“Bang! Bang! You’re not dead!”

An exploration of practitioner attitudes towards war, weapon and superhero play.

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ABSTRACT

It has been recognised that policy and practice regarding war, weapon and superhero play are considered to be influenced by practitioner’s own attitudes and experiences (Holland, 2003). This case study explores practitioner attitudes towards this play in a large urban Primary school, Nursery and Children’s Centre. The study explores how current attitudes in this setting may influence practice and the factors that may influence those attitudes. Data was gathered through questionnaires, that were completed by class teachers and teaching assistants in Year one of Key Stage One (KS1) and Early Years Foundations Stage (EYFS) practitioners from the Nursery and Crèche in the same setting. Interviews with a selection of these participants were conducted to further understand patterns and issues that arose from analysis of responses to the questionnaires. The data collected reflected the issues that were evident in the exploration of literature on this subject. It also identified factors that may influence practitioner attitudes and how these attitudes shape current practice; therefore shaping children’s learning experiences and construction of childhood. The study emphasised the importance of reflective practice and continued professional development, as well as a whole school approach to a variety of play types.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Recognising and valuing children’s individual interests, ideas and motivations is a essential feature of high quality Early Years practice (Department for Children, Schools and Families, (DCSF) 2007). Practitioners are encouraged to include all children’s ideas and interests in order to support and extend play; this may require practitioners to evaluate their own beliefs and values to co-construct learning experiences with children as active participants in this process (DCSF, 2008). War, weapon and superhero play can be a contentious area of children’s interests as practitioners struggle to balance the utilization of these interests to support learning and development, whilst ensuring children’s actions are not morally questionable (Holland, 2003). This area of practice is of interest to me because as a practitioner I have often observed children being discouraged from engaging in war, weapon and superhero play (which will be referred to as WWSP); this has resulted in the children appearing to be disaffected from the learning and deceiving practitioners in order to continue their play and follow their motivations. Following these experiences I have endeavoured to develop my own practice to support and extend rather than discourage this play. Other practitioners and managers have not shared my attitudes towards WWSP; this has presented barriers to provision of successful support and extension of WWSP. Therefore this study will help me develop a greater understanding of practitioner attitudes and overcome barriers to future effective practice.

This area of study is particularly relevant to early years’ education as during their formative year’s children develop their identities as learners and motivations which impacts their holistic development (DCSF, 2007). Additionally Statutory Framework for the EYFS requires practitioners to acknowledge children as unique individuals that are valued equally (Department for Education (DfE), 2012); therefore it is a requirement for practitioners to understand and value all children’s play choices and interests, as this may impact on children’s attitudes to learning and long term outcomes.
The literature review explored a variety of relevant research concerned with this topic; this provided an overview of current and historical elements that have influenced practitioner’s attitudes, as well as an understanding of children’s motivation towards this area of play. The data collected reflected and echoed the literature explored providing possible explanations for current attitudes.

Firstly the questionnaires highlighted patterns in practitioner responses and attitudes; interviews were then conducted to further explore these patterns. The study found WWSP was observed by all practitioners throughout the key stages and identified the challenges faced in managing this type of play. Furthermore the study discovered practitioner attitudes differed in different key stages and there was some disparity in the translation of policy through to practice. The study highlighted factors that may affect practitioner attitudes and response to WWSP. The data collected indicated a need for whole school recognition of policy that relates to children’s play, to ensure continuity and consistency in practice. Furthermore the study recognised the need for a theoretical understanding of children’s play motivations, the role of play in learning and how play experiences shape the social construction of childhood.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Play is described as the: “quintessential development activity of childhood” (Pellegrini and Blatchford, 2000, Pp133). Article 31 of The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child states children have a right to play, (UNICEF, 2011, Pp4). Play is an essential tool to support children’s holistic development, health and wellbeing (Department of Education, (DfE), 2012); therefore play is part of children’s legal rights, a statutory part of childhood and central to learning and development. Smith and Pellegrini (2008) note different types of play have become topical areas of debate; a highly debated area of play is WWSP. WWSP has been described as play that can help children “... to work on issues that are basic to their development and to ideas they build about their world” (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006, Pp93); furthermore it is acknowledged; “the popularity of superheroes is here to stay” (Martin, 2007, Pp249). In our modern society children are considered to be “swimming in a culture of violence” (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 1998, Pp31); children use play to make sense of their exposure to violence through media and cultural experiences; WWSP can be utilized by practitioners to develop co-operative and inclusive environments (Smidt, 2011). These definitions reflect positive attitudes towards WWSP; however not all educational professionals share these view therefore the management of WWSP in educational settings is a highly debated controversial subject (Bauer and Dettore, 1997). This literature review will consider research and practice concerned with WWSP, discuss differing research, theories, issues and perspectives that shape practitioners attitudes and practice.

