we taught the curriculum through play. It's statutory and we can't justify it to OFSTED. The current political climate in education doesn't allow for it. I have worked previously in a school with continuous provision for Y1 and it was a lot of work for a marginal gain in data." (Participant A).

Although there are long term positive impacts other than academic outcomes (Kingston-Hughes, 2022) and the risk to mental health is greater if learning is formalised too early (Clark, 2016), those who have not taught in EYFS or received training in play based learning, such as Participant A, may not recognise the importance of overcoming barriers to implementing play based approaches in KS1 (Quirk & Pettett, 2021). Due to the educational climate, political views may influence the thought process of leaders in their decision making (Turpin & Marais, 2004) and if a leader has not yet got a deep enough understanding of play-based learning they may not be able to rationalise why overcoming barriers to play-based is worth the effort.

Participants who do continue with play-based learning explained that despite implementing elements of play-based learning, they "would like to offer more play-based learning, but the current curriculum does not allow for it." (Participant L)

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and though "play across the curriculum is valued and important, OFSTED and data still plays a part in decisions." (Participant AH). Another participant who was confident their play-based learning approach was secure up to the end of Year Two felt "[from] Y3 onwards, purely and simply, the Government directive on League Tables and the pressure on DfE KS2 results means that it is not an option to continue beyond KS1." (Participant AB). This links back to the headteachers standards (DfE, 2020c) which explain that, ultimately, headteachers are accountable (Law & Glover, 2000; Male, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2011) and, therefore even if a headteacher is aware of how politics may have influenced their decision (Kinchington, 2023) the leader may not be confident in implementing play-based learning as it could impact how their school is perceived under scrutiny of local authority, OFSTED or other educational bodies.

Building upon this, all participants who were interviewed mentioned OFSTED, curriculum and the pressures from the government were factors in impacting decisions made. Participant F explained that:

"You have to have the knowledge and understanding in what you are doing, otherwise what would you say to a secondary HMI who is in your primary school and says, 'You need to be doing something different to what you're doing now because of the outcomes'?" (Participant F).

The ability to be able to justify any decision made was a common theme within the interviews, when asked about barriers in implementing play-based learning beyond EYFS, Participant N also explored this: they remained Good in their January 2024 inspection but their inspector was secondary trained who "just didn`t get it and therefore having my reasons for implementing play-based learning had to be strong." (Participant N). Being able to justify the decisions made with OFSTED was a viewpoint shared with other participants, Participant G explained that "We had a fear in us because... our outcomes are very high. What if we put [play] into Year Two and their outcomes drop? We were expecting OFSTED and... what if they come in and they don't like what they're doing?" (Participant G). Participant G went on to explain

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that after further research and seeing the impact of learning in Year One, despite being in an OFSTED window, they "decided that actually what was right for the children was more important than all of that," (Participant G) and due to the positive impact play-based learning was having, "we knew that we could talk about it. And that we would be fine." (Participant G) From the interviews, it was evident that the leaders who had an understanding of play-based learning and really understood their own why for making the decision to implement play beyond EYFS did not see OFSTED or the education system as a threat in the same way that some participants did as they believed they were able to explain, or justify a decision.

4.4 Leaders' Confidence and Certainty in Decision Making

Despite knowing decision making is central to the role of a school leader (Walker & Dimmock, 2002), within the interviews each participant explained that they had not received any training specifically on decision making. Research suggests that the amount of training available on decision making is minimal (Kinchington, 2023), it was evident in the approaches to making decisions that frameworks had not been used by participants consciously to make decisions. Despite this, the participants who were interviewed described a variety of approaches they took to decision making, leaning towards a dual decision-making process (O'Sullivan, 2011) which naturally considered the views of others, due to the way in which the school leaders worked. If school leaders had more awareness of decision-making processes, it would have ensured participants were more aware of the process they had undertaken and, in turn, been aware of ethics, biases, politics and the complexities involved in decision making. In being more aware of the process, this may also support leaders in developing their confidence in decision making and reducing the uncertainty within some elements of the decision.

Participants interviewed had an understanding in the research around the benefits of play-based learning, however, there was an element of an intuitive approach within the decisions being made due to dual processes being used to make the decision (Vanlommel et al., 2017). There is, as Participant F refers to, a degree of uncertainty in

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the decision to implement play-based learning in the current educational climate due to the lack of certainty from government policy and statutory documents. Participant F explained, "there's no survey in school that you could possibly do really as it's just a gut feeling about how the how [the children] react and how they learn." (Participant F). To be confident in that gut feeling when there is a degree of uncertainty, the knowledge and experience of play-based learning is essential. Participant H explains that leaders do not feel certain within some of the decisions they can make due to the education system in England:

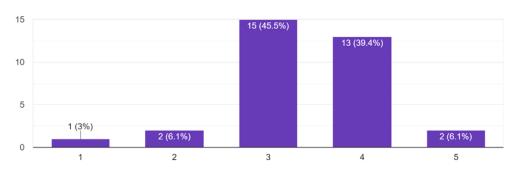
"It would just be nice to be allowed to make decisions that suit the needs of our community and our children and feel certain about what you are doing. Not having the government and OFSTED putting everyone in the same boat, because you could be down the road, and it can be a very different community." (Participant H).

The Education System is a significant factor in impacting the confidence and certainty in decision making in England. As mentioned, other countries within the United Kingdom have government documentation that explores the importance of play beyond EYFS (Quirk & Pettett, 2021), reducing the uncertainty of what their government's position is on play based learning beyond EYFS.

Another factor that participants identified when asked 'What factors impacted your decision around whether or not play-based learning should continue beyond EYFS?" was their own knowledge (45%) and own opinion (55%). As mentioned, the knowledge a leader has links to the certainty that leaders feel within the decisions that they make (Kinchington, 2023). In addition to this, when asked 'How would you rate your own understanding of play-based learning beyond EYFS?' (5= Strong, 3=average, 1= poor) there were only 6% (n=2) who felt their own understanding of play-based learning beyond EYFS?' (5= Strong, 3=average, 1= poor) there were only 6% (n=2) who felt their own understanding of play-based learning beyond EYFS was strong whereas 55%(n=18) felt their knowledge was average or below (Figure 5). Though a scaled score has some limitations (Morgado et al., 2017), this identifies that not all leaders are confident in their understanding of play-based learning beyond EYFS

which links to the level of confidence a leader may have in their decision making, yet, in an environment of high stakes, leaders' need to feel certain that they can stand by their decision (Chitpin & Jones, 2015) and be confident that it is the right thing for the children in their school.

Figure 5: How would you rate your own understanding of play-based learning beyond EYFS?

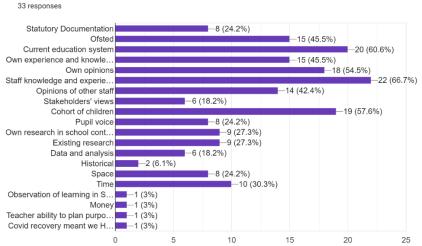


How would you rate your own understanding of play based learning beyond EYFS? 33 responses

Alongside leaders' own knowledge, the knowledge and experience of others impacts the decisions that leaders make (Figure 6) with 67% (n=22) participants identifying that the knowledge and experience of others is a factor they consider in decision making. Participant H explained that **"this school has a great staff that even though they're reluctant, they're reluctant because they're not confident" (Participant H)** whilst Participant X states **"staff generally don't have the understanding of how children learn through play and their role in it." (Participant X)**, In order to be confident in making the decision to implement play-based learning, trust in the staff that would be implementing the play-based learning must be evident (Bormann et al., 2021). If this is not evident then a risk is perceived (AI-Tarawneh, 2012) and the certainty in the decision made is reduced,(Peters, 2022) impacting leaders' confidence in the decision.

