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## **Practitioners' Understandings of Loose Parts Play**

A dissertation presented in part fulfilment of the requirements of the  
Master of Education (Childhood Practice) at School of Education,  
The University of Glasgow

Supervisor: Dr Mary Wingrave

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## Abstract

This dissertation explores practitioners' understandings of loose parts play. Current policy has focussed interest in loose parts play and the use of open-ended materials within Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) and Out of School Care (OOSC) settings. My experience in practice in these settings and in training practitioners led me to the belief that there are essential differences in their approaches to loose parts play. My focus here is to explore how practitioners' understandings of loose parts play influence their approaches, and to gain insight into how these might influence the experiences of the children. The premise of the study is to define a baseline for further training and reflexive practice. The main theme that permeates the dissertation is the nature of play in education and play settings and the corresponding role of the adult.

Data for this research was collected from two sets of practitioners, six in an Early Learning and Childcare setting and six in an Out of School Care setting. Both groups took part in a questionnaire and then the six Out of School Care practitioners took part in a discussion group. The findings suggest that loose parts play is being adopted in settings without there being a fundamental understanding of the theory, and that the different approaches of those settings influence the success of the approach. I suggest that the conclusions presented require that practitioners in different settings share training and knowledge on a more equal platform, giving a basis for examination of practice in all settings. While the use of loose parts play and open-ended materials in settings is a valuable tool for learning, I propose that further research to investigate the benefits and best practice models is required in the context of Scottish policy and guidance.

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## List of Abbreviations

ELC Early Learning and Childcare

OOSC Out of School Care

SSSC Scottish Social Services Council

SVQ Scottish Vocational Qualification



## Chapter 1 Introduction and Rationale

'In any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it' (Nicholson, 1971:30).

Loose parts were first proposed as a theory in 1971 by Simon Nicholson. His work in the fields of art and architecture led him to examine how children's use of playgrounds, and consequently their creative development, could be influenced by the design and provision of variables that could be used to change the environment; 'loose parts'. This attitude to learning can be seen in various underpinning tenets of the Scottish educational system such as the work of Froebel (1887), Dewey (1897) and Piaget (1972) who advocate play as critical to children's development and learning (Platz and Arellano, 2011). I will examine the concept of play and its relationship to loose parts more fully in the literature review.

### 1.1 Rationale

While I may not have referred to loose parts by name in my initial years as a practitioner in early learning and childcare (ELC), Nicholson's (1971) 'variables' emerged as central resources in my nursery environments, applied workshops for students, and now in the out of school care (OOSC) setting where I am lead practitioner. This creative and imaginative approach to play fundamentally influenced my childhood, an echo of my artist father's childhood which was spent on remote islands where children played with wooden planks scavenged from boats, rocks, shells, old buoys and repurposed tin cans. My interest in loose parts has grown and developed as my career has progressed and a joint project between the school and my OOSC setting to introduce a Playpod (loose parts storage container) in the playground, furnished with a selection of large loose parts including tyres, pipes, cable reels and crates further influenced my interest in the subject. Through my experience as a tutor for SVQs (Scottish Vocational Qualifications) and as a workforce development officer delivering several workshops on the subject over the past two

years, I became aware of the need to establish an understanding of practitioners' perceptions of the concept, which can be lost in the enthusiasm for a new project, as demonstrated by Lewis (2011) in her examination of Sure Start initiatives. To assist with both practice in the OOSC setting I lead, and in the development of training programmes, I propose a small-scale enquiry into 'Practitioners' understandings of loose parts play'.

## 1.2 Professional context

While loose parts play is being used in both ELC and OOSC settings there are specific differences between the two environments. ELC fulfils both a care and educational role, emphasising curriculum and learning, particularly for children aged three to five (Scottish Government, 2014a; Siraj and Kingston, 2015). OOSC is underpinned by the Playwork principles (PPSG, 2005) (Appendix 1) and is wholly based on care and meeting children's play needs (Brown, 2008). Playwork entails removing identified barriers to play and enriching the dialectic environment of play, which involves encouraging children to investigate, modify and test ideas and opinions, influencing the outcome through their actions (Sturrock and Else, 1998:2). Practitioners often come from differing backgrounds in the two types of settings with OOSC practitioners having qualifications in 'playwork' rather than 'early education' (Siraj and Kingston, 2015). Both sectors register under the heading of practitioners with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), the regulator for social care workers in Scotland, however, OOSC workers are often referred to as Playworkers (ibid).

As advocated by Lewis and Munn (1987), I will satisfy the principal scope of the enquiry by considering supplementary questions: Can loose parts play be defined? How is the current Scottish policy context influencing loose parts play? What benefits to children are there in using loose parts play? Is there an accepted role of the adult in loose parts play? Through a literature review and gathering data from practitioners themselves, I will aim to re-join these questions within the limitations of a small-scale enquiry. I begin with the literature review.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

In this research, I sought to establish practitioners' understandings of loose parts play. This was founded on my personal experiences of training and working alongside practitioners and the resultant confusion that I perceived to exist regarding the use of loose parts. In this literature review I will first establish the importance of play, define specific language used and ascertain the Scottish context, before exploring the meaning of loose parts play, examining the history of the theory and establishing links to other relevant theoretical approaches. I will then examine the literature for how loose parts play can benefit children and the role of the adult in loose parts play, comparing two differing viewpoints and approaches based on playwork and education.

### 2.1 Play

I begin with the presumption, when discussing loose parts play, that it is free play, 'freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated' (PPSG,2005:1) and is an integral part of learning and child development. An examination of the definitions of play, and the benefits of play in general, are multifarious and far out-with the scope of this study (Eberle, 2014). However, a broad overview of the key theories of play will be presented, as a definition of play is essential to understanding the latitude of this research.

The importance of play for the healthy development of children and young people has become increasingly acknowledged. A mounting body of evidence corroborates the view that playing is not only an intrinsic necessity but also a behaviour that supports a sense of wellbeing, quality of life, and is a fundamental constituent in all areas of learning (Scottish Government, 2013a:14).

The National Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision defines play thus:

Play encompasses children's behaviour which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development – not

only for individual children but also for the society in which they live (Scottish Government, 2013a:12).

While this definition fits with the Playwork Principles delineation of play (PPSG, 2005:1) as being wholly within the realm of the child and not to be interfered with by an adult except to assist when things go wrong, it is somewhat at odds with educational definitions of play which incorporate the adult as a key part of learning through play. Moyles (1989) suggests that there are two types of play: free play (child initiated) and directed play (adult led). Her explanation of play to assist in learning involves a play spiral (see figure 2.1 below) in which the child first plays independently, exploring materials, and then is assisted by an adult in directed play to build on knowledge and skills. The child is then encouraged to play freely again, trying out the new skills and knowledge in new situations (ibid). Her work is supported by Kolb's (1984) cycle of experiential learning through experience, reflection, conceptualisation and testing and that of Wood et al. (1976) who advocate intervention by an adult to 'scaffold' learning for a child in an educational scenario, withdrawing the support as the child becomes more capable.

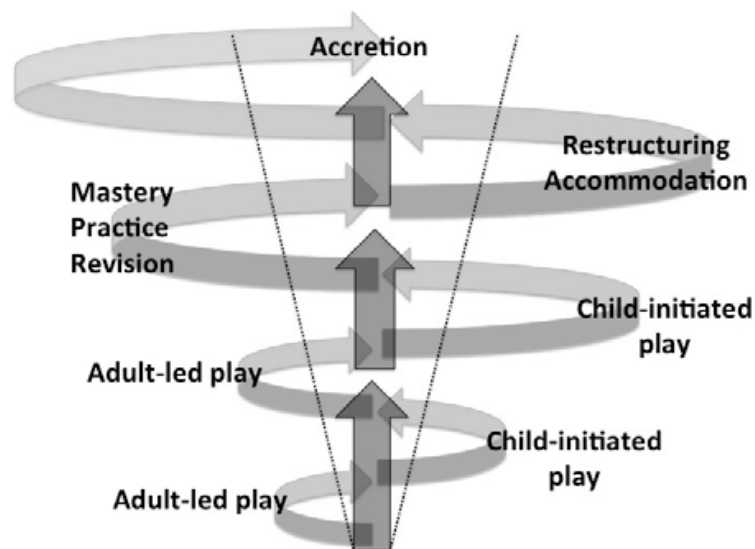


Figure 2.1: The Play Spiral, adapted from Moyles (1989:16) by Robinson et al. (2015:12).

Wood (2014) echoes Moyles (1989) definitions of types of play, describing them as 'child initiated', 'adult guided' and adding an additional category of 'technicist'. This new category is planned with the adults' goals in mind and is driven by policy and

curriculum-based learning outcomes rather than child-centred outcomes. Her description of 'child initiated' play, or free play, draws on the work of Froebel (1887), depicting play as an innate childhood pursuit that reinforces the discoveries that children make while exploring their world (Wood, 2014). The play and learning come from intrinsic motivations. 'Adult guided' play focuses on pedagogical, teaching relationships; an interpretation of play as educational, particularly in developing language and concepts (ibid).

In recent years educational theorists have emphasised the value of play as a mechanism that builds the self, not only through the expansion of experience-based skills and knowledge but also through the development of self-directed investigation (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Saracho and Spodek, 1998; Henricks, 2014). This elaborates on the work of theorists such as Piaget (1972) who regarded play and an experiential approach as being rudimentary factors in the development of children's cognitive structures through assimilation and accommodation of new knowledge and skills.

Play is defined by Bruce (2004:149) as having twelve features, which include being intrinsically motivated, using first hand experiences, trying out and consolidating skills, playing alone and with others and making sense of the world around them. Her one proviso is that adults should not dominate play in any way and although they may initiate it, they must be aware of the child's own 'play agenda' (ibid). Bruce's (ibid) approach is supportive of a less hands on, more playwork based view of play (Brown, 2008), however Stephen (2010:20) suggests that in educational establishments it is important to guard against the non-interventionist approach (removing adults from the learning process after the environment has been organised) as this can place too much emphasis on the child to drive forward their own learning. As I will investigate later in this review, these opposing views of play can influence how the adult behaves in supporting the child in a setting and signify the differences between a play based OOSC setting and ELC setting (Wood, 2014). As policies have an impact on practice, I will now examine the Scottish context influencing these approaches to play in general, and loose parts play in particular.

## 2.2 The Scottish context for play

The concept of loose parts play has gained ground recently in Scotland, with increasing awareness of the need for children to influence their environment rather than playing with toys that have predetermined outcomes, which can suppress imagination and creativity (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994; Craft, 2002; Cohen and Uhry, 2007; Wilson, 2009). Championed by the Scottish Government through the publication of a toolkit to encourage their use (Casey and Robertson, 2016), and by reference to them explicitly in the new Health and Social Care Standards (Scottish Government, 2017), loose parts play has become the latest 'innovation'. The use of a balance between organised, and freely chosen play, with these open-ended materials (loose parts) is stated as being essential to the development of 'social and physical skills, confidence, self-esteem and creativity' (Scottish Government, 2017:7).

The creation of the Loose Parts Toolkit (Casey and Robertson, 2016), was motivated by numerous Scottish policy developments. These include the Play Strategy for Scotland (Scottish Government, 2013b) which indicates the necessity for playspaces where children are initiators of the project and principal considerations in the design, as advocated in Fjørtoft and Sageie's (2000) analysis of natural playscapes. The toolkit affords practitioners an insight into theory and offers guidance in the development of loose parts in different settings. One of the principles presented in the document is the need to 'ensure that loose parts play is facilitated in line with the Playwork Principles' (Casey and Robertson, 2016:16). This positions loose parts play firmly in the realm of Playwork, putting onus on the non-interventionist approach as an appropriate means of adult supervision (Pellegrini and Galda, 1993; Sturrock and Else, 1998; Brown, 2003, 2008; Bruce, 2004; Armitage, 2009).