2.1 Children’s motivations towards WWSP

In our modern society children are continually exposed to suffering, trauma and brutality, either through tragic personal experience or through media exposure; for some children abuse and violence is a reality and they are often observed mimicking their experiences in their play (Smidt, 2011). In the early 1980’s, broadcasting deregulation resulted in the television and toy manufacturing industries working together; consequently this increased children’s
exposure to violence in television programmes and the availability of toys that mimic this media (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987). Children are constantly exposed to violent scenes in our modern society and violent offences perpetrated by young people have almost doubled since the mid 1980’s (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 1998). However children don’t submissively receive this information; instead they use play to convert it into meaningful experiences (Levin 2003). In other countries attempts have been made to limit children’s exposure with initiatives such as restricting advertisements and the sale of toys linked to war; however in the UK the media and toy industry is saturated with these images, therefore children’s play is influenced by this exposure (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006). Adults cite concerns that over time children have become more preoccupied with this type of play, and adults found banning the play a complex task (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006).

2.2 Historical practice in WWSP: socio-political view.

Historically practitioners have adopted a zero tolerance attitude to WWSP banning the play and discouraging children from engaging in this play (Holland, 2005). This practice has been described as the “socio-political view” (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006, Pp5). The socio-political view considers WWSP should be banned, because when children replicate war, weapons and superheroes in their play they will learn harmful messages about acceptable behaviour in their culture and society (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987). Research that supports the socio-political view suggests children who engaged in violent play displayed lower levels of emotional regulation and consequently engaged in less co-operative play (Dunn and Hughes, 2001). It must be noted that Dunn and Hughes (2001) recognised the limitations of their research, as social factors and children’s backgrounds were not taken into account; furthermore this study has been criticised as practitioner’s lack of involvement and support in children’s play, was considered to influence the study results (Holland, 2003).

In a review of past literature regarding WWSP Holland (2003) was unable to find a paper trail that advised practitioners to adopt a zero
tolerance policy; therefore this practice may have been derived from the anti-war era, where feminist activists in education were attempting to reduce male violence. Jones, (2001) suggested female teachers use their authority to shape play in order to reduce male dominance in society even though this does not reflect child centred practice. Although the socio-political view is recognised and acknowledge by research it is noted by many that zero tolerance policy and practice is ineffective, as children will still engage in this play they will simply deceive adults and hide their play (Bauer and Dettore, 1997; Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987; 1995; Holland, 2003; Rich, 2003; Jones, 2001).

2.3 Supporting WWSP: the developmental view.

The opposing view to the socio-political view is the “developmental view...children use their play to construct meaning from experience and to work on key issues of their stage of development” (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987, Pp82). This view acknowledges children make sense of their world through play therefore this play should be allowed as it is valuable to children’s development (Rich, 2003). Banning war play forces children make sense of their exposure to violence and aggression, without the support or guidance of adults (Carlsson-Paige and Levin 1995). Additionally, children make sense of their exposure through: “play which cannot be described as pleasurable or fun” (Smidt, 2011, Pp115). Following world events such as bombings or media coverage of war children may display play that may be considered disturbing and worrying; however zero tolerance policies limit this play, preventing adults from gaining an understanding of children’s emotions and support them to make sense of their experiences (Smidt, 2011). This suggests in our media driven, global society, zero-tolerance policies may not be an effective solution to fully support children’s development.