Figure 6: What factors impacted your decision around whether or not play based

learning should continue beyond EYFS?



What factors impacted your decision around whether or not play-based learning should continue beyond EYFS? (Select multiple)

If the knowledge and experience of those leading and implementing play-based learning is strong then, as Participant F explained, "If you're strong enough and you're experienced enough to be able to say, 'this is what I believe in and it's worked' then you are fine." (Participant F). When a leader is certain in their own decisions, or the decisions of the team, they are more able to navigate school improvement and uncertainty with increased agency, autonomy and confidence (Peters, 2022; Porcenaluk et al., 2023) Despite a degree of uncertainty within a decision, leaders can still be confident enough if knowledge and experience is combined with an element of intuition, alongside a willingness to adapt approaches as additional research emerges.

4.5 The impact of perception and values

Spillane et al. (2002) suggest that headteachers are influenced by their knowledge and experience and the beliefs they hold about what is important to them professionally. However, when asked, only 43% (n=13) of participants felt that their decision of how learning takes place beyond EYFS was in line with their own vision and values. Recognising that 57% (n=20) of leaders believe that their decisions were not in line, or only somewhat in line, with their own vision and values was eye opening and would be

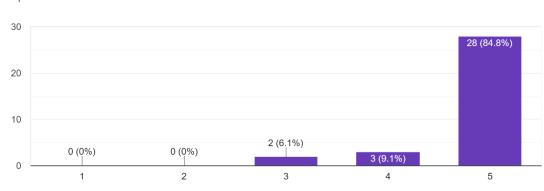
something worth exploring further as to whether this was linked to their own knowledge and experience, the confidence and certainty within decision making, the education system, or unique to their own context. (Table 3). The responses given from the 57% (n=20) that felt their decisions were not in line or only somewhat in line with their own vision or values within the questionnaire were varied, with the most common answers for not being able to align the practice within school to their own beliefs being the demands of the curriculum 50% (n=10) and accountability and testing 35% (n=7). This was an open-ended question to increase validity and reliability in responses however data can be impacted by participants own beliefs and perceptions (Chapman et al., 2005). Of those participants who had undertaken external CPD on play-based learning, those that felt their approach was in line with their vision and values increased slightly to 61% (n=8). The reasons given from the 39% (n=5) who did not feel their decision of how learning takes place beyond EYFS was in line with their own vision and values were in line with the group as a whole.

Is the decision to play in in line with your vision and values?					
All Participants	No	Not Quite	Yes		
33 100% (n=33)	33.5% (n=10)	33.5% (n=10)	43% (n=13)		
Trained in EYFS within ITT	No	Not Quite	Yes		
No 33.3% (n= 10)	(n=3) 20%	(n=1) 20%	(n= 6) 60%		
Yes, mainly primary 57.6% (n= 19)	(n= 7) 26%	(n=6) 31.5%	(n=6) 42.5%		
Yes – EYFS as specialism 12.1% (n=4)		(n= 3) 75%	(n=1) 25%		

Leaders' perceptions on play were gathered within the questionnaire by being asked "How would you rate the importance of play-based learning in EYFS/KS1/Beyond KS1" (With 5= very important 3 = somewhat important and 1= not important). The

importance of play-based learning beyond EYFS varies with 24% (n=8) of participants rating play-based learning as very important in KS1 (Figure 8) and 15% (n=5) in beyond KS1 (Figure 9) as opposed to 85% (n=28) of participants who felt play based learning is very important in EYFS (Figure 7). 6% (n=2) felt play was somewhat important in EYFS, 27% (n=9) felt play was somewhat important or less in KS1 and 61% (n=20) who felt play was somewhat important or less beyond KS1. Looking at the data, we also found that of those who rated the value of play in KS1 as very important, 88% (n=7) had stated that the decision for play based learning was in line with their own vision and values. The 12% (n=1) who did not feel the decision was in line with their values was due to staff reluctance rather than their own knowledge and values.





33 responses

Figure 9: How would you rate the importance of play-based learning in KS1?

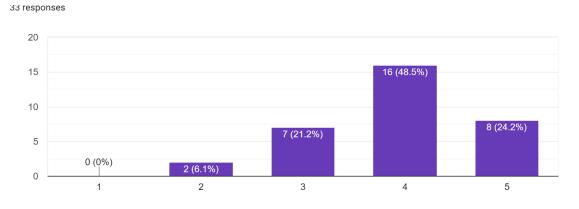
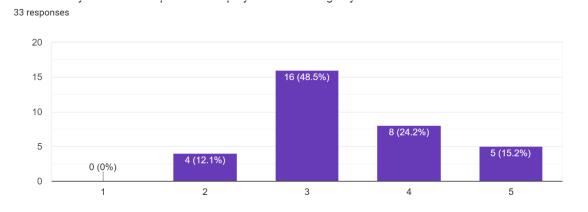


Figure 8: How would you rate the importance of play-based learning beyond KS1?



Participant H explored the school's historical context and the influence on perceptions from previous leaders within the school. As research suggested, it is difficult for a decision maker to ensure their own perceptions does not inform decisions they make (Hoy and Tarter, 2011, Dane and Prat, 2007). However, in this case, the previous longstanding headteacher impacted the perception of all staff, alongside the chair of governors who had been a governor at the school for 41 years. The school had developed the belief that EYFS was separate to the rest of the school. Participant H explained it "was the perception across the school - them and us. I know it happens elsewhere too – EYFS vs the rest of the school but that isn't right for anyone so I had to challenge their views." (Participant H). The headteacher supported the Year One teacher to begin to change her perceptions and encouraged other school leaders,

governors, and the team to see the impact that elements of play-based learning can have across the school. We know from research, that perceptions, bias, vision and values are built upon and influenced by a variety of factors, (Al-Tarawneh, 2012) and these are difficult to separate regardless of the decision-making framework used.

4.6 The Significance of Connections and Collaboration

Through the questionnaire and within the interviews, the importance of working with the team was a significant factor in the decision making of participants. Several participants within the questionnaire identified that they felt play-based learning had not been implemented due to reluctance from staff, others discussed the way in which they had worked with their team to identify and support others to adapt the way in which children learn beyond EYFS. For example, Participant G explained:

"I had staff in year 2 that didn't want to be in early years. I used to be a year 2 teacher at the school, so they were saying to me 'What are you doing? You know how it structured in year 2 and you wouldn't want to teach like this.' So took a while to get those people on board and to get them to understand the importance of what we were doing." (Participant G).

They continued to explain that the process was slow but through research and training, and a developing trust, they supported the same team to change their perceptions and biases towards play:

"And now we're all at a point where I have teachers that say to me, I'd never leave the school, because I couldn't teach in any other way other than the way that we teach here. We are quite a strong team because everybody is very much on board and believes in how we deliver our curriculum." (Participant G).

Participant F built upon the experience of participant G, suggesting that a decision must be a team effort to be effective, not just to support the leader but also to challenge them if their views and beliefs differ,

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"If you make a decision on your own, expect to do it yourself because you need people, who will you know, follow the leader into war. You need somebody that is alongside you... and you need people who are brave enough and skilled enough to actually turn round to the likes of me and say I think you're doing that a bit too far going a bit too far or put the brakes on and understand, you know...And that's what teams are about." (Participant F).

This is in line with research which suggests collaborative decision making ensures the perceptions of others were considered, reducing bias (O'Sullivan, 2011). The study also considers, where leaders are not experts in play-based learning, how the perceptions of leaders can be influenced by others. This is supported by findings from Fisher (2022) who mentioned that those without experience in EYFS will often be led by advocacy of those who have. As mentioned, Participant H was KS2 trained and felt, prior to going into leadership that **"all they do is play down there, it's so easy." (Participant H).** When Participant H moved into leadership their EYFS lead encouraged them to look differently at play and **"helped me to challenge my beliefs." (Participant H).** Advice from colleagues can reduce bias in decision making (Chitpin,2020) as illustrated by Participant H who had the confidence to implement play-based learning as their knowledge and understanding had been challenged and changed prior to becoming a headteacher.