The educational agenda in Scotland has further influenced the growth of loose parts via the Curriculum for Excellence, with its emphasis on 'active learning' and the utilization of play in the early years as integral to learning and an educational tool (Scottish Executive, 2007). The Curriculum for Excellence (ibid) encompassing education from age 3 to 18 in Scotland, specifically references play in fourteen different outcomes across a range of curricular areas. The links to the theories of

Piaget (1972) are clear in the guidance for use of 'active learning' in the Building the Curriculum series of documents (Scottish Executive, 2006, 2007; The Scottish Government, 2008, 2009, 2011), placing an emphasis on resource rich environments and abundant opportunities for children to investigate as they choose (Stephen, 2010; Audain and Shoolbread, 2015).

Building the Ambition: National Practice Guidance on Early Learning and Childcare (Scottish Government, 2014b) and Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families (LTS, 2010), both central tenets of the Scottish system, have a strong focus on play. Guidance in both these documents relates to providing free play opportunities, assessing and managing risky play and continuous access to suitable indoor and outdoor play environments. The Scottish context therefore favours the use of play as a tool to be utilised in both ELC and OOSC settings to encourage learning and development and address the individual needs of children, with play being both child-initiated and adult guided (Wood, 2014). Loose parts play is central to this ambition (Casey and Robertson, 2016; Scottish Government, 2017).

### 2.3 The history of loose parts

The term 'Loose Parts' was established in 1971 by architect and designer Simon Nicholson in his essay 'How not to cheat children: The theory of loose parts'. Nicholson's work was based on his knowledge of both architecture and art and his work designing children's playgrounds. Nicholson (1971) defined loose parts as 'variables' that can be carried, moved, manipulated and utilised in multiple ways to influence an environment. These materials have no defined use in play and they can be employed alone or used in combination with other materials. With no predetermined outcomes, children are free to use their imagination and creativity to construct their own environment and play spaces (ibid). Loose parts are readily available and can be large or small, including natural resources such as sticks, leaves and pine cones, and scrap materials such as old tyres, planks and off-cuts of guttering (Casey and Robertson, 2016). Nicholson (1971:31) expanded the meaning of variables

to include physical phenomena such as gravity and magnetism, sounds and smells, as well as fire and electricity.

Nicholson (1971:30) suggested 'in any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it'. Further, he asserts, open-ended resources such as boxes, corks and sticks are more likely to encourage creativity than a set of swings. In his article he urged others to use this approach to design and in education to counteract the 'inflexible education system and cultural elite' who gave little opportunity for societal creativity (Nicholson, 1971:34).

In 1979, James Gibson discussed the psychological theory of 'affordances': that the affordances of any setting or article are the conceivable things it can do or be, as perceived by the beholder. 'An affordance is an invariant combination of variables' (Gibson, 1979; 135). Therefore, an object relies on a child's imagination and past experiences, for its affordances. While concurrent with Nicholson's theory of loose parts, affordances also relate to the philosophy of Craft (2002) whose hypothesis concerning 'possibility thinking' proposes that creative experiences such as loose parts play leads to developing multiple intelligences and 'the capacity to route-find, life-wide' (Craft 2002:44). Fox and Schirmacher (2012) agree that this divergence of thought can lead to innate critical thinking, a skill they advocate is essential in adult life. This incorporates components of scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976), and Vygotsky's (1976) zone of proximal development, in that progress relies on a child's interaction with their environment and society, learning through active and social experiences.

Following on from the work of Nicholson, Frost and Campbell's (1985) study of play behaviour in six-year olds demonstrated that children preferred to play with equipment that allowed for action and had multiple functions as opposed to fixed equipment, which had limited functionality. In support of this idea, Henniger et al. (1985) concluded, in their study of children's playgrounds, that children favoured equipment that was 'moveable' and 'offers several play options' over fixed apparatus. This notion is supported by the work of Walsh (1993) who examined the



juxtaposition between fixed play equipment and loose parts in early childhood education in Australia. Her review established that using loose parts, as opposed to fixed equipment, ensures sustained interest and accommodation of developmental variations, allowing children of different ages and abilities to play together.

The lexicon of loose parts, along with affordances, was engaged in by numerous other playground designers and architects in the following two decades (Frost 1992, 2006). However, the literature concerning the influence of loose parts on play and child development is limited until the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when loose parts became more prevalent in childcare settings, inspired by children's adventure playgrounds in Europe and a growing movement towards open-ended, unstructured play opportunities (Gill 2007:32; Louv, 2010).

An advocate of loose parts play, Brown (2003:56), proposes that in order to attain a setting where enrichment occurs, the environment needs to be arranged creatively to allow children to cultivate 'compound flexibility' which extends Sylva's (1977) idea that the child is part of a 'dialectic flow' of information between themselves and their environment. Building on this, Brown (2003) maintains that the level of flexibility children experience in their environment impacts their capacity to investigate and problem solve. According to Sutton-Smith (1997), play is a function of 'adaptive variability', allowing participants to occupy an environment while changing and adapting to the conditions within it, resonating with Nicholson's (1971) theory. Therefore, these theorists suggest that children having occasion to play with loose parts creates opportunities for flexibility and creativity in a child's domain, leading to an enriched environment (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Brown, 2003, 2008; Taylor 2008).

## 2.4 Differing viewpoints of loose parts

Within the literature, it would appear that there are two diametrically opposite attitudes to loose parts play: playwork and education. Skills Active (online), the Sector Skills Council responsible for playwork in the UK defines it as a 'highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances provision for children's play. It takes place where adults support children's play, but it is not driven by prescribed education or

care outcomes.’ Beunderman (2010:ix), in a Play England report examining the merits of playwork, suggests it is out-with, but complementary to, ‘the education continuum’ with no less consequence. ‘The Playwork Principles’ (PPSG, 2005) underpin practice and give the child, and play, the central role in the provision; play is led by children, with no specified outcome. Playworkers furnish children with spaces to play in the ways in which they want and need to (PPSG, 2005). In education in Scotland, Building the Curriculum 2, (Scottish Executive, 2007) advocates play as a tool to assist learning and divides play into two categories: spontaneous play and planned, purposeful play. The adult role in play in education is to provide materials and activities which can lead to the development of children’s identified learning needs (ibid).

Hutt et al. (1989:223) specifically define a taxonomy of play as three types; ludic, epistemic and games with rules. They defined ludic play as involving creative, symbolic and innovative behaviours while epistemic play is related more to problem-solving and skill acquisition. The playwork framing of loose parts focuses on play as an end in itself with an emphasis on the more imaginative and creative, ludic aspects of play, while the educational frame seeks to educate through utilising loose parts, focusing on the epistemic aspects of acquisition of skills and problem-solving (Hutt et al., 1989; Brown, 2008). While all are play, I would suggest that the influence of adults on the epistemological outcomes means that loose parts play is being overtaken by curricular outcomes within ELC settings.

Whilst this ludic approach is underscored in the Loose Parts Toolkit (Casey and Robertson, 2016), topical publications referring to loose parts play display an educational bias. Recently Daly and Beloglovsky (2015, 2016, 2018) have published three books regarding the use of loose parts with young children. As professors of Early Childhood Education, both approach loose parts play from an educational perspective. The focus of their books (ibid) are the developmental benefits of loose parts and the enhancement of loose parts play through the frame of the senses, creativity, action and inquiry, loose parts for younger children and how loose parts can be used to explore sustainable environments with children through art, inquiry

and family and community links, with a theoretical basis in the work of Dewey (1897), Bruner (1996) and Bronfenbrenner (1979). The use of descriptive images of early learning settings in these books gives adults a basis for learning and development and the opportunity for praxis (reflective practice) within their own settings.

This series of books illustrates the epistemological focus of loose parts play and the determination of educationalists to use loose parts, as in the Reggio Emilia approach in Northern Italy (Edwards et al, 2011), as invitations and provocations to learn rather than as freely chosen objects, for personally directed and intrinsically motivated play. The adult role implied in these books and various websites devoted to loose parts such as Fairy Dust Teaching (Haughey, 2018) and Stimulating Learning with Rachel (Rachel, 2018) is that of a guide and instructor as well as a facilitator. This coincides with the educational emphasis assigned on loose parts play by researchers such as Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2002) who argue that in the experiential play of loose parts, children begin to categorise objects, an antecedent to the development of knowledge and understanding in science and mathematics. My analysis of literature indicates that while the fundamental theory of loose parts remains constant, the outcomes and adult functions would appear to fluctuate depending on the frame applied.

## 2.5 Recent research

Having defined loose parts, and established the origin of the theory, I will examine a sample of the more recent research. Parameters for this review include research within the past ten years, playground use, and consideration of adult roles. Most of the empirical research I examined focuses on the specific benefits of loose parts play for the child and its impact on development, intelligence, health and behaviour. The methodologies used are specific to the disciplines being studied: from positivist approaches focusing on long-term quantifiable effects to interpretive qualitative surveys establishing opinions.

In their study of playground behaviours, Maxwell et al. (2008) assessed the impact of the introduction of loose parts on construction and dramatic play, however, no examination of the adult role was made. They observed play before, during and after the presentation of loose parts and determined that there was a beneficial effect on individual and group play, supporting the improvement of communication and negotiation skills.

Bundy et al.'s (2011) longitudinal study and Engelen et al.'s (2013) subsequent study of the impact of loose parts on physical activity and social skills in Sydney, Australia established a link between the introduction of loose parts into playgrounds and positive outcomes in creative and imaginative play, co-operation, socialisation and children being more physically active. Comparable links can be made between Maxwell et al.'s (2008), Bundy et al.'s (2011) and Hyndman et al.'s (2014) studies of loose parts play. Based in school playgrounds in Australia, Hyndman et al. (2014) examined the difference introducing loose parts play made to children's physical activity and quality of life at three intervals; during the introductory phase, at seven weeks and eight months subsequently. Data was collected from a quantitative viewpoint through pedometers and qualitatively through child responses. Increases were established in creative and imaginative play, co-operation, socialisation and physical activity. The benefits of allowing children to become familiar with the materials and revisit them over an extended period of time were noted.

Kiewra and Veselack (2016) used case studies in their interpretive investigation to examine how pre-school children's creativity and imagination are supported by outdoor environments encouraging the use of loose parts. Three key themes emerged from their play observations: space, time and adult role. While the study had an educational focus, the role of the adult which emerged is one that is recognisable from the Playwork writings of Brown (2003, 2008) and Hughes (2012), encouraging adults to allow children the space, time and materials to engage in play at their own pace and in their own way. Snow et al. (2018) concur that the size of play space and duration of play times has an impact on the quality of play. Kiewra and Veselack's (2016) conclusions indicate that the equilibrium of the adult role is an

elusive one, balancing the epistemic motivation of adults facilitating and scaffolding learning and the ludic emphasis of permitting children uninterrupted time while observing from a distance. Hunter et al. (2017) agree with the findings of Kiewra and Veselack (2016), alluding to a tension in the adult role between what they describe as pedagogical play (epistemic) versus open-ended play (ludic), and suggesting that the intentionality of adult intervention is the dividing line between the two.

Evaluating the use of Playpods (large storage containers full of loose parts) in school playgrounds from 2006-2009, Armitage (2009) concurs that improved co-operation and socialisation are fundamental characteristics of loose parts play, with the supplementary advantages that behaviour is improved, and children have the opportunity to experience more risk. He found that adult perception of the risk was also diminished, perhaps due to better understanding of the outcomes. Armitage (2009) gathered data using observation and questionnaires in parallel with interviews of small groups of children and adult collaborators. A difference between teaching through play and learning through play are exposed by his conclusions. He deduced that what made the project so successful was a combination of 'loose parts, mixed playmates, and a lack of adult direction', facilitating learning through play more successfully when no adult was present (Armitage, 2009:54).