War and weapons can also be part of children’s cultural heritage; for instance families may be from the farming community, the armed forces or refugees from war torn countries (Rich, 2003; Holland, 2003). In research into children who are refugees, Hyder (2005)
conveys the importance of considering children’s prior experience as they need to explore their exposure through play. Additionally Hamblen (2008) notes worrying statistics that up to 43% children will experience a traumatic event in their lifetime, proposing post traumatic play and re-enactment can be central to play therapy necessary to support some children. Therefore children who feel they lack power or control in their own lives may be regularly observed engaging in this type of play, as this play is required for them to make sense of their experiences and gain control of their understanding (Levin, 2003). Banning WWSP also results in preventing boys from exploring different aspects of masculinity and girls are given worrying messages that passivity and obedience is advantageous; furthermore this communicates to children their opinions and interests in this play are not appreciated or regarded as valid (Holland, 2003). Carlson and Taylor (2005) found boy’s imaginary characters where more competent and capable than themselves and more likely to be media influenced; they suggested differing behaviours in fantasy play reflects how children view their gender in their social world. Children need to know their play choices are valued and respected to ensure they have opportunities to develop essential play skills and positive attitudes to learning, to ensure they do not become disaffected towards educational experiences. Although the developmental view is also acknowledged and supported simply allowing WWSP without adult support is not the answer; this suggests play needs to be supported and extended not simply advocated (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006).

2.4 A balanced view: supporting and extending WWSP.

Piaget (1951) suggested there was a key difference between imitation and play; imitation is a type of activity where children’s simply copy behaviour they have experienced, whereas play is the activity that helps children construct meaning and develop their understanding. Therefore adults cannot merely allow WWSP; this play must be appropriately supported to move activities from imitation to play, in order for the play to be developmentally valuable (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987). Through supported, risk free play children are prepared for adult life as they rehearse adult roles and explore their knowledge,
understanding and fears (Ginsburg, 2007). Vygotsky (1978) valued the role of others in children’s play; through pretend play children make representations of the real world and develop their skills by accessing experiences they would not approach in their own lives; this extends their knowledge and understanding and makes preparations for their adult life. Smidt (2011) considered Vygoskian theory and concluded that through WWSP children can move their understanding from abstract to concrete thinking and adults can scaffold this play in order to “reinforce a culture and ethos of non-violence and co-operation” (Smidt, 2011, Pp108). Theory and research therefore is suggesting a balance between socio-political and behavioural views of WWSP advocating practice that observes, analyses, supports and extends this play, to ensure it is beneficial to children’s holistic development and wellbeing.