Research into collaborative decision making also links back to the level of accountability at stake (O'Sullivan, 2011) Leaders recognise that, "it's on my head if it's wrong." (Participant H), however, using this to encourage the team to trial a collaborative approach can be powerful. Participant H explains they suggested to the team "let's see if it works. And if it doesn't...because I know it will...if it doesn't then fine, let's look back again." (Participant H). Though collaboration is essential in decision making, as Male (2004) identified, the decision, despite taking a collaborative approach, is ultimately, still the decision of the leader.

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4.7 Reflections on Results and Analysis of Research

The results and analysis of research, whilst not surprising were interesting, in that those who were EYFS trained were not all implementing play beyond EYFS, though those that had received training since they were qualified, were. As mentioned, the factors that were most pertinent to explore were as follows:

- Leaders' knowledge and experience
- Systems and Politics The impact of the English Education System
- Leaders' Confidence and certainty in Decision Making
- The impact of Values, Beliefs, Perceptions and Biases
- The significance of Connections and Collaboration

However, from anecdotal evidence, I had thought the impact of COVID-19 would have been mentioned more than it has been. It was mentioned by Participant AD and AF within the questionnaire Participant F, G and N mentioned the impact on COVID being a reason to continue with play-based approaches but had implemented elements of this approach prior to COVID-19. The impact of COVID-19 on school leaders' decisions to develop play-based learning may be something to explore within future research.

Other considerations, if completing this research again, would be to compare decisions to continue with play-based learning against the OFSTED judgements given. It would also be useful to repeat the study in several years' time after the curriculum reform under Labour Government as the curriculum review for Primary and Secondary Curriculums is starting in Autumn 2024.

As mentioned, exploring the motivation for those who have had training in playbased learning after qualifying would be interesting to consider, it would also be useful to reflect upon the impact of training staff across the school in understanding the benefits of play-based learning beyond EYFS and how this impacts collaboration in decision making. Following the exploration of the above, it would be pertinent to explore how perceptions and values had changed across the school and if the amount of play-based learning across KS1 and KS2 has increased.

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A key finding of the study was that those who take part in CPD on play-based learning after their initial teacher training, are more likely to implement play-based learning beyond EYFS, as are those who have taught in EYFS. In addition to participant's own knowledge and opinion, the knowledge and opinions of their team can also impact leaders' decisions. However, the reason for hesitancy with many leaders, it would appear, is due to the fear of the system and the authority to make decisions that are not informed by government policy. Participants who have implement play-based learning felt "autonomy in our own schools only goes so far, we have the government to consider" (Participant F) and they would love for the government to "trust the people in the schools... that we're doing the right thing for the children, not for an easy life, certainly not for an easy life." (Participant H). The wealth of research, however, that discusses the benefit of play for children beyond the age of those within EYFS cannot be ignored and, though there is no guidance as to whether or not play should continue beyond EYFS from the government, there are plenty of researchers, neuroscientists and practitioners who understand why children need to learn through play longer than the first 5 years of their life. Ultimately, when you see how happy the children can be in a play-based environment and how it can positively impact future outcomes for all children, you realise that, by having the courage to put children first and implement play-based learning, you can have phenomenal results.

> "When I walk into a classroom and see the level of play happening it pulls on my heartstrings because it shows me how successful play-based learning is and how happy the children are to be at our school." (Participant G).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Summary of findings

This dissertation set out to answer 'What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage?' and, from the literature review, a framework was established with the most common themes (Figure 2). Each of the most common themes are explored below against the research study.

Knowledge and Experience

The research study identified several factors that inform decisions when considering play as an approach to learning beyond EYFS. Most significantly, those participants that engage in play-based learning after their initial teacher training are more likely to implement play-based learning beyond EYFS, as are those who have taught in EYFS. In addition to identifying that leaders' own knowledge and opinion are essential, the knowledge and opinions of the team can also impact leaders' decisions. (See Chapter 4.2).

Systems and Politics

The study suggests that the current education system in England impacts leaders' thoughts around play-based learning. Due to the statutory curriculum, policies, and the current OFSTED framework, many school leaders feel the education system does not allow for play-based learning. When leaders have a strong understanding of play-based learning, they still do not perceive that they have autonomy to embed play-based learning in a way that they would like to. (See Chapter 4.3).

Confidence and Certainty

The study suggests that in addition to the lack of training which impacted leaders' confidence in decision making, there were many other reoccurring elements that impacted the confidence in leaders' decision making: lack of direct instruction from the government; the expectations of the statutory National Curriculum; leaders' own knowledge, and the knowledge and experience of others. Understandably, headteachers

need to feel certain that their decision is right for their school (Chitpin & Jones, 2015). To be confident in making the decision to implement play-based learning, the leader should also have confidence in the staff that would be implementing the play-based learning or a confidence in their own knowledge so that their decision can be justified. (See Chapter 4.4).

Values, Beliefs, Perceptions and Bias

It was interesting to note that 57% (n=20) of leaders believe that the way in which children learn beyond EYFS in their own schools were not in line, or only somewhat in line, with their own vision and values. The most common answers for not being able to align the practice within school to their own beliefs being: the demands of the curriculum, and accountability and testing. Individuals' values and beliefs are a huge factor in decision making, however their own perceptions and bias also impact the decisions made. (See Chapter 4.5)

Connections and Collaboration

The importance of working with the team was a significant factor in the decision making of participants. Several participants within the questionnaire identified that they felt playbased learning had not been implemented due to reluctance from staff, others discussed the way in which they had worked with their team to identify and support others into adapting the way in which children learn beyond EYFS. The study also considers, where leaders are not experts in play-based learning, how the perceptions of leaders can be influenced by others. This is supported by findings from Fisher (2022) who mentioned that those without experience in EYFS will often be led by advocacy of those who have. Advice from colleagues can reduce bias in decision making (Chitpin, 2020), however the research into collaborative decision making also links back to the level of accountability at stake (O'Sullivan, 2011). Though collaboration is essential in decision making, as Male (2004) identified, the decision is ultimately, still the decision of the leader. (See Chapter 4.6). In summary, though there are a range of factors which *inform the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage*, the most substantial findings within this study are:

- Despite the range of research available on play-based learning, not all leaders are aware of this yet. Having training in play-based learning and experience in EYFS after the initial teacher training is an indicator that a leader is more likely to implement play-based learning beyond EYFS.
- The knowledge and experience of the team will impact leaders' decisions when considering play as an approach to learning.
- The education system in England, curriculum demands, accountability and OFSTED impact leaders' confidence and certainty in making decisions.
- Though leaders' perceptions and biases play a part in decision making, some leaders' feel they are not able to implement approaches that are aligned to their values and beliefs due to the current education system in England.
- Where leaders have not received training in decision making frameworks or approaches, a dual process including collaboration is applied, however this can often be intuitive and, therefore, ethics may not be consciously considered in the process.
- Headteachers know that accountability, ultimately, sits with them.
- Individual contexts and circumstances can impact decisions to implement playbased learning but those leaders who are confident in explaining why they are implementing it are less likely to let other factors influence their decision making.

5.2 Significance of Findings

As a result of the findings in this study, the following should be considered when reflecting on the research question: *'What informs the decisions that leaders make when considering play as an approach to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage?'*

- The government should consider the research into play-based learning and reflect on the policies and statutory documentation to suggest play based learning should continue after EYFS. This would reduce the uncertainty in decision making for leaders and be in line with other countries within the United Kingdom.
- Research which indicates the importance of play-based learning should be shared with all school leaders through training and development.
- All leaders should consider teaching in EYFS for a brief period if they have not done so within their careers.
- Leaders should consider why an approach to learning has been implemented in their own schools if it is not in line with their own vision and values.
- Leaders should consider the importance of collaboration to reduce perceptions and bias in decision making.
- Leadership qualifications should provide training in decision making.