A later survey by James (2012) of head teachers to establish the impact of the Bristol Scrapstore playpods in schools also found behavioural changes brought about by loose parts play. These included greater inclusion, a reduction in accidents and better integration across sex and age groups and positive outcomes for playground staff. The playground staff were particularly affected by the training which was focussed on helping them to be less risk averse and encouraging children to manage risk for themselves. James (2012) went on to identify the need for further research into the impact of loose parts in the playground on educational attainment, in particular to focus on those children who had access to loose parts for their whole primary school experience; research that could now be possible. Änggård (2011) concurs, suggesting that when loose parts are employed to enhance an environment, the depth and quality of play escalates, but that more research is necessary to

establish why.

A further exemplification of this non-interventionist approach is present in Goldschmied and Jackson's (2004) 'treasure basket' play; during play they ascertain the adult's role as one of 'emotional anchorage', a supportive adult presence who encourages the child to explore, but who doesn't actively participate in the play with the child. This empowers the child to make their own selection of resources and how they are exploited (ibid). However, Adams et al. (2004) ascribed the absence of complex play, and the diminished learning environment they witnessed during their study of pre-school, to the lack of communication between adults and children within the settings. They suggest a need to balance adult and child interaction between non-interventionist (ludic) and interventionist (epistemic) approaches and agree with Kiewra and Veselack (2016) that training, and adult intention is a key indicator in success of learning programmes.

More recently Houser et al. (2016) and Gibson et al. (2017) have reviewed research into loose parts play. Houser et al. (2016) used a scoping review to determine the influences of loose parts play on participation in physical activity. Their literature search categorised sixteen articles into types of loose parts, play and thinking. They established that the assortment of loose parts promoting play varies, along with their application, and there is a scarcity of information on the support the loose parts play can offer to the improvement of physical skills and energetic play outdoors. Gibson et al. (2017) also determined in their review of literature that while loose parts play is an emerging field of research, the supporting evidence and resultant studies do not yet afford enough evidence to reach conclusions.

## 2.6 Conclusion

The initial questions concerning the concept of loose parts, benefits for children and the role of the adult have been satisfied through this literature review. The reviewed research into loose parts has principally concentrated on how the resource affects children's play, and the majority of this research is regarding outdoor settings.

Although some researchers have examined interventions through adults introducing loose parts, the focus has been on generalisations such as traditional playspaces compared to adventure playground design and the effects on play behaviours, learning and social interaction. While introducing loose parts into settings the role of the adult has received inconsequential attention and there is scant evidence to support adults in practice. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) suggest that to be beneficial, practitioner research must be used to advance practice. This study aims to begin addressing the gap in knowledge for me, and other practitioners I work with, by investigating existing comprehension as a starting point to progress praxis.

## Chapter 3 Methodology and Methods

### 3.1 Introduction

Having established a rationale and examined relevant literature to help specify my aims and objectives of the enquiry into 'Practitioners' understandings of loose parts play', I will now explore the methodologies employed in this study. Humphrey (2013) illustrates a methodology as the broad approach to the study, delineated by philosophical suppositions regarding the nature of processes and people involved. I aim to argue that my chosen methodologies are pertinent to the rationale behind the research and to the subject matter (Weaver and Olsen, 2006). According to Mertens (2005) and Mackenzie and Knipe (2006), the prevalent methodological paradigm, a 'basic set of beliefs that guides action' (Guba, 1990:17), will impact the research aims, emphasis, data gathering tools and presentation of outcomes.

Referred to by Humphrey (2013) as 'being', 'knowing' and 'valuing', Burrell and Morgan (1979) help elucidate the suppositions that underpin all methodologies. To conclude a theoretical position, they propose one must decide whether social reality is universal or personal for individuals (ontology), whether knowledge is objective or subjective (epistemology), and whether people govern their environment or merely respond to it, and the values this entails (axiology). These philosophical premises indicate whether a study is within the positivist or interpretive paradigm (Creswell, 2014, Lincoln et al., 2017). The ontology and epistemology embraced in any project is inextricably linked to the axiology, advise Cohen et al. (2011). They suggest that the researcher's perception of the world the participants inhabit is improved through comprehending the underpinning values and principles and the ethics concerned (ibid).

Consequently, I will scrutinise the two principal research paradigms in empirical research of positivist and interpretivist (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2014), and determine the most pertinent to this enquiry. I will then examine the methods used



in this project, situated within the chosen paradigm. Finally, I will discuss the limitations and ethics of the study. I begin by examining the positivist paradigm.

### 3.2 Positivist methodology

The ontological position of the positivist paradigm, as defined by Lincoln et al. (2017:111) presumes a 'single identifiable reality' and an objective answer to every question, implying what they describe as a 'naïve realism'; a reality independent of human thought which can be captured and documented, quantified and scrutinised. A positivist approach would seek to demonstrate a universal truth for those recreating research (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2005; Miles et al., 2014).

Positivism is characterised epistemologically by the establishment of a hypothesis, an idea to be tested, corroborated by collecting generally quantitative data (Creswell, 2014), with the utilisation of valid and reliable methods to explain and describe events (Lincoln et al., 2017). Carr and Kemmis (2004:132) exemplify this as the process of solving 'technical issues' through scientific enquiry. Braun and Clarke (2013) describe quantitative data collection as an objective process, whereas Miles et al. (2014:30) define methods of quantitative data collection as being 'devoid of context'. This allows the research to be applied in multiple circumstances, in spite of the social, personal and environmental contexts and can therefore be useful in scientific investigations and applications of knowledge which involve the proof of a hypothesis (Lincoln et al., 2017:111-112).

The axiological supposition of positivism is that research can occur exclusive of the effects of a value system (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Lincoln et al., 2017). Positivism does not take values, diversity or opinions into account, and assumes that variables such as time, circumstances and location can be controlled within the boundaries of the given study (Cohen et al., 2011; Lincoln and Guba, 2013). Researchers need to be conscious of the axiology they are adhering to, as an operational axiology, going unrecognized, can infer biases that will impede the legitimacy of any research (Maxwell, 2013). Thus, the objective and impartial research of the positivist paradigm occurs with the researcher remaining independent from the data and

participants (Cohen et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2013; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This approach is in contrast to the interpretive methodology which reflects a very different position.

### 3.3 Interpretive methodology

In comparison and described by Carr and Kemmis (2004) as having an ontology, epistemology and axiology which is the opposite of positivism, the interpretive paradigm is employed to interpret meanings and infer motivations for an individual's behaviour and experiences (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). According to Creswell (2014), the ontology of interpretive methodology employs examination of an individual's perspective concurrently with their historical and cultural contexts which parallels Cohen et al.'s (2011) proposition that it allows comprehension of each individual's world to understand their experiences further. Braun and Clarke (2013:37) suggest that a fundamental condition for qualitative research within the interpretive paradigm is reflexivity, which they describe as 'the process of critically reflecting on the knowledge we produce, and our role in producing that knowledge'. This notion is supported by Griffiths (2000) who proposes that the value of knowledge is enhanced by the introduction of diverse perspectives and similarities, investigating lived experiences and intangible concepts. Denzin and Lincoln (2017:12) employ the illustration of lenses to portray the different perspectives that an observer and subject bring to any research, clarifying that observations cannot be objective within the interpretive paradigm but are 'biographically situated' in the parameters of all participants' social experiences.

The epistemology of the interpretive paradigm aims 'to replace the scientific notions of explanation, prediction and control, with the interpretive notions of understanding, meaning and action' (Carr and Kemmis, 2004:83). Individuals are located centrally in the enquiry, a model asserted by Miles et al. (2014:14), who explain the gathering of qualitative data as an 'iterative' cycle, involving the researcher in reviewing and reflecting at each stage, re-inspecting findings in the light of new ones. Researchers are part of the research and seek to uncover

understanding through the interpretation of collected data (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Silverman, 2012). Additionally, the interpretive paradigm privileges the role of the participant as significant; although the researcher may start asking initial questions the iterative nature of the research allows the participants to determine the direction further discussion takes (Brannen, 1988; Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006), as opposed to the positivist approach which seeks to remove the individual. According to Lincoln et al. (2017) and Humphrey (2013), this social construction of concepts and world-views is as myriad as the number of people viewing it.

The interpretivist paradigm, as described by Candy (1989,) utilises subjectivity as the basis for research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Cohen et al. (2011) substantiate Candy's (1989) view that instead of regarding values, perceptions and judgements as possible causes of corruption during research, researchers should perceive their impact on actions as the aim of interpretivism. Lincoln and Guba (2013:41) describe the axiology of interpretive enquiry as uncovering the values of the researcher, participants, stakeholders and those inherent in the context, within a 'shared and co-created reality'. Law (2004:45) advises that within the interpretive methodology, researchers do not 'discover and depict' reality, but 'participate in' it, echoing Silverman's (2012) edict to depict a reality as close to their own as possible. The values underpinning the research are, according to Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007), an indicator of the 'validity' of a study in the interpretive paradigm; I will examine this assertion later in this chapter. Having examined the two central paradigms of positivist and interpretivist methodologies (Lincoln and Guba, 2013; Creswell, 2014), I will now examine the most applicable to this enquiry.

### 3.4 Identification of the paradigm for this research

Creswell (2014:71) proposes that a fundamental set of beliefs or assumptions channel a researcher's enquiry and that research occurs, not in a vacuum, but within a societal environment which governs the analysis of the data through belief and culture. This is echoed by Guba and Lincoln (1994:107), who affirm that a research paradigm describes the beliefs of its holder, defining relationships, an individual's

circumstance, and their worldview, as well as the context of the research. According to David and Sutton (2004), central to the process of research, is the empowerment of the researcher to ascertain the effect their own perceptions have on the methodology they apply to expose social truths by considering ontological differences. The preferences researchers display with regards to methodological considerations links closely to the ontological ways in which they view socially constructed realities (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress that for research to be regarded as authentic, studies must be substantiated by a consistent rationale that validates the preferred methodology, the data collection and the analysis. Following Grix (2002) and supported by Waring (2012:15), a set of fundamental questions frame all research and allow researchers to develop an investigative position which influences the methods used. Therefore, in order to ascertain an appropriate framework, or paradigm, on which to base my research, it is essential to scrutinise my own assumptions in the context of this research, relating to ontology, epistemology and axiology (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Weaver and Olsen, 2006; Cohen et al., 2011; Menter et al., 2011; Waring, 2012; Miles et al., 2014).

### 3.4.1 Ontology

In proposing to study 'Practitioners' understandings of loose parts play' I recognised that fundamentally there could be no one reality within this study as each participant would have their own viewpoint, making a positivist approach problematic (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Miles et al., 2014). Following Creswell (2014) the ontological actuality of this study implies that there is no one truth, there is only the truth at this point in time, for these individuals, in their shared settings. Each individual's divergent perspectives give innumerable truths (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Schultz and Hatch, 1996). Therefore, multiple perspectives within this study would give way to numerous truths as the participants and I co-created our understanding of the

reality; each individual viewing loose parts play from their own perspective (Lincoln and Guba, 2013).