Children of both genders are exposed to similar levels of aggression however boys choose to reflect this exposure through play; this could be considered because boys are simply more aggressive or because adult’s gender expectations limit girl’s play (Daly and Perez, 2009). When engaging in WWSP boys are observed to persistently exclude girls and give them stereotypical female roles when they were included in the play (Dyson, 1994). However, Paley (1984) found by extending free play time and supporting WWSP play became less frantic and more productive; additionally the inclusion of girls into WWSP created a calmer atmosphere. Furthermore in safe, supported inclusive environments boys can access opportunities to explore and challenge stereotypical views of masculinity and girls can challenge gender stereotypes (Marsh, 2000). In their practical study Logue and Detor (2011) demonstrated when play is supported but not directed by adults WWSP can become inclusive, complex and sustained, and a forum for boys and girls to develop cooperative, inclusive behaviours and attitudes; thus concluding adults inhibit play due to their personal fears. Therefore part of the adult role is to ensure environments provide safe and inclusive opportunities for all children to engage in all play that is beneficial to their development.
Adult support and guidance is considered essential to reduce aggression and for children to engage in WWWSP that is effective for their development and social understanding (Daly and Perez, 2009; Holland, 2003). Research suggests the solution to reducing aggressive behaviour is to develop children’s self or emotional regulation through imaginative play; to control behaviour rather than act on impulse (Berk et al, 2006; Daly and Perez, 2009; DeSouza and Radell, 2011). Berk et al (2006) considers the adult role of using imaginary play to develop self-regulation considers sociocultural theories of development. The sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) suggests with the support of adults or more skilled peers children can achieve learning that they would not achieve individually; Vygotsky called this process movement through the “Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)” (Vygotsky, 1978 cited in Dolya, 2009, Pp9). Children’s imaginative and sometimes aggressive narratives, stories and role play can be utilized to support moral development and help them to develop differentiation between fantasy and reality (Bacigalupa and Wright, 2009; Paley 1984; Bromley, 2010); this could be considered as supporting children through their ZPD. Sharon and Woolley (2004) found children who have a preference for fantasy play have an improved understanding of fantasy and reality. Furthermore Martin (2007) suggests through a focus of complex relationships and the struggle for equality, stories of superheroes provide opportunities to teach co-operation, conflict resolution and moral values. This practice is more than achievable in the early years as children begin to make moral judgements as young as 2½ years of age (Smentana, 1981). Desouza and Radell (2011) suggested the adult role is to encourage children to develop their own non-aggressive characters in a weapon free play environment; conversely the recommendation of weapon free zone contradicts research previously discussed that expresses children’s need for some play needs to not be pleasurable to work through fear and anxiety (Smidt, 2011; Rich, 2003). Although there are differing methods of supporting children in practice it is clear that by intervening in children’s play adults can support children’s understanding of WWWSP and guide their development of self regulation.
2.5 Conclusion

According to new statutory guidance for Early Years Education child lead and initiated play must be facilitated through learning experiences that are centred around the child (DfE, 2012); government guidance in supporting boys’ achievements express a need to include all play themes including those that are media driven (DCSF, 2007). These developments in practice guidance have resulted in an increased pressure for practitioners to provide learning experiences that are inclusive to all children irrespective of their interests and preoccupations; this includes WWSP. Using children’s interests and play to support learning can be contentious for some practitioners as they may feel they are promoting WWSP which may be in opposition of their personal beliefs about this play. This can be challenging for practitioners due to the social requirement of National Curriculum expectations; practitioners must therefore become mediators between children’s innate need to play and educational requirements (Hurst, 1997). This may be more easily facilitated in the child focused EYFS curriculum as opposed to the National Curriculum guidance that has a distinct subject focus and there is no mention of including children’s play in learning (Department for Education and Employment and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999). However, all of the key skills children develop through play are part of the National Curriculum framework therefore children’s interests can still promote learning in KS1 (Abbott, 2003).

Children’s lives are permeated with violence, war and aggression either in their own lives or as part of their daily media diet; this is an unavoidable factor of our modern society therefore we cannot be surprised that children appear to be drawn to WWSP (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006). This is not a new development, for generations human culture has been drawn to narratives of good versus evil, in cultural stories such as Cowboys and Indians, dinosaurs and humans and much more (Martin, 2007; Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006; Holland, 2003). However if children become pre-occupied with concealing ‘taboo’ fantasy play they may miss opportunities to explore real life situations in play, making sense of reality and social
relationships (French and Pena, 1991). Therefore with adult support fantasy play can become an essential and balanced part of children’s imaginary play.

Zero-tolerance practice towards WWSP removes children’s involvement in their learning experiences as their interests are dismissed without discussion. This highlights practice regarding WWSP in settings affects the construction of childhood as practitioners consider children lack the wisdom and competence required to make their own decisions (Johnny, 2006); furthermore they view childhood as a period of time where children require strict instruction and control (Zhao, 2011). Conversely by supporting WWSP children are included in their childhood construction as they are viewed as active participants in their learning and development: “The child’s own instinct and powers furnish the material and give the starting point for all education” (Dewey, 1938, Cited in Mooney, 2000, Pp5). How practitioners view children and childhood affects children’s experiences (Sorin, 2005); therefore the debate regarding WWSP will impact children’s long term outcomes. The literature suggests simply banning or advocating WWSP is not the answer; adults need to work co-operatively with children to fully understand their motivations; furthermore a balanced approach to supporting and facilitating WWSP can enable children to make sense of their world and support holistic learning and development.