The responses within this survey which explore the reasons why leaders implement play are heart-warming and, though it may be due to who the questionnaire attracts, not one leader implied that play was the wrong approach for children beyond EYFS. Participant H explained it perfectly **"Every time I look at something, all I think is would I be happy with my own child in that room? And if I'm not, then why is it okay for another child?"** (Participant H). As play is the right of every child (UN, 1989), the final suggestion would be to invest in implementing a play-based learning approach beyond EYFS and see what happens within your school.

5.3 Limitations

As with all research that uses the interpretive paradigm, by exploring human behaviour and evaluating responses to questions to deepen the understanding (Chapman et al., 2005; Holley & Harris, 2019) there will always be a limitation brought by human perceptions, beliefs, and biases (Adelson, 2019) despite the research methodology taking approaches to reduce this (Chapter 3). The participants for the questionnaire were from across England and the sample size ensured rich, qualitative data was collected. However, a limitation with the research was the number of participants who were available for interview within the period available. Should this research be repeated, it would be beneficial to increase the number of interviews. The participants that were selected who were no longer able to be interviewed within the time available were leaders from who had indicated that they did not implement a play-based approach beyond EYFS on the questionnaire. The withdrawal of participants impacted the sample as the representation of those who did not implement play-based learning, compared to those who did, was not as intended. However, the qualitative data supported responses in the questionnaire and provided vast amounts of high-quality data for the research study.

Though questions were adapted after the pilot for the questionnaire, when analysing the final data, there were several questions that did not provide as much information as I had anticipated on how decisions had been made or on individual's perceptions of play-based learning. The questions within the interview were adapted for this, however, as the number of participants for the interviews were reduced so was the data collected.

A range of strategies have been put in place to ensure validity, reliability and ethical considerations within the study and the research design has identified and helped to mitigate most potential limitations with the research. Though there are some limitations outlined above, the research study has been effective in identifying significant findings that can be implemented within schools and within educational policy in order to make changes when considering play-based learning beyond EYFS.

5.4 Future research

This research builds upon the research of why play-based learning beyond EYFS is important. In particular it builds upon the work of Fisher (2022) who, after interviewing teachers and headteachers, felt a barrier to implementing play-based learning can be the headteacher and, felt it would be of value to research the teaching experience of headteachers to see if it impacted the implementation of play-based learning beyond

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EYFS. Following the suggestions of how the findings of this research study could be implemented, future research based on an extension of this study have been identified. In summary, it would be useful to research:

- The motivation for headteachers who have chosen to complete training on playbased learning and the impact of the training
- The impact of receiving training on play-based learning for school leaders who are reluctant to implement play beyond EYFS and the impact of providing training or experience for all staff in primary school on play-based learning
- Thoughts from OFSTED inspectors on play-based learning to give further certainty for headteachers
- The effect of the curriculum review under the labour government and any subsequent changes
- If there is an impact on how leaders make decisions, and their confidence in the decisions they make, after receiving training in decision-making processes and frameworks.

5.5 Concluding thoughts

As educators, we want to inspire, motivate and instil a life-long love of learning in every child we have the pleasure of meeting. In England, however, the education system has become lost with a combination of the 'school readiness' agenda, narrowed academic outcomes and 'top-down' government policies which impact many aspects of leading a school, and at times, can impact school leaders' belief that they can stay true to their own vision and values. As educators we have power to implement play and encourage children to see the awe and wonder that fills the world around them. In doing so we are supporting them to become experts in skills such as problem-solving, creativity, communication, self-regulation and emotional wellbeing. However, the confidence, knowledge and experience of school leaders are in a privileged position to reflect on

the abundance of research and, in putting children first, advocate for the magic of play beyond EYFS.

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Appendicies

Appendix 1 Ethics Panel Approval Letter



Dear Jo

Thank you for your recent application to the School of Education Ethics Committee for approval. Apologies for the delayed response.

I am pleased to inform you that your application was reviewed by the committee and has been granted approval to move on to the next stage. Please note that although your application was approved, the committee asks that you address the following:

- Please remind participants about their right to withdraw and how their data will be stored and used even though it is on the information sheet. If they are not signing a consent form (because they are agreeing consent via the online form) please include the full consent statement in the questionnaire form and yes/ no responses.
- Please introduce yourself on the questionnaire and thank participants for volunteering.

In addition to feedback sent earlier:

- Please amend retrospective dates
- Clarify how participants will be recruited to the study and what criteria will be used to select participants for interviews.

Please discuss the committee's recommendation(s) with your supervisor(s) before proceeding with your research project.

Please also find included an **'End of Project Report Form**'. You will need to submit this to the ethics committee <u>within one month</u> of completing your project.

We wish you every success with your research.

Kind regards

Sarah Adlington, on behalf of the School of Education Ethics Committee Research Administrator University of Chester

Appendix 2 Blank Participant Information Sheet

Copied from an Electronic Google Form

Title of Project: What informs decisions that leaders make when considering play learning beyond EYFS?

Name of Researcher: Jo Gray

I am a Masters student at the University of Chester and am passionate about supporting leaders to keep hold of their vision and values whilst putting children first.

Thank you for your interest in this research project.

I am inviting **current headteachers or executive head teachers** in England to participate in this research project.

You should only participate if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. Before you decide if you wish to participate, you need to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If there is anything unclear or if you would like more information, please contact Jo on her university email address: 2326681@chester.ac.uk

What is the aim of this study?

The aim of the study is to investigate the factors which contribute to decisions that school leaders make in relation to learning beyond Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England, in particular the decision around whether or not children learn through play-based learning beyond EYFS. Through this, it will also explore the primary school system in England and the way in which children are currently taught.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You are invited to participate because you are a school leader that expressed an interest in participating in the research and the researcher would value your input into the project.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason. If you choose to exit the study before its completion, your data will be deleted and not used.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you choose to participate, you will be invited to complete an online, anonymous survey and then, should you wish to, you may also be interviewed by the researcher. The interview will be virtual and a date will be set that is convenient for yourself and the researcher. Your engagement in the online survey should take no more than 15 minutes and the interview will last around 30 minutes.

What are the possible benefits of me taking part?

The information you provide will help you to reflect on decisions you make as a leader. The survey will also contribute to our understanding of the reason as to why some school leaders implement play beyond EYFS and why other leaders do not. This information may then be used to support school leaders' decisions going forward and may also inform larger scale studies that look at and explore the school system and the way in which children are currently taught in England.

What are the possible disadvantages of me taking part?

Thinking about and reflecting on issues of leadership in education can be difficult and can occasionally lead to distress. If you experience any stress at any time as a result of your participation in this study, you can withdraw immediately and/or seek support from an appropriate agency e.g., your school governors, mental health charities, or support services such as Education Support.

Will the information provided by me for the study be kept confidential?

The researcher will not share the details of who has or has not participated in the study with anyone. All data collected will be confidential and remain anonymized. Data will be stored on a secure computer which will only be accessible to the researcher.

What will happen with the results of this research?

The results will be used as part of the researcher's dissertation. It is also possible that the data will be published in an academic journal and/or shared at academic conferences.

Who has reviewed this study?

The study has been reviewed and approved by my supervisor and the School of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Chester.

Who can I contact further regarding this research?

If you would like further information about the study or have any questions then please contact Jo Gray on her university email address 2326681@chester.ac.uk at any point before, during or after completing the survey.

Alternatively, you can contact the project supervisor, Brian Stillings on <u>b.stillings@chester.ac.uk</u>.