### 3.4.2 Epistemology

The epistemological standpoint is regarded as crucial to the researcher's role by Cohen et al. (2011:6). They consider that perceiving knowledge as 'objective and tangible', embeds the researcher's role within the positivist paradigm, whilst perceiving knowledge as 'personal, objective and unique' precedes participation with subjects; a requisite interpretivist position. By means of questionnaires and a discussion with these participants, which will be considered further below, I planned to gain insight into their understandings and their perceptions of the value of loose parts play, along with examining my own. The epistemological premise used as the foundation of my research was that the practitioners are cognisant contributors to extending their own understanding, and changes in opinions were probable and predictable as the research evolved (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017; Morgan, 2012).

### 3.4.3 Axiology

The links established between axiology and ontology and epistemology by Cohen et al. (2011) suggest that in establishing an interpretive approach to the latter it is likely that the former will be interpretive also. Following Silverman (2012), I will place value on opinions and experiences of the participants of the study to ensure that I provide as reasonable a depiction of their reality as possible and reveal the values of all participants, within a newly created 'reality' (Lincoln and Guba, 2013:41).

### 3.4.4 Choice of methodology for this study

In attempting to discover the personal understanding of a concept by individuals, the underpinning supposition of my research is that the differing world views of each individual will have an influence on their knowledge and understanding. There can be no 'right answer' when exploring these differing viewpoints. Following Lincoln et al. (2017) and having considered the ontology, epistemology and axiology of the two

main research paradigms, the interpretive methodology, with a primary focus on qualitative data collection, is most appropriate for my aims and reflects my own perspective. Having defined the paradigm for the research I will now examine the methods used to conduct the study.

### 3.5 Data gathering methods

I have attempted to gather 'systematic and reliable information that can be used as a basis for action' (Lewis and Munn, 1987:16). Following the interpretive paradigm, I wished to employ data gathering methods that allow me to acknowledge perspective (Neuman, 2003), and which supported the collection of 'rich' data, which includes the context of participants' behaviours, by encouraging participants to contribute (Geertz, 1973; Braun and Clarke, 2013:24). Thus, the most appropriate method of data gathering in this study is a group discussion. My methods encompassed an initial questionnaire across two settings and then a discussion group to draw out further understandings of the OOSC group. The preliminary questionnaire allowed me to deliberate on specific areas of comprehension, to then scrutinise in the discussion group (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013). I examine each in turn to demonstrate their appropriateness.

#### 3.5.1 Questionnaires

Munn and Drever (1990) define questionnaires as a participant completed set of questions, without the researcher present. The advantages of a questionnaire are that they are efficient time usage, allow participants to remain anonymous, standardised questions give clearer data and there is the prospect of a high return rate (ibid). The researcher does not require interaction with the participants to administer a questionnaire, and they do not need to interact with each other (Robson, 1993). Consequently, if participants give similar answers using similar terms it implies a shared understanding of the topic being investigated (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2004). The fact that participants give 'their own answers, in their own words' to open ended questions also allows for prioritisation of their own agendas, in line with the interpretive paradigm (Braun and Clarke, 2013:137). In choosing a

questionnaire over other methods, I considered the need for initial data that could be analysed quickly to give themes for a discussion group within a limited time frame. Using interviews, for example, would have been considerably more time consuming to action and code (Menter et al., 2011).

Disadvantages of questionnaires can be that piloting of questions takes time to ensure that they are fully considered, and answers are not superficial (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Answers from participants can also be restricted to descriptive rather than explanatory, and responses cannot be investigated further (Robson, 1993). Therefore, questionnaires may have reduced efficacy in data gathering as the unravelling of answers may be problematic for the researcher (Munn and Drever, 1990; Menter et al., 2011). Thus, it was crucial that I apportioned adequate time to formulate and pilot the questionnaires and marshal sufficient data to impact the group discussion.

I piloted the questionnaire as recommended by Munn and Drever (1990) to give me an indication of prospective answers and whether they met my need for data, as well as ensuring that the questions were comprehensible for others. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013:141) I asked for feedback as well as the completed questionnaires. Responses from the pilot group, who were practitioners in a nursery where I was planning to deliver training, were that the questionnaire was clear and easy to complete. I found the preliminary answers were useful and discarded some of my initial questions as being interesting but unhelpful in terms of data such as ages of participants and types of qualifications (See Appendix 2 for questionnaire).

The questionnaires were then given to practitioners in two settings, one an ELC nursery setting, and the other an OOSC setting. They were accompanied by the Plain Language Statement (PLS) (Appendix 3) which explained the purpose and process of the research project, and consent forms (Appendix 4) for participants to sign and return with their questionnaires. I explained to potential participants the purpose of the study and their role in it. I then gave them time to ask questions and clarify their

thoughts prior to signing the consent form and returning the questionnaires within the following week.

A pattern-based analysis is most suited to questionnaires, especially as the use of questions standardises the set of data received (Braun and Clarke, 2013). By tabulating and coding the data I was therefore able to apply a thematic approach to the questionnaire data to give a set of themes to explore further in the discussion group.

### 3.5.2 Discussion group

A more elucidatory method than the questionnaire, is the discussion group, which is liable to contribute to comprehension of the 'truths' of the participants, affording the researcher more diverse data (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Schultz and Hatch, 1996; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). This approach gave me this opportunity and was useful in elucidating some of the initial answers given in the questionnaire, while also proving appropriate for time management as opposed to individual interviews which would not have allowed for a 'shared and co-created reality' to emerge (Lincoln and Guba, 2013:41). Holloway and Wheeler (2013) propose that the rationale for a discussion group is to be able to analyse a subject within a group of people with 'similar roles and experiences'. The discussion group was therefore drawn from the practitioners of the OOSC setting who have had similar experiences of loose parts play. Following Holloway and Wheeler (2013:127) who suggest that a discussion group should be small enough to allow all participants to have a voice, the first six participants who responded to the questionnaire with additional consent to take part in the discussion group in the OOSC were selected.

At the outset of the discussion group it was explained that a recording would be made of the discussion and then a transcript of the recordings along with notes of the main themes subsequently identified, would be provided for each contributor. Participants were assured of anonymity through the use of numerical identifiers in the transcript and ensuing data analysis. By giving participants the opportunity to propose new topics or to assert their opinions about assumptions made in the



discussion, I encouraged them to feel that the data collected was representative and plausible (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Silverman, 2012).

Using the themes identified from the questionnaire, I initially formulated tentative questions (Appendix 5) however I was conscious of the need to accept that the discussion may have gone on a course I had not intended (Kitzinger, 1994). I also attempted to ensure that the flow of discussion was as natural as possible without my intervention (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013). In reality the discussion needed some prompting to allow the participants to continue the discussion; they exhausted topics and looked to me to introduce the next one.

Participating in the discussion, I had to be careful not to give excessive weight to my own ideas and opinions and I acknowledged that the participants could discuss subjects I had not anticipated (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 2012; Holloway and Wheeler, 2013). However, as part of the research I could not entirely remove my opinions from the context of the study and my own theoretical stance could influence the questions asked and how I interpreted the resulting data. As Haraway (1991) explains, there is no such thing as no point of view; researchers always start from some form of stance or hypothesis, even if unwittingly. Using a discussion group allowed for the co-construction of meaning related to the coding and contextualizing of information both during and after the discussion (Morgan, 2012:172). This presented opportunities for participants to reflect on their understanding and generate plausible data (Wilson, 1997). According to Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007), encouraging individuals to participate in research in this way, creates a more credible outcome than a dialogue prescribed by the researcher.

I used the data, gathered through the questionnaires, and by filming the discussion group (which I transposed later), to identify themes and patterns for supplementary examination (Creswell, 2014). I polished data from the discussion group to remove hesitation and repetition within the participants answers as suggested by Sandelowski (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2013). I then examined the data using the process of thematic analysis; coding across the whole set of data, seeking themes, consequently constructing a map of them relating to subthemes, and finally naming

the themes before analysing, with a focus on experiences and opinions (Braun and Clark, 2013:202-203). This inductive process gave broader meaning to the interpretations of the data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017) through both examination of the discussion and 'engagement with the literature' of loose parts to allow a more perceptive and enhanced analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006:89). Starks and Trinidad (2007:1376) suggest that this process of analysis within the interpretive approach is 'inherently subjective' as the researcher is the mechanism by which the analysis takes place. Therefore, my focus was on remaining 'data near' to ensure that although the themes have been interpreted, the meanings were not changed through my own perceptions (Sandelowski, 2010).

The data generated from the questionnaires and discussion group is analysed in Chapter 4. However, it is imperative that I first examine the limitations and ethics of this enquiry to ensure that the conclusions can be considered credible (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007).

### 3.6 Limitations

Following Tracy (2010), it is essential that a researcher take account of limitations which exist within the spectrum of the enquiry to ensure that there is a sense of transparency. Transparency of research decisions bolsters credibility and sincerity (Creswell and Miller, 2000:128).

As a member of one of the teams taking part in the study, I was obliged to be conscious of the implicit understanding I have of the context, while also allowing for the familiarity and my status in the team. While the assumption could be that this is a limitation, being 'experience near' can be perceived as an advantage, which will, according to Geertz (1983) give me a more profound comprehension of the participants and their relationships, thus enhancing the honesty, fidelity, richness, and authenticity of the data gathered (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; McNiff et al., 2003). Braun and Clarke (2013) and Miles et al. (2014) agree, asserting reliability is associated with the researcher's knowledge of an environment, while Geertz (1983) recognises that researcher and subject bring layers of meaning which enhance the

research. Each makes a convincing argument for interpretive studies where both the researched and researcher are collaborators in the outcome. To negate any issues which might occur from my relationships I followed the guidelines of the ethics committee at University of Glasgow and issued all participants with a relevant Plain Language Statement (PLS) and a Consent form which ensured that they were notified in writing that were able to choose to participate, or not, and to withdraw at any time from the study with no repercussions to their working relationships or status.

There are various limitations on the timescale of this study, including the requirement of an application to the University of Glasgow ethics committee. I utilised the time it took to gain approval, to further develop a literature review. The period of a year would appear to be a realistic, if short, time frame in which to complete this research (See Appendix 6). The time span between the questionnaire and discussion group also needed to be sufficient that an analysis of the initial data for themes and development of some initial questions for the discussion group could take place. I set aside a two-week gap between the questionnaires returning and discussion group to allow for this process.

The questionnaire limitations were negated, in part, by carrying out a pilot as recommended by Munn and Drever (1990) to ensure that my lack of experience in this field did not provide me with raw data that was impracticable or irrelevant. The pilot group answers proved to meet my expectations, however I removed some of the less pertinent questions (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Another limitation was that some of the participants in my setting attempted to speculate as to the answers I desired (Morgan, 2012). This was also clear in one of the nursery questionnaires where the description of loose parts play was verbatim from text books, consulted to answer the question. The main limitation of the questionnaire proved to be the contextualisation of the answers as pinpointed by Munn and Drever (1990) and Menter et al. (2011) which in some of my data analysis I could surmise but not be sure of without further discussion with the participant.

Limitations within the discussion group included my inexperience of undertaking this type of research. I referred to the work of Holloway and Wheeler (2013) for guidance and considered the aspects of the discussion that could prove problematic. This included participants moving too far off topic, becoming too personal with their comments or becoming dominant in the discussion. By preparing for these situations I was able to prevent some of these occurring or impede their extension when they did. I also put in place parameters to the gathering of data to ensure that the study was manageable (Braun and Clarke, 2013), by purposefully limiting the number of participants to six from each setting as recommended by Holloway and Wheeler (2013) for the best outcomes in a discussion group, and to reduce data outcomes from the questionnaire. In addition to scrutinising limitations it is also imperative that I examine the ethics of the study. This will help to prove the credibility of the research and give a sense of trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Marshall and Rossman, 2016).

### 3.7 Ethics

This study is contingent on the Ethics Committee approval at the University of Glasgow, as with all research carried out at the university. In this section, I will examine the need for such approval and the ethical considerations that underpin quality research.