This study will attempt to explore current practitioner attitudes towards WWSP in an Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage one (KS1) setting. The researcher will compare current attitudes with the literature explored and attempt to address the following questions:

What are current practitioner attitudes towards WWSP?

What factors influence practitioner attitudes to WWSP?

How does current practice reflect the literature reviewed?
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Exploring the attitudes of practitioners is concerned with social interactions and the social construction of our environment, this area of research is considered by "interpretive researchers... interested in the complexity and diversity of human interactions" (Robert-Holmes, 2005, Pp40). Robert-Holmes (2005) notes interpretive research often utilizes case studies; these small research projects effectively focus and explore social issues and relationships within an organisation, as they have clear objectives and structure; therefore a case study was selected as the method of research.

3.1 Context of the study

The study was conducted in a large primary school, nursery and children’s centre situated in a large council estate, with areas that are considered to be socio-economically deprived. Data was gathered from class teachers and teaching assistants in Year One of KS1 and EYFS practitioners from the Nursery and Crèche in the same setting. The participants had a diverse range of education and experience: The KS1 class teachers were educated to degree level with one specialising in Early Years Education; their experience in education ranged from four to thirty years. The teaching assistants had differing qualifications from NVQ levels 2 or 3 and their experience in education ranged from three to twenty three years. In the EYFS the practitioners were educated to NVQ level 3, with two practitioners educated to degree level with Early Years specialism; the experience in the EYFS ranged between two to thirty years.

3.2 Methods of data collection

Firstly questionnaires were issued to participants to gain a broad view of practitioner attitudes towards WWSP and attempt to identify any general trends in the data (Robert-Holmes, 2005). Some questions provided specific sets of answers that could be presented in tables and graphs; this is known as quantitative data as is provides clear and explicit information in the form of figures (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2009). Quantitative data is valuable as it provides information that is
reliable and rigorous; however this information can give limited understanding (MacNaugton, 2009). Robert-Holmes, (2005) notes questionnaires can only gather limited information and should be used in conjunction with other research methods that provide qualitative data. Interviews and observations provide qualitative data; this is data that gives more detailed explanations of results and is concerned with individual opinions (Bell, 2010). To increase validity and rigour the study used open ended questions on the questionnaires to provide a selection of qualitative data. Some of the questions asked practitioners to communicate their attitudes and opinions; although the questions gave predetermined answers, the responses represented data concerned with human behaviour which is considered qualitative data, rather than scientific quantitative data (Cohen, et al, 2011; Hall and Hall, 2004). Quantitative data can be presented to provide increased impact as the statistics gain the attention of the reader (Burton, et al, 2008). Combining this with qualitative data ensures a connection between the reader, researcher and participants in a shared understanding that quantitative data could not provide (Burton, et al, 2008).

Interviews were conducted with two participants, one from the KS1 and one from the EYFS to provide further qualitative data. The interviews were semi-structured as they had a plan but no fixed questions, with the focus on the participant (Robert-Holmes, 2005). Interviews are beneficial as they enable the participant to communicate their experiences and opinions in a more in-depth way; however, ensuring focused discussion, organisation and time management are a disadvantage to this method of data collection (Burton, et al, 2008). The semi-structured design of the interview sought to overcome these barriers as the discussion was focused, enabling ease of documentation and evaluation. Due to these barriers the interviews were limited to two participants which may have reduced the validity of the results.
3.3 Validity and Reliability