If you have any complaints about the study, please address these to the Dean of the School of Education, David Cumberland, at <u>education@chester.ac.uk</u>.

Thank you so much for your interest in this study.

The University does not accept liability for harm which does not result from its negligence. In the event that something does go wrong and a participant is harmed during the research and the harm sustained is due to the negligent acts of those undertaking the research, then the participant may have grounds to bring legal action. Anyone bringing such legal action may incur legal costs.

This research study complies with current legislative requirements for England and with the commonly agreed international standards for good practice in research. These are laid down in the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity and are categorised as: Honesty in all aspects of Research; Accountability in the conduct of research; Professional courtesy and fairness in working with others and good stewardship of research on behalf of others. University of Chester recognises that there may be ethical and cultural differences across jurisdictions. Participants are therefore advised to be aware of any local requirements and to exercise care in their decision to take part.

What informs decisions that leaders make when considering learning beyond EYFS?

jo.gray@oneeducation.co.uk Switch account

Not shared

⊘

* Indicates required question

Your consent to participate in the survey

Please contact Jo Gray on her university email address 2326681@chester.ac.uk at any point during the completion of this survey to ask any questions or withdraw. You can also contact Jo if you want to opt out after submitting.

Please note if you select NO to any of the questions in section 2 then please do not complete the survey without discussing it further with Jo or her supervisor.

I understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project, I can notify the researcher(s) involved and withdraw immediately.

O Yes

No

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions. *

- O Yes
- No

I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for * the above study. Yes No
I understand that all information would be treated as being strictly confidential * and that anonymity would be assured. Yes No
I agree to participate in the above study. * Yes No
If I agree to have an informal discussion following the survey, I am confirming that * I am willing for the content of the interview to be recorded and kept until the end of the study. Yes No Do not want to partake in interview
Before moving onto section 3: *
Choose I confirm I have not selected no to any of the questions in section 2 and I can continue with the survey.
I have selected No to one or more of the questions in section 2 so I cannot continue with the survey.

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Appendix 4 Questionnaire

What informs decisions that leaders make when considering learning beyond EYFS?

Ø

jo.gray@oneeducation.co.uk Switch account

Not shared

* Indicates required question

Survey

Reminder: Please contact Jo Gray on her university email address 2326681@chester.ac.uk at any point during the completion of this survey to ask any questions or withdraw. You can also contact her if you want to opt out after submitting.

Definition of Play-based learning: For the purpose of this study, the definition of play-based learning will be: an approach where children are able to develop concepts, knowledge and skills through play.

What is your current role within the school or Trust you work in? (Choose one)

- Headteacher
- Head of School
- Executive Head Teacher
- O CEO
- Other:

Within your teaching career, which age ranges have you taught in for one year or more?

EYFS

KS1

KS2

Secondary

Other:

Did your teacher training include EYFS?

() No

O Yes - though Primary mainly

Yes - EYFS as a specialism

Other:

Have you had CPD on learning through play after your teacher training? Yes - I did a qualification Yes - external CPD courses Yes - In house CPD No - but colleagues currently outside of EYFS have No - but colleagues currently within EYFS have No Other:							
How would you ra	1	2		ndersta	4	5	aspinent:
	_					-	
Novice	0	0	C)	0	0	Expert
How would you ra Novice	1	2	3		4	5	beyond EYFS? Expert
How would you ra	te the im	portanc	e of play	/ based	learning	in EYFS?	
	1	2	3	4	5		
Not Important	0	0	0	0	0	Extreme	ely Important
How would you rate the importance of play based learning in KS1?							
		2					
Not Important	0	0	0	0	0	Extreme	ely Important
How would you rate the importance of play based learning beyond KS1?							
	1	2	3	4	5		
Not Important	0	0	0	0	0	Extreme	ely Important

As a school leader, is the decision of whether or not to offer a play-based learning curriculum beyond EYFS in line with your vision and values for education? Why or why not?

Your answer

How was the decision in your school made in relation to whether or not play-based learning should continue beyond EYFS?

Your answer

How do children access play based learning beyond EYFS in your school? (Select all that apply)

Continuous Provision during transition into Y1 (for part of the year)

Continuous Provision throughout most of the day throughout Y1

Continuous Provision for most of the day throughout Y2

Continuous Provision in Y1 at set times of the day/week

Continuous Provision in Y2 at set times of the day/week

Continuous Provision at set times of the day/week primary school classrooms

Outdoor (Free flow) in Y1

Outdoor (Free flow) in Y2

Outdoor (Free flow) in KS2

Play based resources at playtimes

Play when children finish their lesson

Play based activities planned within some direct teaching lessons

Play for individual children to meet their needs e.g. SEND or behaviour

There is limited play after EYFS in my school

Other:

Do you feel there are benefits to play based learning beyond EYFS? If yes, please specify.

Your answer

If you have implemented play based learning beyond EYFS, have you drawn upon any theory or research that links to play based learning?

We do not have play based learning beyond EYFS.

\sim	Ma
L 1	NO
\sim	

Yes

If you answered yes to drawing	upon any theory	or research, please state
who/what etc.		

Your answer

How do you as a leader contribute to learning through play within your school? Why?

Your answer

In your school, do you feel the children learn through play enough once they are no longer in EYFS? Why?

Your answer

What factors impacted your decision around whether or not play-based learning should continue beyond EYFS? (Select multiple)

- Statutory Documentation
- Ofsted
- Current education system
- Own experience and knowledge
- Own opinions
- Staff knowledge and experience
- Opinions of other staff
- Stakeholders' views
- Cohort of children
- Pupil voice
- Own research in school context
- Existing research
- Data and analysis
- Historical
- Space
- Time

- Other:

- 85 -

	e anything you would like to add about play based learning beyond EY your school for the researcher to consider?	FS
Your an	iswer	
about p	would be happy to have an informal discussion (approximately 20 mir play beyond EYFS to further inform the research please include your e is below.	
present	formation within this survey and within the informal discussion will s ted anonymously and the email will only be used for contacted you to se a time).	
Your an	iswer	
I under	mitting this survey below, I consent to participating in this research p estand that all information will be anonymised and I know I can conta withdraw at any point during the research project.	
	5	
Thank y Thank y study.	you! you so much for taking the time and effort to contribute towards this resear	ch
Back	Submit	Clear for

Appendix 5 Semi-Formal Interview Questions

Thank you so much for taking the time to have a discussion with me today regarding decisions you make as a leader especially linked to play based learning beyond EYFS. I have shared the Participant Information sheet and you have given free and informed consent to be interviewed. Are you still ok with this?

I want to remind you that you can stop this interview at any point you wish to and I will check with you throughout to ensure you are still happy participating. I will use the recording afterwards to ensure the transcript is accurate and anonymous.

1. Building upon your answers from the survey, please can you explain if your school currently incorporates play-based learning into its curriculum beyond EYFS and the reasons for doing so.

2. What factors influenced your decision-making process when determining whether to teach the curriculum through play or not??

3. Can you walk me through a particular decision-making process you underwent to implement play-based learning

Additional: How have you made the decision of how to balance statutory policy and your own vision and values within the curriculum?

4. What factors influence your decisions as a school leader?

Additional: what impact do stakeholders / data/ research/ the system/ staff etc have?

5. Have you encountered any challenges or barriers after you made your decisions linked to play based learning – either by implementing it or not and if so, how have you addressed them?

Can I remind you at this point, as we are over half way that you can withdraw at any time from this survey. Are you still in agreement to be interviewed?