According to Dadds (1998:41) and Gorman (2007:22), ethical research can cultivate enrichments for all participants involved in the context. Being reflexively aware that ethical difficulties are likely to occur and examining ethics in practice will ensure that I am better prepared to manage those difficulties (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Braun and Clarke, 2013). Ethical challenges of enquiry need not be intractable obstacles, suggest Menter et al. (2011:55), but encountering them can prove beneficial to the outcomes of the research, particularly if confronted using a holistic approach (Mockler, 2007:94). Mockler (2007:88) refers to 'consent, confidentiality and transparency' as the 'frames' of ethical consideration. Menter et al. (2011:37) concur that transparency is fundamental; however, they suggest the

most essential aspect of ethics is trust, a hypothesis with which Sachs (2007: xiv) agrees.

There is some controversy surrounding validity in the interpretive paradigm (Wingrave, 2014). Marshall and Rossman (2016) suggest that the concepts of reliability and validity have no place in the interpretive paradigm as it is impossible to replicate qualitative studies. Conversely, Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007), in their examination of ethics in practitioner research suggest that validity within the interpretive paradigm can be indicated through some of the values that are uncovered and by considering the ethics of the enquiry. They suggest that to meet ethical concerns guidelines should be followed; ethical protocols, transparent processes, collaborative practices, transformative intent and justifiable to the practice community (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007:205-206). The interpretive paradigm places the researcher within the context and requires that there is a dialogic relationship with the participants (ibid). Therefore, within this project validity is not directly addressed as it would be within a positivist study, but rather I follow the guidance given by Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007), ensuring that this project follows their protocols.

Contingent on the situation, there can be conflict between ethical principles, and Hammersley and Traianou (2012) suggest, the culture of the researcher and their subject. The balancing and weighting of each principle against the other can be open to interpretation, as indeed can the principles themselves (Menter et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2014). By instigating a collaborative community of enquiry in my workplace, as recommended by Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007), Torbert (1976) proposes it is likely that I will contend with ethical dilemmas, which, according to Oliver (2008) can occur before, during and after the research and should to be considered as inductive and inherent in any research with people (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

I am the lead practitioner in the OOSC setting in which participants were asked to take part in a questionnaire and subsequently a discussion group. In an effort to establish transparency within this study, I informed the OOSC team at a weekly

meeting about the research and asked them for participants, ensuring they were aware that withdrawal from participation was achievable at any time (Holloway and Wheeler, 2013). I showed each of them the Plain Language Statement and explained the need for written consent. Each person was able to discuss concerns with me individually to ascertain understanding before signing their consent forms.

The ELC team, which I had no prior contact with, were given the Plain Language Statement for their setting at an after-work meeting and then also issued with the consent form and questionnaires. I spoke to the staff about their participation in the questionnaire and asked that if there were any questions that they approached me at the time or contacted me via email. In doing so, I addressed the ethical protocols required by the University of Glasgow and endorsed by Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007), leading to a more transparent process. The consent forms and questionnaires were returned to me using stamped addressed envelopes supplied with the questionnaires.

To protect the privacy and identity of participants, I endeavoured to maintain anonymity, and when presenting data have ensured that there are no identifying features (Menter et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2014). There were no reciprocal payments made to participants, however, I obtained the permission of the OOSC's board to allocate the discussion group as part of the staff development programme. The ELC setting will benefit from a loose parts play training session at a later date once the research project is complete.

There was no discrimination against individuals, whether they agreed to participate or not. Each team member was treated equally. I considered the ethical implications by being sensitive to the power relationships which already exist within the workplace which could have made this difficult. Personal and team dynamics might also mean that not everybody felt able to be honest (Morgan, 2012). I was conscious that participants might seek to afford me 'correct' answers within the discussion group as well as the questionnaire, and my view of individuals could impact how I interpreted the data (Singer et al., 1983; Menter et al., 2011).

As the participants are professionals choosing to participate in an investigation to ascertain a baseline of knowledge to improve further staff training it is improbable that they will be harmed intellectually, emotionally or physically by any of my queries or results (Mockler, 2007; Menter et al., 2011). For each participant, the decision to contribute is a personal choice; they have given an informed consent. However, according to Crow et al. (2006) it can be difficult to fully inform participants without giving them too much extraneous information which can obscure the intention of the study. Gorman (2007) proposes that each participant ought to at least be conscious of the latitude and purpose of the research in order to facilitate their decision. By giving the participants the opportunity to collaborate through the discussion group and then to contest the data that had been gathered and evaluated when presented with the transcription, I strengthened the ethical principles of the study according to Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007), giving participants the opportunity to collaborate and contribute to the justification of the research. An additional theme was suggested during the conversation that was relevant and held some interest for the participants, which was then utilised in the data analysis, reflecting the iterative nature of the research (Brannen, 1988; Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006; Miles et al., 2014).

The purpose of ethics proposes Webster et al. (2014:78), is to put the participants at the centre of the decision-making during research, giving them the opportunity, as in this study, to benefit from an expansion of knowledge and possibly transforming some of their practice (Lyons, 2010). The outcomes from the study are intended as actionable and to give rise to enhanced practices in loose parts play, therefore meeting the need for transformative and justifiable research practices (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007:206).

### 3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I identified that the most appropriate paradigm for this study is the interpretive approach, and why this is the case, with reference to the underpinning ontology, epistemology and axiology. I have examined the limitations and ethics of the research and will now explore the data gathered in detail.

## Chapter 4 Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Introduction

‘Loose parts play...with open ended resources, has endless possibilities and outcomes – or no outcome at all. There are no rules.’ A3Q1

In the following chapter I will present, analyse and discuss the data collected, as described in Chapter 3. I will examine the data in an iterative manner to establish findings that illustrate practitioners’ understandings of loose parts play (Berkowitz, 1997; MacNaughton and Hughes, 2009). The analysis of data in this manner, according to Marshall and Rossman (2016:111), is a ‘messy, ambiguous, time-consuming’ process which aims to establish relationships between classifications of data.

The initial questions gave a differing picture of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) and Out of School Care (OOSC) practitioners’ understandings of loose parts play and allowed a basis for the discussion group, which, following Braun and Clarke (2013) was rich in data, giving additional explanation and confirmation of participants’ thoughts relating to loose parts play. The addition of relevant literature to develop the latitude of data examination allowed me to make a more comprehensive investigation (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995; Braun and Clarke, 2006:89). In doing so I will illustrate individual voices through quotes and multiple voices through vignettes and tables.

The data provided by the initial questionnaires was tabulated and coded. To extract meaning from the data, it was sorted using a thematic approach as recommended by Burrell and Morgan (1979) and Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013). This involved sorting each answer according to pre-determined themes which I had anticipated, and then adding in any additional themes as further data indicated areas I had not foreseen. Table 4.1 below shows the main themes that were present in the questionnaire and discussion across the settings.



Table 4.1

Themes across the questionnaire and discussion group

Theme	Categories of theme	Nursery (ELC)	After School (OOSC)
Adult role	Variety of materials	Large parts mainly named	Variety of sizes of resources
	Application	Limited to specific areas of curriculum, daily	Broader application across developmental areas, several times a week
	Underlying theory	Outcome driven	Free play
	Risk	Some unawareness of risks	Dynamic risk assessments
Space	Space to play	Provision of indoors and outdoors, large and small spaces	Provision of indoors and outdoors, large and small spaces
	Storage	Own space - left in various areas of the rooms and outside in the garden	Shared space - tidied away each night and set up each day, cupboard space and storage container for larger loose parts in playground
Time	Play time	No mention	'Enough' time during play sessions
	Resource gathering	No mention	Difficulties in engaging parents. Easy to find resources through staff

The themes which emerged from the questionnaires were used to guide the discussion group which in turn led to further thematic analysis and emerging of an additional theme, time, not present in the initial questionnaire but referenced in the literature search and correlated to previous investigations into loose parts play. I had predicted that themes from the work of Kiewra and Veselack (2016) would be present across the dataset of adult role, space, and time. While time was absent in

the questionnaire it was introduced by the group in discussion before I could allude to it. I used these themes to examine the issues relating to my investigation as recommended by MacNaughton and Hughes (2009).

#### 4.2 Definitions of loose parts play

Before discussing the above themes, I believe it is necessary to consider participants' own definitions of loose parts play. As an underpinning premise for the rest of the answers this was an important aspect of the questionnaire of which I wish to provide the reader with an overview.

Participants all displayed an understanding of loose parts, claiming knowledge, and use of it, in their settings. In keeping with the difficulty of defining loose parts play in a short phrase within the literature, participants' answers varied across the settings, including the use of the quote employed to open this chapter. Vignette 1 below illustrates the variety of answers.

##### Vignette 1. Responses to "How would you define loose parts play?"

Lots of different, things for making into new things. N1Q2

A selection of everyday materials to encourage imaginative and creative play. N3Q2

Open ended play with various natural resources to help the children enhance their creativity and imagination skills. N6Q2

Open ended, adaptable, materials which should be able to move, be carried, taken apart and put back together, adventurous, appealing, different shapes and sizes.

A2Q2

Children using open-ended materials freely to create or make anything with no instructions. A5Q2

Imaginative, creative, open ended play with a variety of moveable materials. A6Q2

This demonstrates the knowledge practitioners have of loose parts as being wide ranging and, in some cases, in-depth. They exhibit knowledge of the concept as defined by Nicholson (1971) where loose parts are 'variables' that can be moved and

combined, while also demonstrating an understanding of the concept of them as 'open-ended materials' to be used creatively as defined by Casey and Robertson (2016). However, the playworkers' definitions were more explicit with their use of the phrase 'open-ended play' being more prevalent. This could be linked to more OOSC than ELC participants revealing they had received loose parts play training, and therefore had enhanced knowledge. This, as can be seen below, becomes more evident and has implications for practice which will be examined in the next chapter. I now move to discussing the themes presented above. The first theme which emerged was the adults' role in play.

### 4.3 Adult role

Adult role is one of the areas in loose parts identified by Kiewra and Veselack (2016) as key to their success. Risk assessment was one of the adult roles identified by most of the participants, along with supporting and supervision of the play. Yet, there was a distinct difference between the settings; ELC practitioners mentioned scaffolding, extension of learning and provision of materials to provoke interest. The OOSC practitioners emphasised observation and supervision, affirming the need to inspire the children to play freely without adult intervention and only becoming involved when necessary due to safety concerns or a child's request. This emulates my contention in the literature review suggesting that the dichotomies of ELC and OOSC approaches to loose parts are underpinned by distinctive principles (Moyle, 1989; Brown, 2003; Wood, 2014; Casey and Robertson, 2016). This fundamental difference has an effect on the expected outcomes of loose parts play, the adult role, and therefore on the sub-themes identified. Within adult role I identified four sub-themes; variety of materials, application, underlying theory and risk. I will begin by examining the impact of the variety of materials.

#### 4.3.1 Variety of materials (Adult role)

Nicholson (1971) expounded the virtues of an environment in which children could alter their surroundings using the materials within it. These 'variables' were the

loose parts of his theory and in response to the question ‘Please list some of the loose parts you use in your setting?’ practitioners gave diverse answers. All of the answers, except one from a baby room practitioner, involved large loose parts that were played with outside such as tyres and planks of wood. The playworkers in the OOSC listed considerably more loose parts, an average of 19 items, as opposed to the practitioners in the nursery who listed an average of 12. Table 4.2 below shows all of the loose parts listed by practitioners in each setting.