Triangulation is a process of data collection that improves validity through the reduction of bias; “Triangulation involves the researcher collecting a range of evidence from a range of sources” (Robert-Holmes, 2005, Pp40). Triangulation was used to avoid bias through collecting data from a range of practitioners, who had a range of experience and qualifications; additionally interviews were conducted alongside questionnaires, to ensure different methods were used. Maintaining non-bias results was challenging as some of the participants were known to the researcher from previous employment; furthermore the Senior Leadership Team had requested a copy of the research when completed. Burton et al (2008) notes conducting research in a familiar setting impacts the validity of the data: some participants may feel there is covert reason for the research, therefore may consider the researcher untrustworthy; alternatively some practitioners may answer the questions with the responses they believe you anticipate, therefore not being honest. To prevent bias, results were collected anonymously and the participants identity remained anonymous using coding when collating data. The questionnaires and semi-structured interview questions were designed to prevent bias.

Bias can occur in interviews and questionnaires through the use of language that could be leading; additionally the responses could be interpreted to support a particular view held by the researcher (Bell, 2010). To avoid bias the questions were given to the dissertation supervisor for consideration and to monitor for bias. The semi-structured nature of the interviews further reduced the possibility of bias yet gave flexibility to gather rich qualitative data (Bell, 2010). The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and in a location chosen by the participant to maintain confidentiality and ensure honest responses; this ensured individual voices were represented, as unlike in group discussions, there is no risk of dominant characters leading conversation (Bell, 2010). Copies of the interview transcripts were sent to the participants for their approval and to gain their agreement as to the validity of the data collected. Additionally information gathered
from the interview transcripts and open ended questions were coded, in order to recognise distinct patterns and avoid bias in result interpretation (Cohen, et al, 2011).

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical codes ensure research is morally sound, causes no harm to the participants and maintains confidentiality (MacNaughton, and Hughes, 2009). To ensure the research was conducted with appropriate ethical consideration this study followed British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines and the University of Northampton (UON) Ethical code and procedures (UON, 2005) (see appendix XIII); for this particular study this entailed:

- Voluntary, informed consent with the understanding of disclosure.
- Clear research without deception or manipulation.
- Participants must be at all times aware of their right to withdraw
- Maintaining confidentiality.

(BERA, 2011)

All research must ensure no emotional or other harm is caused and presents minimum burden to participants (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2009); this was achieved by ensuring flexibility and conducting research at times suitable to the participants. To ensure confidentiality sensitive data, such as age and educational qualifications, were collated and used in comparison but removed from the data presented.

Informed consent ensures the participants are fully informed about the research project and are aware at all times of their right to withdraw from the project “Thus informed consent implies informed refusal” (Cohen et al, Pp 78). To enable informed consent all participants were fully informed of the rationale behind the study through an information leaflet. Each participant signed a consent form; consent was confirmed on the questionnaires and prior to interviews. Providing this information ensured participation was informed and crucially informed consent was considered throughout the study as an “ongoing process” (Roberts-Holmes, 2005, Pp68). The participants were informed the
tape recording would be transcribed anonymously and then destroyed as part of informed consent (Robert-Holmes, 2005).
CHAPTER 4: DATA FINDINGS

4.1 Data collection

Twelve questionnaires were sent out, of which ten were returned; five from the EYFS area of the setting and five from the KS1 area of the setting. The respondents’ experiences of working within education varied between 1.5 years to 30 years and the qualification levels of the respondents ranged between NVQ level 2 and degree or equivalent.

Quantitative data

The quantitative data was collected from questions on the questionnaires that had predetermined answers in order to create a set of results that could be comparatively analysed; these were then used to create graphs and charts in order to identify themes and patterns of results.

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data was gathered from open ended questions on the questionnaires and in response to the interview questions; sections of this data were organised, to make sense of the data collected (Cohen, et al 2011). Responses to open ended questions were coded and collated in tables in order to identify patterns.
4.2 Observations of WWSP in settings

The data collected demonstrated 90% of practitioners observed WWSP in their classrooms however there appears to be more frequency of observations in the KS1 classrooms.