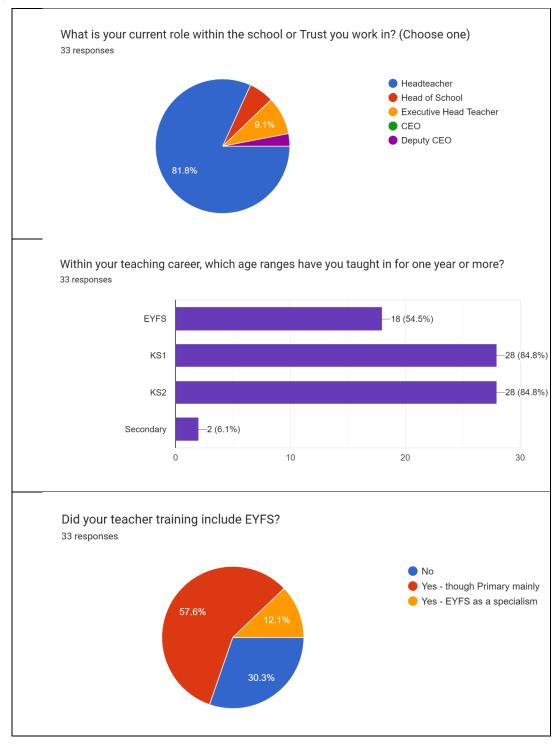
6. Can you describe any notable successes or positive outcomes resulting from your decisions of your curriculum decisions?

7. How do you envision the future of learning to look at your school, considering possible educational reform and the decisions that you make as a leader?

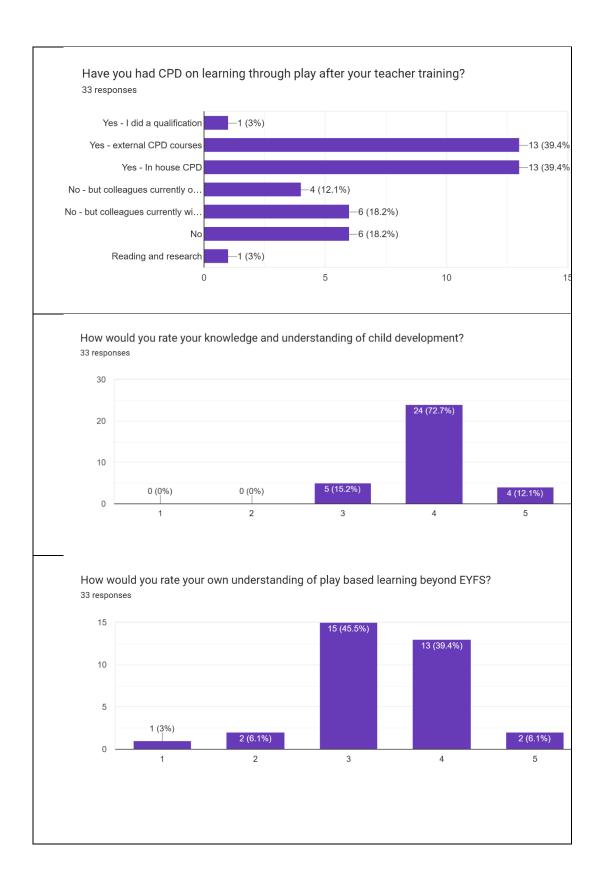
8. Have you ever had any specific training on decision making that you can recall, as a school leader?

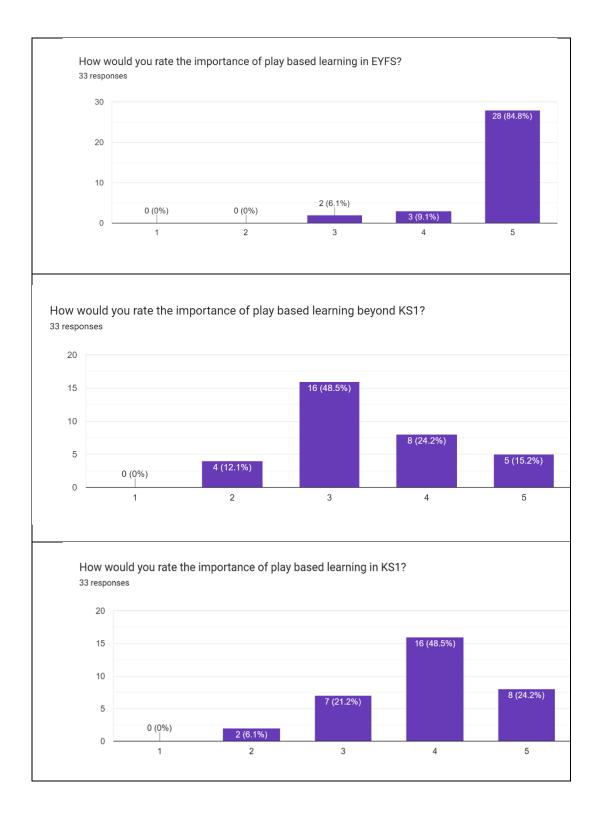
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your decision making in education as a leader?

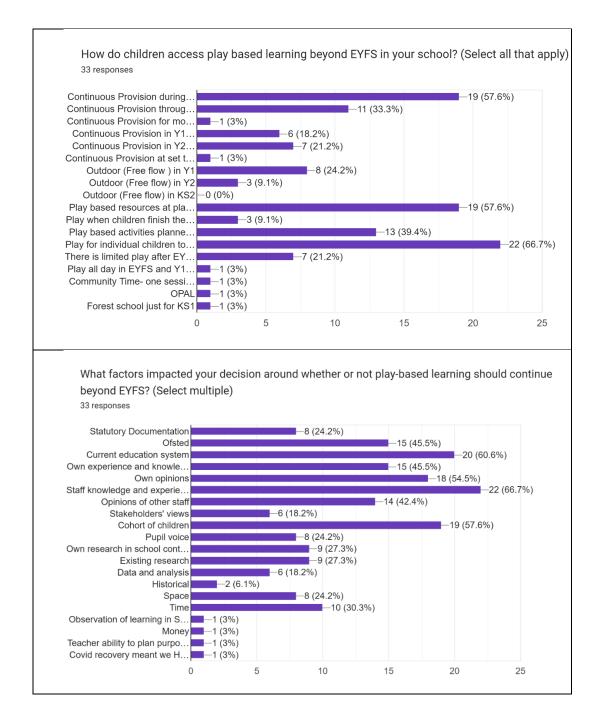
Thank you so much for your time. As mentioned, this is all confidential and you can withdraw at any time. Are you still in agreement to be included within the research project?



Appendix 6 Data from Questionnaire







i. Comparison between ITT training and implementation of play beyond EYFS

Trained in EYFS during ITT	Play based learning in their school			
No (33.3%) 10	3 – limited play after EYFS	5 – Play at transition into Y1 for part of the year 50%	N/A	2– throughout year one and two 20%
	30%			2070

Yes, mainly primary (57.6%) 19	6 – limited play after EYFS 32%	4 – play for transition into year one 21%	4 – throughout year one 21%	5 – throughout year one and two 26%
Yes – EYFS as specialism (12.1%) 4	1 – limited play after EYFS	1 – play at transition for part of the year in year one	2 – throughout year one	N/A
	25%	25%	50%	

ii. Comparison between ITT training and leaders' thoughts on play-based learning

Trained in EYFS during ITT	In your school, do you feel the children learn through play enough once they are no longer in EYFS?			
No (33.3%) 10	No - 8 80%	Possibly	Yes 2 20%	
Yes, mainly primary (57.6%) 19	No – 11 58%	It depends - 2 10.5%	Yes – 6 31.5%	
Yes – EYFS as specialism (12.1%) 4	No -4			
	100%			

iii. Comparison between ITT training and knowledge/understanding of Child Development