Type of Loose Part	ELC	OOSC
Nature based	Stones, sand, mud, cones, shells, loofah, pinecones, sticks, corks	Wooden discs, sticks, pine cones, seed pods, stones, pebbles, flowers, petals, shells, twigs, feathers, mud, leaves
Wood reuse	Planks, bracelets, cable reels, pallets, barrels, wooden spoons, blocks	Bobbins, wooden pallets, pegs, cable drums, crates, curtain rings, poles, lolly sticks, planks, corks, picture frames
Plastic	Tyres, guttering, drain pipes, bottle tops, buckets, brushes, hoses, tubs	Tyres, drain pipes, crates, tubes, buttons, buckets, yoghurt pots, bottle lids, keyboards, old chairs, lego
Metal	Pots, pans, leys, whisks, utensils	Lids, pots, pans, buttons, foil, bangles, curtain hooks
Ceramic/Glass		Glass gems, tiles, mirrors
Fabric/Ribbon	Ribbons, scarves, ropes	Scarves, ribbon, blankets, ropes, cloth, pipe cleaners, curtains, net curtains, tarpaulins, pompoms, wool, string, mats
Packaging	Cardboard boxes, paper gift bags	Yarn spools, cardboard boxes and tubes, suitcases, sweet wrappers

Table 4.2 Loose parts listed by practitioners across each setting (Based on Loose part types by Haughey and Hill (2017))

Of all those loose parts listed, around 62% of the examples were smaller items in both settings. However, because the examples from the playworkers were larger, there was a far greater variety of materials listed, covering many more natural and synthetic resources. The playworkers therefore exhibited a superior knowledge regarding the breadth of materials that could be used as loose parts, implying that, as Armitage (2009) suggests, the presence of playworkers in loose parts play settings can open up and extend the possibilities for play. This is not to say that with some additional training the nursery practitioners could not extend possibilities in their own setting.

When this was examined in the discussion group the participants confirmed that they used a wide variety of materials from small glass beads to large pallets and across the whole range of available media as defined by Haughey and Hill (2017) as nature based, wood reuse, plastic, metal, ceramic/glass, fabric/ribbon and packaging. While the OOSC participants gave examples of the whole range, ELC participants mainly listed natural, wooden, plastic and metal resources, and made no mention at all of ceramic/glass. While this might be an oversight on the part of the ELC practitioners, or a deliberate action due to risk assessment, this greater or lesser selection of loose parts could have implications for the children's creative experiences as defined by Craft (2002) and Brown (2003); Nicholson's (1971) initial theory of loose parts suggests that the more variables there are, the more creative children will be, and consequently with less variables they will be less creative.

#### 4.3.2 Application (Adult role)

When asked about how often they used loose parts in their setting, the ELC practitioners in the preschool room indicated that they used loose parts daily. The baby and toddler staff who were beginning to introduce the concept were using the resources less often, once a week and once a fortnight. The OOSC practitioners answered with both 'every day' and 'more than once a week'. This was accounted

for in the discussion group by the preparation of the OOSC environment on a daily basis in the school premises, rather than leaving out resources from day to day.

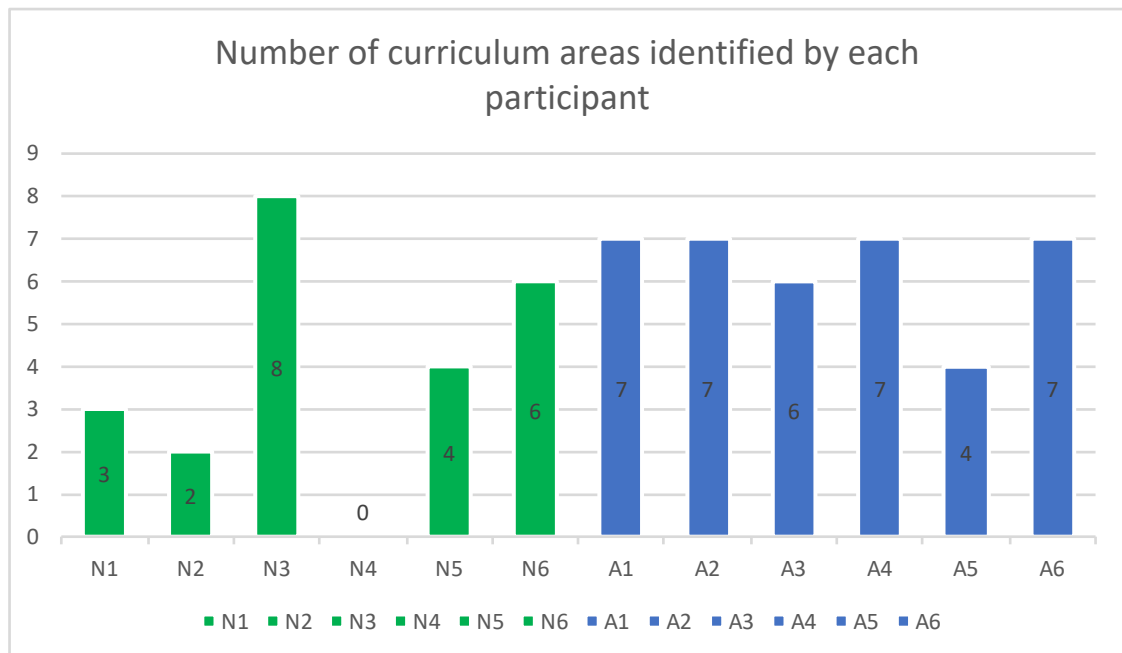


Table 4.3 Number of curriculum areas identified

The practitioners in both settings agreed that there were several areas of the curriculum and learning covered by loose parts play, however, on average the OOSC practitioners named six curriculum areas as opposed to four in the nursery (see Table 4.3 above). The reported areas were specifically centred around Numeracy, Language, Health and Wellbeing and Expressive Arts, while Science, Technology and Social Sciences were mentioned by several participants. Religious and Moral Education was the least mentioned of the eight areas of the curriculum from Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2007). I asked the discussion group specifically about this. Participants suggested that although the moral aspect of the subject could be covered by the socialisation, negotiations and bartering that could be part of larger loose parts play, the religious aspect was what prevented them from mentioning it.

The core provision areas named by the practitioners in both the ELC and OOSC where loose parts play was used mirrored each other; garden, house, construction, play

dough, art and creative, with the exception of the sand and water tray, which was only mentioned by ELC practitioners. This could be that there is not a regular area of sand and water in the OOSC due to the daily rearrangement of the setting.

The higher number of resources listed (see 4.3.1), in similar areas of play suggest that the OOSC is providing a greater variety of loose parts experience, if not on a more regular basis. This again indicates repercussions for creativity as suggested by Craft (2002) and Änggård's (2011) study which implies; the greater the amount of loose parts there are available to enrich the environment, the greater the complexity and quality of play. I will discuss the implications for practice further in Chapter 5, however loose parts and open-ended resources are specifically referenced in the new Health and Social Care Standards (Scottish Government, 2017) and therefore settings need to address the understanding of practitioners regarding their use in all curriculum and core provision areas.

#### 4.3.3 Underlying theory (Adult role)

Participants were asked to list the benefits of loose parts play for children. The benefits posed by the participants are listed in Table 4.4 below. The majority of answers included imagination and creativity, socialisation and co-operation, exploration of materials and being child led. The OOSC practitioners gave more comprehensive answers with a greater number of benefits, perhaps reflecting their additional training in loose parts play and therefore a better understanding of the underlying theory. These benefits are closely related to the findings of Maxwell et al.'s (2008), Bundy et al.'s (2011) and Hyndman et al.'s (2014) who found a correlation between loose parts play the development of imaginative and creative play, co-operation, socialisation and physical activity. Practitioners are echoing these findings with their anecdotal experiences.

Benefit	N1	N2	N3	N4	N5	N6	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6
Communication	X			X					X	X	X	
Imagination and creativity		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Socialisation / co-operation	X			X				X	X	X		X
Confidence/ self esteem										X		
Exploration of materials				X	X		X	X		X		X
Motor skills										X		X
Problem solving				X				X		X	X	
Concentration											X	
Hand-eye co-ordination											X	
Child-led		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Risk taking		X					X			X	X	

Table 4.4 Benefits of loose parts play for children

Both sets of practitioners mentioned child led experiences as being of importance, however OOSC practitioners also answered more questions with an emphasis on the activities being freely chosen by the children. ELC practitioners used language that suggest that they are aware the experiences and outcomes of Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2007) are central to their provision and that there is less freedom for the child:

‘children are allowed to explore the resources’ N2Q10  
‘learning is extended across the curriculum’ N3Q10

In the discussion group the OOSC practitioners were very clear about the outcomes needing to be left to the children:

‘if there is an outcome it should be completely up to the child if that’s what they want the outcome to be. It’s about the process and not for the adult to say.’ A4DG



They were keen to talk about the approaches of OOSC and ELC being different and the fact that Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2007) experience and outcomes were not part of their motivation for activities:

‘It’s not like nursery, we don’t look for experiences and outcomes and then try to make next steps.’ A1DG

There was a consensus that although every area of the Curriculum for Excellence (ibid) could be seen to be covered by loose parts play, as playworkers, planning for this was not part of their role and that the children at play were experiencing them despite the lack of prescribed outcomes (PPSG, 2005; Brown, 2008). I would suggest that this is a clear indication of the difference between the epistemic approaches in ELC and the ludic approaches in OOSC (Hutt et al., 1989), reflecting the findings of Hunter et al. (2017) that adult intention can shape the play to be adult-led(epistemic) or child-led (ludic).

#### 4.3.4 Risk (Adult role)

In answer to the question ‘Do you think there are any risks to children being involved in loose parts play?’ the practitioners gave some of the following answers:

Vignette 2. Practitioners’ perceptions of risks to children involved in loose parts play.

Not really. If there is plenty adult supervision, then play should be safe enough. N1Q11

There shouldn't be any risks to the children. N2Q11

There are always risks but it is good for children to learn how to manage them. N3Q11

As long as all materials being used have been considered safe by adults before being given to the children. N4Q11

Items may get broken easily and produce sharp edges. N6Q11

Large items may be heavy and may hurt someone if thrown or fallen off. A3Q11

If an object is too heavy (a tyre) for a smaller child, an adult should help move it for them. The adult should also make sure no nails are sticking out of wooden pieces.

A4Q11

Not if adults have risk assessed all materials and are supervising appropriately. A5Q11

Depending on the objects being used i.e. sharp, broken, splinters, nails, building towers too high. A6Q11

The two staff who suggest there are no risks perhaps meant that there was no risk involved once they had done a risk assessment of the materials involved. Their answers could also be tied with their listing of loose parts as larger materials such as tyres and planks of wood, while others mentioned smaller objects. As this was a questionnaire, however, the drawback of being unable to discuss with the participants, as suggested by Lewis and Munn (1987) necessitates a lack of clarity. In the discussion with the OOSC practitioners there was an appreciation that there is undeniably a greater level of risk involved in loose parts play than with usual toys, and that this is to be expected due to the nature of the materials used not meeting standard safety checks such as CE certification (Louv, 2010). Casey and Robertson (2016) examine this as part of the Loose Parts Toolkit in which they advocate a risk benefit analysis approach to loose parts play, allowing practitioners to use their judgements as to whether the benefits outweigh the risks. The discussion also covered the fact that large and small loose parts have different risks attached to them: smaller loose parts are choking hazards while large loose parts are more likely to be used as weapons or as described in this comment:

‘I just think maybe when you said about the risks, if a child is playing with a toy or an item outside like the pipes and they’re so engrossed in what they’re doing, if they’re turning they’re not realising there is someone there. So, someone could get hurt or knocked.’ A2DG

The discussion group further examined risk and were clear about their role in risk assessing and helping the children to risk assess materials:

Vignette 3     Assessing loose parts for risk

Broken loose parts can be a problem, not all loose parts will have been checked by adults every day. A1DG

Moving and handling issues, like dropping stuff or hitting others with long poles over their shoulders. A5DG

We should be telling them to think about it, not barking at them to stop. A4DG

It’s difficult not to raise your voice at them because they’re going to hurt someone, or themselves. A6DG

The big sticks that were put away at one point – that was cause they wanted to hit each other with them. They had to be told why that was dangerous, it was really important. And when they didn't listen we took them away. Having the wee pool noodles instead, the ones we made into light sabres, that worked better, as it doesn't hurt when they bash each other. A2DG  
We're better at saying 'Stop, Think, What's the problem here?' but it's difficult A4DG

Practitioners demonstrated a clear understanding of the types of risks that might occur particularly mentioning broken or sharp parts in the questionnaire, but in the discussion group they spoke about the difficulties of the children being involved in assessing their own risk and becoming responsible for their own safety as recommended by Gill (2007) and James (2012). Their awareness of the need to change their thinking regarding risk is apparent in the quotes above, which Engelen et al. (2013) suggest is an important part of enhancing children's play. Having addressed the first main theme of Adult role, I will now scrutinise the theme of Space.