Additionally the area of the setting this play is observed was not consistent as demonstrated below:
It is pertinent to note the outdoor area would be considered part of the continuous provision in the EYFS classroom, therefore could be considered part of free play.

One clear result in both classrooms was the children who engaged in WWSP were considered mainly boys (90%) or exclusively boys (10%).

Qualitative data gave further insight into practitioners experience and observations of WWSP: Practitioner 6 identified a clear split between superheroes and weapon play:

"we’ve had some Spiderman games in the classroom where they’re not trying to kill each other, they are doing something good”

She discussed positive use of superheroes in schools that she had heard of:

"... superheroes topic which I assume will be magical powers and that side of helping children rather than the violent side because obviously we wouldn’t have that within school.”

This illustrates in the setting superheroes are used to support learning and development but weapons would not be included in this exploration:

"but it’s the reality of what a gun is used for, and I think that even at the age of 5 that they know that.”

The interviews also gained an insight into the contentious issue of what is or isn’t a gun:

“Something that can seriously hurt or kill somebody”

“water guns...that’s fun and nobody’s going to get hurt, ... we don’t actually have water pistols or anything like that at school because that still comes under the gun thing...”

Practitioner 6

“toy gun, a gun made from construction materials”

Practitioner 4
4.3 Practitioner attitudes towards WWSP

The pie chart below represents the responses to question 14 which illustrated practitioner attitudes towards WWSP.

![Chart 1 (Question 14) Practitioner Attitudes towards WWSP](image)

Although practitioner’s attitudes is considered qualitative data (Hall and Hall, 2004); for the purposes of this study this data was collated in a quantitative method and used with quantitative data to identify factors that may influence practitioner attitudes.

Practitioners who held negative attitudes towards WWSP gave further information and cited concerns children may get hurt or become out of control:

"Starts as fun but tends to get out of hand and children get hurt then they really fight back also others tag on to game."

Practitioner 9

When considering positive attitudes towards WWSP practitioners stated an understanding that children’s play is exploration of interests, learning and development:

"It’s part of their imaginary play, so they’re thinking for themselves and with different technical abilities that sort of thing."

Practitioner 4
4.4 Factors that influence practitioner attitudes towards WWSP

When considering factors that may influence practitioner attitudes the following data was compared with answers to question 14 that communicated practitioners’ current attitudes:

- The number of years the practitioner has worked in education.
- The practitioners’ level of educational qualifications.
- Practitioners’ personal childhood experience of WWSP.
- Practitioners’ personal childhood experience of children in their families engaging in WWSP.

This data showed no direct correlation between these factors and practitioner attitudes.

However when comparing practitioner attitudes against the key stage they worked within, KS1 practitioners held more negative attitudes towards WWSP as opposed to EYFS practitioners:
4.5 How practitioners respond to WWSP in practice

Patterns were identified in the practitioner attitudes and the way in which they respond to WWSP in their settings as illustrated below:

Practitioners who held negative attitudes towards WWSP stated they would discourage and redirect the play, were as practitioners with more positive attitudes were likely to observe the play only.
Response to WWSP was also influenced by the key stage practitioners worked within as illustrated in below:

![Graph 5 (Question 13) Response to WWSP]

Practitioners in KS1 stated they would discourage and redirect play whereas practitioners in the EYFS stated they would observe the play. When considering qualitative data regarding how practitioners respond the WWSP, practitioners who stated they would observe the play only gave additional details, stating they would intervene to redirect the play if it had lead to aggressive or unacceptable behaviour:

"if the play was getting violent, or if someone was getting emotionally hurt I would step in and maybe redirect the play."

Practitioner 4
4.6 Factors that influence practice: The setting policy

There was a clear divide of beliefs as to the existence of a policy that guided practice regarding WWSP:

The practitioners in KS1 believed there to be a no-tolerance policy regarding WWSP; however in the EYFS classrooms practitioners considered there to be no policy, or no details on the policy that covers this play.

Practitioners who stated they would discourage the play, who were all in the KS1 classroom, stated they would do so due to the school policy or to avoid injury:

"because this could end up with another child being hurt."