Trained in EYFS during ITT	How would you rate your knowledge and understanding of child development?			
No (33.3%) 10	5 – 2	4 - 6	3 -2	
	20%	60%	20%	
Yes, mainly primary	5- 2	4 – 14	3-3	
(57.6%) 19	10.5%	74%	15.5%	
Yes – EYFS as specialism (12.1%) 4		4- 4 100%		

iv.	Leaders' opinion on the importance of play-based learning in EYFS
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Trained in EYFS during ITT	How would you rate the importance of play-based learning in EYFS?				
No (33.3%) 10	5 – 10 100%				
Yes, mainly primary (57.6%) 19	5- 14 74%	4 – 3 16%	3-2 10%		
Yes – ÉYFS as specialism (12.1%) 4	5-4 100%				

v. Leaders' opinion on the importance of play-based learning in KS1

Trained in EYFS during ITT	How would you r	ate the importanc	e of play-based l	earning in KS1?
No (33.3%) 10	5 – 2 20%	4 – 5 50%	3-3 30%	
Yes, mainly primary (57.6%) 19	5- 8 42%	4 – 5 26.5%	3-4 21%	2-2 10.5%
Yes – EYFS as specialism (12.1%) 4	5-1	4-3		
	25%	75%		

vi. Leaders' opinion on the importance of play-based learning beyond KS1

Trained in EYFS during ITT	How would you rate the importance of play-based learning beyond KS1?						
No (33.3%) 10	5 – 1 10%	4 – 1	3-6	2-2			
Yes, mainly primary (57.6%) 19	5- 3 15.5	4 – 5 26.5%	3-9 47.5%	2-2 10.5%			
Yes – EYFS as specialism (12.1%) 4	5-1 25%	4-2 50%	3-1 25%				

vii. Leaders' decisions and their vision and values

Play based learning after EYFS	Is the decision to pla	ay in in line with your v	vision and values?
We do not have play-based learning beyond EYFS 10	No -4	Somewhat - 4	Yes - 2
Play within transition into Y1	No – 1	Somewhat - 1	Yes - 3
Play longer than transition into Y1	No -3	Somewhat - 5	Yes - 9

viii. Training and experience in EYFS and those that have implemented play-based learning

	Trained in EYFS ITT	Trained in EYFS as part of Primary ITT	Not trained in EYFS ITT	External CPD in play after qualifyin g	Internal CPD in play after qualifyin g	No CPD in play after qualifyin g	Taught in EYFS	Not taught in EYFS
Percenta ge of participa nts	12% (n=4)	58% (n=19)	30% (n=10)	39.5% (n=13)	21.% (n=7)	39.5% (n=13)	55% (n=18)	45% (n=15)
Percenta ge of participa nts that engaged in play beyond EYFS	75% (n=3)	68% (n=13)	70% (n=7)	100% (n=13) * *Two who stated they do not have play are impleme nting play this academi c year	86% (n=6)	54% (n=7)	84% (n=15) * *Two who stated they do not have play are impleme nting play this academi c year	60% (n=9)

ix. Sample of one question to show how data was analysed for themes

Q. As a school leader, is the decision of whether or not to offer a play-based
 learning curriculum beyond EYFS in line with your vision and values for education?
 Why or why not 32 responses

My vision and values for education help inform our decision making as a school for all areas of the curriculum. However, this is limited by other constraints within which we need to work. Yes and no. We do our best to offer play-based learning but it's hard with the demands of the National Curriculum Yes, to some extent. We are currently changing our curriculum to provide significantly more experience led learning including significantly increasing opportunities for talking and discussing. I would like to offer more play-based learning, but the current curriculum does not allow for it Yes - best opportunity for children to shine and learn at a developmentally appropriate way Yes. Particularly since **Covid** it has never been more important. Children are missing fundamental experiences of play-based learning to support their development. Somewhat. The expectations of the national curriculum and published data means that there is pressure to teach skills and for the children to complete tasks early on. We have OPAL playtimes though so all pupils can learn though play outside. Yes, although driven by external forces re results It is used for those that need it and require a more play-based approach. The curriculum constraints to reach end of year 2 would not be met by some if they continued to engage in play-based The curriculum doesn't allow for extended play-based learning anymore children should be met where they are at, not be forced to be ready for learning that they are not.

x. Sample of the data from questionnaire to show how data was analysed

Timestamp		Did your teacher training include EYFS?		If you answered yes			How would you rate		How would you rate	As a school leader, is the decision of	How do children access play based learning beyond EYFS in your		Eyouhave Eyo
	career, which age			for CPD, what	your knowledge and		the importance of	the importance of	the importance of	whether or not to offer a play-based	school? (Select all that apply)		implemented play to d
	ranges have you taught			element/s of play did						learning ourrioulum beyond EYFS in line			basedlearning the
	in for one year or more?		teacher training?	the training cover?	child development?	play based learning	inEYFS?	inKS1?	beyond KS1?	with your vision and values for education?		beyond EYFS? If yes,	beyondEYFS, have plea
	T	*				beyondEYFS? 🚽		-		Why or why not? 🗸	-	pleaselist. 🖵	you drawn upon i 🚽 who
A	KS1. KS2	Yes - though Primary mainly				1 3	1	5 4		3 The decision I have made is now is b	Play based resources at playtimes. Play based activitie	Independence, co	We do not have play b
в	EYFS.KS1.KS2	Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes - external CPD or	Therapeutic benefits		3	3	4	4	4 My vision and values for education help info	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1(for part of the year),	Opportunities for all cl	Yes Sha
C	KS2	No	Yes - In house CPD	Child Initiated Langu		4 :	3	5	4	3 No	Continuous Provision throughout most of the day throughout Y1, C	It is how children learn	No
D	KS2. Secondary	No	No			1 3	1	5 !	5	5 Yes. For example, we look to develo	There is limited play after EYFS in my school	Developing emotion	We do not have pl No
E	EYFS, KS1, KS2	Yes - though Primary mainly	No					3					We do not have play b
F	852	No	No - but collegaues a	urrently outside of EV	5	4		5			Continuous Provision throughout most of the deviteroughout Y1.0		
G	EYF5.KS1.KS2	Yes - though Fhimayy mainly	Yes-external CPD o	How chn learn best to	5	5 5		5 3		5 kis We have a play based learning across	: Durdoor (Free flow) in Y7. Durdoor (Free flow) in Y2. Play based in	Teamwork.collabora	Yes Va
H	KS2	No	No-but collegoues a	umently outside of EV	ہ ^ا	ز ۱		5 3		3 Yes stall incortant and fundamental to all	. Continuous Provision during transition into Y1((or part of the year))	Continuous Provision (heavahout most of the devi
1	EYES.KSI.KS2	Yes - EYFS as a specialism	Yes-external CPD or	High Scope Learning		4	1	5	4	4 Yes and no. We do our best to offer play bar	Continuous Provision throughout most of the day throughout Y1, P	Resilience, creativity,	Yes Ead
3	EYES, KS1, KS2	No	No					5 4		3 No	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1 (for part	Children learn mor	We do not have play b
ĸ	KS1, KS2	Yes - though Primary mainly	No - but colleagu	es outreptly within	2	3		4	3	3 Yes to some extent. We are currently			We do not have play b
L	K\$1.K\$2	Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes - In house CPD	Plavin EYFS and OP	(I	4 :	3	5	4	4 I vould like to offer more play based learning	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1 (for part of the year).	Children learn through	Yes EFF
м	K\$1.K\$2	Ne	Yes - In house CPD	Intensive interactions		3 3	3	5	4	4 Yes - best opportunity for children to shine a	Continuous Provision during transition into 'r'1 (for part of the year).	Can help appropriate	Yes Ead
N	EYFS.KS1.KS2	Viez - though Phinary mainly	Yes-external CPD c	Planning for play this	4	r 4		5 4	r .	4 Yes, Particularly since Covid it has never be	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1/for part of the wear).	Social communication	Yes An
0	K\$1, K\$2	Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes-In house CPD	Loose parts and Gree		4 :	3	5	5	5 Yes completely my vision that all primary chi	Continuous Provision throughout most of the day throughout Y1, C	Focus, engagement,	No
P	KS1, KS2	Yes - though Primary mainly	No		4	1 2	2	3	2	2 Somewhat. The expectations of the	Play based resources at playtimes, Play for individual	Independence, re	We do not have play b
0	EYFS, KS1, KS2	Yes - EYFS as a specialism	Yes - external CP	Through Early Exc		4	1	5		4 Yes although driven by external force	Play based resources at playtimes. There is limited pla	Interactions, cogr	We do not have play b
B	EYFS, KS1, KS2	Yes - though Primary mainly	No - but colleagues o	urrenity outside of EYF		4 1	1	5	3	3 It is used for those that need it and require a	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1(for part of the year),	Supports access to le	Yes EFF
s		Yes - EYFS as a specialism	No			4 1	1	5	4	3 The curriculum doesn't allow for extended p	Continuous Provision throughout most of the day throughout Y1	Eyfs was originally des	No
T	EYFS, KS1, KS2	Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes - external CPD ci	I cannot remember		4 :	3	5	5	4 Yes, children should be met where they are	Continuous Provision throughout most of the day throughout Y1, C	To name a few_high +	Yes -Pla
U		Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes-external CPD or	Benefits of learning til		4 4	1	4	3	3 It's important to be structured and meaningf	Continuous Provision in Y1 at set times of the daylveek, Continuou	k's important to engage	Yes Car
V	EYFS, KS1	Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes - external CPD or	Importance of continu		3	3	5	4	3 Yes, as a HT of an infant school I can see th	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1(for part of the year).	Critical skills developm	Yes The
v	EYFS, KS1	Yes - though Primary mainly	No			5 4	1	5		3 Yes play based learning is good for	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1 (for part	Social and emotio	We do not have play b
x	EYFS, KS1, KS2	No	Yes - external CP	The theory behind	5	5 4	l .	5 1			Play based activities planned within some direct teach		
Y	K52	Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes - In house CPD	Indoor play, outdoor p		4 :	3	5	3	3 Yes - we are an inclusive school and make	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1 (for part of the year).	Meets the needs of th	No NA
ż	EYFS, KS1, KS2	No	Yes-external CPD or	verses. Reading and w		4 :	3	5	3	2 Yes. As this covers cohort/ individual needs	Continuous Provision during transition into 'r'1 (for part of the year).	Continuous Provision t	Yes FSF
AB	K\$1.K\$2	Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes - external CPD or	Playbasedlearning		4 1	1	5	5	3 Yes	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1(for part of the year),	Upto Y2 yes Y3 or	No
AC		Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes-external CPD ci	Developmental play.		4 1	1	5	4	3 Not fully due to the restrictions of the curricu	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1(for part of the year),	Social Curiosity Prob	No
AD	EYFS, KS1, KS2, Secon	w No	No - but colleagues o	urrently within EYFS h		3	3	5	4	3 Yes, we have elements of play within KS1bu	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1(for part of the year).	Mainly, the enjoyment	Yes Ann
AE	EYFS, KS1	No	Yes-Idid a qualificat			4	5	5	3	2 This is a difficult one because values wise, a	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1(for part of the year).	Self-regulation, relation	Yes Lon
AF	K51, K52	Yes - EYFS as a specialism	No - but colleagues o			4	4	5			Continuous Provision during transition into Y1(for part of the year).		
AG		Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes - In house CP			i (l .	5 !			There is limited play after EYFS in my school		We do not have pl No
AH	K\$1.K\$2	Yes - though Primary mainly	Yes - In house CPD	playbased cod throu		4 :	3	5	4	4 Play across the curriculum is valued and imp	Continuous Provision during transition into Y1(for part of the year),	Social and emotional	No