#### 4.4 Space

Space as a key theme emerged in the questionnaire and was explored further in the discussion group. Both Kiewra and Veselack's (2016) and Snow et al.'s (2018) investigations led to their finding that space was fundamental to loose parts play, as the environment in which play took place was influential on the outcomes for the children and the actions they chose with the materials available. Within the theme of space, the sub-themes of space to play and space for storage emerged. I will examine each of these in turn.

##### 4.4.1 Space to play (Space)

This was not a sub-theme that was explored fully in the questionnaire. On reflection, a question focussed specifically on space would have given better results. Vignette 4,

below, gives some examples of the answers from both the questionnaire and the discussion group that involved the impact of space on play.

Vignette 4 The impact of space on play

Children need space to become physically active with the larger loose parts. N3Q10  
One of my roles is finding space in the playroom to use the loose parts. N4Q10  
Setting up and putting away activities each day means space (for loose parts play) varies and can be changed depending on the activity. A4DG  
Having them (loose parts) in the playground means there is plenty space to move the around and stack, balance, roll and build. A2DG

The establishment of loose parts as a core provision within the settings was alluded to in the discussion of adult role, variety of materials and application in 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 above. There is evidence that space is being given in the settings to allow children regular exploration of open-ended materials, with participants using them in various areas. Space to play was examined further in the discussion group and the participants agreed that space can affect the outcomes for the child by restricting or facilitating the play. Consequently, the conversation took on a reflective quality (demonstrated in Vignette 5 below) and the participants concluded that the environment and space itself became a loose part as it was a 'variable' (Nicholson, 1971).

Vignette 5 Space as a loose part

You can give it to them in the wildlife garden and you get a different outcome in each area. A6DG  
...the environment itself is a variable as well as the materials... A1DG  
It becomes part of what they're doing, the environment they find themselves in. They're not restricted...A4DG  
So the environment itself becomes a loose part? A5DG  
It's probably influencing what the child's thinking as well, not just how the loose parts sound but actually what they can hear while they're playing with them jogs their memory and what they're actually thinking. A4DG

This reflective approach gave the research a supplementary quality of collaboration with implications for transformation of practice, facilitating knowledge development and understanding for the participants (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007; Lyons, 2010).

#### 4.4.2 Storage (Space)

Practitioners suggested that storage of loose parts can be an issue:

##### Vignette 6 Participants views on storage of loose parts

Finding storage can be really difficult. We have had to find somewhere to put loose parts every time we gather new ones. A4Q12  
storing the loose parts is difficult if we aren't using them in the room... N1Q12  
we have bags and boxes of things.... A5Q12  
It would be great to have more of them. But, you know.... storage. A4DG

Most practitioners referred to the storage of loose parts being both inside and outside, depending on the size of materials. The ELC practitioners indicated that they were able to leave loose parts out in the playrooms and garden overnight as the building and garden were secure. OOSC practitioners expressed frustration at putting resources away each night and setting them up again the next day, leading to less time for the children to explore the same activity unless the same materials were used each day. Both indicated that leaving materials out would be preferable. This correlates with Hyndman et al.'s (2014) study of playgrounds in Australia which established a connection between the benefits and development of a familiarity of the materials for the children.

The participants in the discussion group agreed that storage can be an issue for the provision of loose parts. An account was given of the purchase of a large storage container for the school playground making a difference to the storage of the larger items, which could not be left in the playground overnight due to vandalism. Finding places for midsize items and materials such as sheets for den making was reported as being a problem in restricted storage spaces within the school. Smaller loose parts

were stored in bags and boxes and clearly labelled for use at another time. The discussion group participants suggested that loose parts play could not be carried out if resources could not be accessed or stored easily, and that their ideal situation would be to be able to set up loose parts play in a room and leave it out for prolonged play, linking to the next theme of time. However, the daily changing of resources does lead to the use of more diverse materials on a regular basis as examined above in 4.3.1 Variety of materials.

## 4.5 Time

I will now discuss the last theme identified from the data of Time. This theme did not feature in the questionnaire, but this could have been due to the questions not inviting answers that gave participants opportunities to mention it. Time appeared in several aspects of the discussion group and was divided into two sub-themes; enough time to play and time required for gathering resources.

### 4.5.1 'Enough' time to play (Time)

This theme did not emerge from the questionnaire, but from the discussion group. Participants noted that having extended time to play with loose parts was important, particularly the time to do so without adult involvement. The consensus was that children needed 'enough time' (A4DG and A6DG) to have ideas and finish what they want to do. One participant in the discussion group suggested that time was key to the development of the play and that the full cycle of play cannot take place in a shortened session:

'You can see the different stages of their play, whether they've added stuff in or other people join in, you can see the progress over the whole time we've been outside.' A3DG

As with storage and space, this is reflected in the work of Brown (2008) and Sutton-Smith (1997) who advocate that children need to be given the time to play though a complete cycle. Again, this reflects Hyndman et al.'s (2014) findings linking quality of experience to familiarity of materials and in turn, time given to playing with those

materials. Practitioners' awareness of providing children with the space and time in which to play was apparent from both settings and reflects the general level of training of the workforce (Siraj and Kingston, 2015), however for loose parts to be successful in settings there needs to be a further focus on the non-intervention of adults to give metaphorical space (Pellegrini and Galda, 1993; Sturrock and Else, 1998; Brown, 2003, 2008; Armitage, 2009).

#### 4.5.2 Resource gathering (Time)

Some of the more negative comments the discussion group participants made were related to the gathering and organisation of resources. The participants reported that the time required to gather resources for loose parts can be concurrently difficult to manage and simple. Examples given included asking parents to contribute to a collection of frames, which was unsuccessful and produced little enthusiasm. Another example was of collecting materials for loose parts play by taking a group of children on an Autumn walk and enthusiastically scavenger hunting for leaves, cones and seed pods.

For loose parts to work Haughey and Hill (2017) suggest that there should be an availability of a large number of resources, a notion supported by Goldschmied and Jackson's (2004) heuristic play concept. Providing resources was perceived by many in the questionnaire as part of the adult role, but time seemed to be a more important factor in the gathering of these resources, with one participant mentioning the need for a number of pieces, which helped with behaviour issues:

'it's important to have lots, but one item can be many different things – it minimises disagreements over toys' N5Q12

The need for practitioners to have time in which to gather resources could have implications for future practice which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## 4.6 Conclusion

In presenting the findings of my research I have examined the themes which emerged and established links to the literature that currently exists. In doing so I have established, within the context of this study, a link between practitioners' understanding of loose parts play and the setting they work in. Whilst the practitioners admitted their understanding of the concept of loose parts, the general principles reflected by the participants differed on an individual basis and within each setting. The ELC and OOSC settings reflected different levels of use of loose parts, and a greater variety of materials were available in the OOSC. There are indications that the accepted role of adults in each setting reflects the ludic and epistemic attitudes towards loose parts in the literature search of non-interventionist and adult-led (Moyles, 1989; Bruce, 1997, 2004; and Wood, 2014). Within the limitations of this small-scale enquiry it is impossible to assume this to be the case in every setting, however my own experience reflects this and shows that loose parts play, while being a focus in the Scottish context, requires more training to develop practitioners' understanding. In Chapter 5, I will consider implications for future practice and make some recommendations based on the data analysis of this project.



## Chapter 5 Recommendations

Following Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988) I will now review my findings in light of previous research, examine the limitations of this research and issues arising, and discuss the implications of my findings. I will also draw of the findings of my research to make recommendations for future research and policy and show how the research can impact on my own and others' professional development and practice.

### 5.1 Findings

The purpose of this study was to establish practitioners' understandings of loose parts play. The intention was that the research would permit me an enhanced understanding of where practitioners were positioned to allow me to better tailor training and assist the practitioners in my own setting, and others, to further develop their use of loose parts. Following Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) and Braun and Clarke's (2013) premise that research should support and develop practice, this will influence both my own and others' practice in the future. The participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the premise of loose parts play, but one of the main themes was the existence of two opposing views of loose parts, the ludic, OOSC based approach and the epistemological, ELC based approach, which I discussed in Chapter 2:2.4 and Chapter 4:4.3 in more detail.

### 5.2 Links to previous research

Within the study it was apparent that the approaches to loose parts were different in each setting. Although the underlying principle of loose parts was generally understood, a greater knowledge of each of the main themes explored here, displayed by the playworkers in the OOSC, would appear to lead to practices more in line with the original theory of loose parts play, in the development of children's creativity and their ability to influence their environment (Nicholson, 1971; Fjørtoft and Sageie, 2000; Craft, 2002; Änggård, 2011). The initial premise of loose parts is, to some degree, vague in terms of being the play with 'variables' that can change a

child's environment, and Nicholson's (ibid) initial theory does not expand to define benefits specifically.

The advantages of loose parts play, as examined in the literature review, reveal positive outcomes for children's social development, inclusion, imagination and creativity, physical activity and improved integration across sex and age groups (Maxwell et al., 2008; Armitage, 2009; Bundy et al., 2011; James, 2012; Hyndman et al., 2014; Daly and Beloglovsky, 2015). The benefits of loose parts play could be further examined to provide greater empirical evidence, however, policy and guidance in Scotland already accepts these benefits and has adopted open-ended resources and loose parts as an integral part of ELC and OOSC provision, with both epistemological and ludic approaches utilised (Scottish Government, 2017).

The findings presented in Chapter 4 resonate with the work of Armitage (2009) and Kiewra and Veselack (2016) who suggest that the adult role has a fundamental impact on loose parts play. The balance between the influence of the adult and the other themes demonstrated a predisposition towards adult role being of greatest importance, with a greater number of sub-themes present. Armitage (2009) expressly states that loose parts play is of more value without direct adult involvement, and his definitions of teaching through play and learning through play correspond with the epistemic and ludic definitions of Wood (2014) and Hutt et al. (1989:223). However, Armitage (2009) does admit that the adult has a role in preparing the space and facilitating time for the child to play, echoing Hunter et al.'s (2017) suggestion that the adult's intention is crucial to the process and outcome of the play (Brown, 2003, 2008; Kiewra and Veselack, 2016).

### 5.3 Limitations

The findings of this study were restricted to only two settings with a sample of twelve practitioners in total. The findings cannot therefore be applied to every ELC or OOSC setting and it should be noted that generalisations would be undesirable. However, I will be able to use my findings to influence further reflexive practitioner research of

my own, to help to establish the best way in which to train practitioners in the use of loose parts play. By applying theory to practice in this way, Lyons (2010) proposes that it is possible to move beyond established practices using reflection and develop more appropriate approaches. If I were to complete this research again or advise anyone undertaking a similar project I would suggest that practitioners from both settings are involved in discussion groups to allow for a greater degree of discoverability from the questionnaire, allowing for clarity of data (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Holloway and Wheeler, 2013).

#### 5.4 Implications for future research

My study offers evocative evidence for there being further research, as also recommended by Gibson et al. (2017) into the benefits of loose parts play for children. More guidelines for practitioners on how they might use loose parts play would also be a benefit of this research.

Should I be afforded the opportunity to further develop research in this area I would want to explore the contrast between the diversity of loose parts play within local authority nurseries and the private and voluntary sector. Resources, training and structure may all have an influence on how well loose parts play is adopted in the settings. Other possible areas of study include a comparison of play types in different settings against theoretical models of, for example, Moyles (1989), Bruce (1997) and Wood (2014). A longitudinal study of the impact of loose parts play on children from nursery through to high school could also display additional benefits, although other factors could prove difficult to negate such as curriculum changes and teaching styles. Future policy based on the benefits of open-ended resources would then have a greater evidence base.

#### 5.5 Implications for my practice

My practice as a lead practitioner in the OOSC and as a workforce development officer will be influenced by this research (Braun and Clarke, 2013). I now have a clearer understanding of the likely comprehension of both my OOSC team and others

who attend training depending on their work situation and experiences. As a workforce development officer, I am in the position to share my findings from this study with other practitioners in a variety of settings across different local authorities through presentations at workshops, training and conferences and to establish further research for the future through my own and the supervision of practitioner research. This research has already impacted an initial questionnaire for each group who attend training. It facilitates my understanding of any bias participants hold and the level of comprehension they have of loose parts play at the outset. Penn (1994) suggests that practitioners from differing settings will have diverse training needs, which has been established partly by this study in showing the differing approaches to loose parts play in each setting. In the past, the training that has been made available may not have fitted the needs of the service or user appropriately and I will be able to tailor this to requirements.

The availability of a more diverse range of loose parts would seem to have an influence on the quality of the play, as advocated by Nicholson (1971) and Haughey and Hill (2017). The provision of a wider range of loose parts in my own setting will enhance loose parts play and the extension of available resources in other settings could impact practice also. Examination of storage and the analysis of time in relation to the processes that children go through will allow the practitioners to further enrich the experience.

## 5.6 Implications for current policy and practice in ELC and OOSC

It would appear that current policies direct practitioners to use open-ended materials and loose parts, however the practical implementation within settings appears to have been overlooked and insufficient support and advice has been given to those implementing the strategy (Scottish Government, 2017). Enthusiastic adoption of strategies without underpinning knowledge has been proven to cause implementation to be less effective (Lewis, 2011). Therefore, I would suggest that there is a need for more training in loose parts play with a particular emphasis on ludic and epistemic applications. Schön's (1983) reflection-on-action methodology,

encouraging practitioners to scrutinise practice by using reflective analysis and thoughtful deliberation to gain knowledge, could be utilised to give practitioners time over a period of months to train, reflect on their practice, and return for further training. In a collaborative, reflexive approach, loose parts play could become a core part of the transformation of practitioners' understanding of play in general relating to ludic and epistemic approaches and the delivery of the Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2007) through play (Hutt et al., 1989; Lyons, 2010; Braun and Clarke, 2013).

## 5.7 Conclusion

In concluding this investigation to discover practitioners' understandings of loose parts play, I would recommend that within the established policy framework of the Scottish context, loose parts play is examined further (Scottish Executive, 2007; Scottish Government 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2017). The use of language within policy which encourages practitioners to implement initiatives requires clarification as each sector interprets guidance from a different perspective as I have demonstrated in this paper. A programme of resource building and systematic training in the use of open-ended materials and loose parts for all practitioners, with the sharing of knowledge across sectors could lead to the transformation of a sector which currently is divided by intention, funding, resources and qualifications (Siraj and Kingston, 2015). I would also recommend that as play specialists, knowledgeable playworkers from OOSC should be involved in the dissemination of information about initiatives such as loose parts play. The knowledge that they hold regarding play could greatly enhance the training for those in ELC settings and other OOSC settings alike. By giving the whole workforce a thorough understanding of the underpinning theory of new initiatives, the experiences for children can only be enhanced.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 Playwork Principles

These Principles establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork and as such must be regarded as a whole. They describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and young people. They are based on the recognition that children and young people's capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities.

1. All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and wellbeing of individuals and communities.
2. Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.
3. The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.
4. For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.
5. The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.
6. The playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.
7. Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.
8. Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and wellbeing of children.

Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, Cardiff 2005

## Appendix 2 Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to find out about your knowledge of Loose Parts Play. There are no right or wrong answers, and it should take you no more than 30 minutes to complete.

Thank you for participating.

1. Have you ever heard the term Loose Parts Play? (*please tick*)

Yes

No

2. How would you define Loose Parts Play?

3. Have you attended training on Loose Parts Play? (*please tick*)

Yes

No

4. Do you use Loose Parts Play in your setting? (*please tick*)

Yes

No

5. If yes, how often do you use Loose Parts? (*please tick*)

Every day

More than once a week

Once a week

Once a fortnight

Once a month

Less than every month

Other (please expand)

6. Where do you use Loose Parts? *(please tick all that apply)*

- |              |                          |                     |                          |
|--------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Garden       | <input type="checkbox"/> | Other outdoor area  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| House corner | <input type="checkbox"/> | Art / Creative area | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Playdough    | <input type="checkbox"/> | Sand and water      | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Other (please expand)

7. Which areas of the curriculum and learning do Loose Parts help you to cover?  
*(please tick all that apply)*

- |                      |                          |                        |                          |
|----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Language             | <input type="checkbox"/> | Numeracy / Mathematics | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Health and Wellbeing | <input type="checkbox"/> | Expressive Arts        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Sciences             | <input type="checkbox"/> | Social Studies         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Technologies         | <input type="checkbox"/> | Religious and Moral    | <input type="checkbox"/> |

8. Please list some of the Loose Parts Resources you use (eg tyres, pipes)

9. From your experience what is the adult role in Loose Parts Play?

10. From your experience what is the child's role in Loose Parts Play?

11. Do you think there are any risks to children being involved in Loose Parts Play?

12. Do you think there are any benefits/ drawbacks to this type of play?



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**Degree Programme**

MEd in Childhood Practice

**School / Subject area**

School of Education

**Project title**

Practitioners' understanding of loose parts play.

**Invitation**

You are being invited to take part in a Master's research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done, what it will involve, and your role, should you choose to participate. Please take some time to read the following information carefully to help you gain a clear understanding of this research project and discuss it with others if you wish. Please do not hesitate to ask me if there is anything that is not clear of if you would like more information before you make the decision to participate. I am contactable via the details above, or you may contact my supervisor, Dr Mary Wingrave.

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

This study will be conducted for the purpose of my Master's dissertation. The focus of the study is to explore the understanding that practitioners have of loose parts play in two settings (nursery and out of school care).

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen to take part in this study because you are a practitioner within one of the chosen settings. Your involvement in this study will give you the opportunity to share your understanding of loose parts through a questionnaire. You will also have the opportunity to discuss how your understanding has changed through

training and experience. As a manager and tutor, I hope this research will inform my professional development and practice as well as that of a wider community through development of more loose parts play training.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this study is voluntary; you do not need to take part in this study. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason and will have no impact on your career progression or employment status. As I have a professional relationship with you, this will not be affected by your decision.

You will be given a consent form which you should sign and return within six days to participate in the study.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

I will provide you with a questionnaire. This will have instructions on it for the completion of the questions. Should you feel there are any questions you do not wish to answer then you may leave these blank. The questions will only relate to your knowledge of loose parts play.

Once you have completed the questionnaire I will ask you to return it to me. The data from the questionnaire will be collated to give a picture of the knowledge of the staff in the centre of loose parts play. It will be used as a comparison to the answers from a group of practitioners in a nursery setting who have less experience in loose parts play.

Once the data is collated I will ask you if you would like to be involved in a discussion group to further discuss loose parts play. The discussion will be video recorded for the purposes of a transcript. This will be given to you so you may clarify any points you made during the discussion before I analyse the data fully. This will reinforce the validity of the research.

Should the discussion upset you in any way, you may leave the research process whenever you choose. This will have no impact on your career progression or employment status. As I have a professional relationship with you, this will not be affected by your decision.

The transcripts of the discussion will be analysed along with the questionnaires to look for common themes in the understanding of loose parts by practitioners.

### **Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

By signing the attached consent form you are agreeing to take part in the study. Any data collected will remain confidential and identifying information will be removed from any written reports. While participating in the questionnaire, you will not be asked to give your name, to ensure your comments will be confidential. Any written data collected will be kept in a locked cupboard or on computer. The files stored on computer will be accessible only by myself, using a password. Once the research has

been completed, by December 2018, all documents and files relating to the data collected will be deleted, other than the research report.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results of this research study will be used to write my MEd dissertation. They may also be used in presentations regarding training, for a journal or magazine article, at a conference or in further research at a later date.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

This research study has been reviewed by the School Ethics Forum that are a subset of the College Research Ethics Committee.

Contact for further information

Kristina Robb

or

Dr Mary Wingrave [mary.wingrave@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:mary.wingrave@glasgow.ac.uk)

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project you may contact:

The College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer:

Dr Muir Houston [muir.houston@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:muir.houston@glasgow.ac.uk)

The School of Education's Ethics Officer:

Dr Kara Makara Fuller [kara.makarafuller@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:kara.makarafuller@glasgow.ac.uk)



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**Consent Form**

**Title of Project: Practitioners' understanding of loose parts play.**

**Name of Researcher: Kristina Robb**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I consent and acknowledge the following clauses relevant to the research project:
  - Participation, non-participation or withdrawal from the research will have no effect on my employment
  - The discussion group will be audio and video-taped
  - Copies of the transcripts will be returned to each participant for verification
  - Participants will be referred to by code in any publications arising from the research
  - Complete confidentiality cannot be assured and in case of evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered, the researcher may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.
  - I understand that the research project explores practitioners' understandings of Loose Parts Play and will not discuss individual children at any time.
4. I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in the above study.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Signature</i>
_____	_____	_____
<i>Researcher</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Signature</i>

Please return this form within six days to take part in the study.



## Appendix 5 Questions for discussion group

Can you explain what you believe loose parts are?

What is their purpose?

How do loose parts relate to children's development and learning?

Do you think that there are differences between ELC and OSC settings' approaches?

What do you think is your main role as an adult?

Is space important to the quality of loose parts play?

Is time important to the quality of loose parts play?

How does risk factor into the play?

## Appendix 6 Timescale for research

Practitioners' understandings of loose parts play.

<b>Task</b>	<b>S e p</b>	<b>O c t</b>	<b>N o v</b>	<b>D e c</b>	<b>J a n</b>	<b>F e b</b>	<b>M a r</b>	<b>A p r</b>	<b>M a y</b>	<b>J u n</b>	<b>J u l</b>	<b>A u g</b>
<b>Ethical approval</b>												
<b>Background reading to identify areas for discussion.</b>												
<b>Recruit participants 6 participants in each setting</b>												
<b>Questionnaire development and piloting</b>												
<b>Questionnaire to participants</b>												
<b>Coding of questionnaire data</b>												
<b>Development of discussion group initial questions</b>												
<b>Discussion group 1 meeting lasting 90mins (max)</b>												
<b>Analyse data</b>												
<b>Reading and writing Including literature review</b>												
<b>Complete project</b>												