Appendix 7 Sample of data from Interview Transcripts

Sample of one interview transcript to show how data was analysed for themes

JG: I have pressed record and I am transcribing it Thank you so much for today. As we have said, you have read through the participant information sheet and signed the electronic agreement. The interview is completely anonymised and the anonymized transcript will be included within the appendices. Obviously, as we mentioned, if you want to withdraw at any point then then you can do.

Yeah, totally.

JG. Thank you so much. I do really appreciate it and I know how busy you are. Can I remind you if you need to stop the recording or pause it at any point then please feel free to do so.

No problem at all.

JG – My first questions just build upon the questionnaire. Building on your answers from the questionnaire, please can you explain if your school currently incorporates play based learning in its curriculum beyond early years and the reason for doing so.

So I I became the head here in January 23. Prior to that I was a headteacher elsewhere. I was a head teacher at previous school in an **extremely deprived area** which had **really low starting points**. And **play-based learning** was what we did. First it was our **early years we had continuous provision in year one and year 2 and then introduced and into key stage 2. it wasn't** full on provision style room, but we had a room where we had those real-life experiences that they could do as key stage 2.You know a kitchen, they were older, so it was more the life, you know, a kitchen, for obviously they were older so it was more the life skills way of learning the curriculum because our children needed it... I came to this school in January, 23. And There was nothing. Early years. It kind of was its own entity......

JG -Okay.

Part of early years was even in its own building. Away and it just didn't sit right with me. At any point. the old headteacher Didn't understand early years and their words were its babysitting. The headteacher was here for a long time, prior to me. And most of the staff have only ever worked here. So, their perception of what was good wasn't necessarily accurate. I struggled with that. I'm not EYFS training, I told them all this, I'm KS2 trained. I'm not early years trained, but I also understand the importance of early years because it is the foundation of everything so there's been quite a bit of work in just making early years part of school and not be seen as being on their own doing Their own thing. That was the perception across the school - them and us. I know it happens elsewhere to – EYFS vs the rest of the school but that isn't right for anyone so I had to challenge their views. I mean the early years lead was just also left completely to her own device. She's phenomenal, you know, no disrespect to her. But look. No, you are part of school. You are not a nursery. You're not a private nursery. You, you are school based. And then in September, the y1 team were trying to challenge their own beliefs

so we introduced continuous provision into year one. So, we talked we did a lot of research, a lot of work with early excellence before the sector before September. And I knew it wouldn't be the continuous provision that, that I envisaged in a few years. They said but why aren't they sat in rows? I am like because the 5. But they sit, need to do English and maths and we need to do an hour of English...an hour since when were you told you have to do an hour of English - since when were you told you have to do an hour of English in an hour of math and then you have to do history. I was like its key stage one. They are just stepping out of Being in early years, we need to incorporate that at least for a while, you know, at least until you know, and build up to that more formal teaching if we want to in the summer term ready for year 2. I did it gradually and they decided to carry on which was my hope – they would realise the power of it and What they didn't know ...they do know now...next year, year 2 is also going to have continuous provision. It's been tricky for staff to get on board with because they don't believe in it yet, though Y1 do now ... it was a very much data-driven school. Very data driven, sat at tables, not moving. That sort of concept

Appendix 8 Example of Systematic Research Review

Sample of how systematic research review was conducted for the Literature Review

	iteria												
All text	"Play based learning" OR "learning through play" OR "Play-based learning"												
All text	"KS1" OR "Key Stage One" OR "Beyond EYFS" OR "Beyond Early Years" OR "Beyond age Five" OR "beyond reception" OR "Transition to Year One"												
Database	s searched												
University	of Chester Online	ibrary											
Taylor an	d Francis												
Google So	holar												
All of Uni	versity of Chester su	bscribed educ	cation datab	ases (BEI, Child	and adolescen	t studies, Edu	cation Abs	tracts, Educ	ational Ad	ministratio	n Abstracts	, Education	Source, ERI
Sage													
Proquest													
Published	between 2014-202	4 (within 10 ye	ears)										
Search in	cluded 372												
Removed	duplicates - 118												
	abstract review - 77	(Not on to	opic, not pee	r reviewed, no	t written in Eng	lish, not empe	rical)						
Title and													