Practitioner 10
Practitioner beliefs as to the existence of a policy were a factor that influenced practitioner’s responses to WWSP:

**Graph 2 (Questions 8 and 13)**
Comparison of practitioners beliefs regarding setting policy and their response to WWSP play

Practitioners who believed there was a policy of zero tolerance were influenced by this policy and therefore discouraged play, practitioners who believed there was no policy observed play.

**4.7 Factors that influence practice: Practitioners understanding of children’s motivations towards WWSP**

When considering children’s motivations towards WWSP, data indicated children engage in WWSP as a re-enactment of media or experiences that they have been exposed to; practitioners acknowledged the influence of: world events; television; computer games; films; local and national news; and topics covered at school such as Pantomime or historical conflict:

“*Often children are only copying what they have watched on television*”

*Practitioner 8*
Additionally some practitioners noted the children are following their interests or they find it fun or exciting:

"Because this is of the child’s interests and we promote children’s interests”

Practitioner 4

"I think they think it’s older, then they think, wow this is great”

Practitioner 6

When considering cultural backgrounds, practitioners did not consider using WWSP as a vehicle to reflect children’s backgrounds:

"we wouldn’t set out to base a topic on the army because their parents were in the armed services or anything.”

Practitioner 4

When considering what affect discouraging WWSP has on the children the practitioners acknowledged the WWSP would continue without adult support or supervision:

"but on the playground, that game may continue... look as though they are chasing each other”

Practitioner 6
5.1 What are current practitioner attitudes towards WWSP?

The data suggests current attitudes towards WWSP are mixed: some practitioners held a zero-tolerance view, reflective of the socio-political view (Holland, 2005; Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006). Practitioners echoed concerns explored in the literature that believes this play is negative as it leads to accident injury or disruption in settings resulting in poorer learning experiences for children (Dunn and Hughes, 2001; Bauer and Dettore, 1997). The zero-tolerance ban was reflective of the view children could not make responsible decisions (Johnny, 2006); thus shaping the construction of these childhoods and communicating that childhood is viewed by the practitioners as a time when children require instruction and regulation (Sorin, 2005).

Opposing this view other practitioners felt this play was engaging for children and could be supportive to learning and development, communicating a value of using children’s interests in their learning (DCSF, 2007). The practitioners communicated a consummate understanding of the children’s cultural backgrounds and experiences and how this may influence their play; this reflected the viewpoint that children are exposed to war, weapons and violence in their daily media exposure and cultural experiences (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 1998; 2006; Holland, 2003; Bauer and Dettore, 1997). However practitioners did not echo literature that suggests children convert this exposure into their play in order to make sense of their experiences (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006; Smidt, 2011) Additionally practitioners did not acknowledge the needs of children to work through cultural or traumatic experiences or events using play as a therapeutic support (Rich, 2003; Hamblen 2008; Hyder 2005). Practitioners stated they would not use WWSP to reflect children’s cultural heritage or to actively value children’s interests and motivations through engaging or extending the WWSP to support learning and development as the research suggested (Holland, 2003; Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006; Paley, 1984; Daly and Perez, 2009; Logue and Detor, 2011)
Observations reflected concerns discussed that WWSP was mainly observed as the play of boys (Logue and Detor, 2011); however the data regarding practitioners’ home backgrounds suggested girls sometimes engage in this play at home. This data reflects concerns that WWSP was not inclusive to girls and without adult support could lead to gender stereotyping (Dyson, 1994; Marsh, 2000). As practitioners stated they would not support or engage in the play this may be a reality in this setting.

Data revealed some practitioners may see superhero and weapon play as two separate types of play; Sharon and Woolley (2004) suggested fantasy play could be a vehicle to help children determine fantasy from reality; however it appears that the fact that guns are part of real life influenced the attitudes of practitioners towards fantasy play with guns creating a blur between fantasy and reality. Practitioners acknowledged children were replicating exposure through fantasy play, yet felt the children were fully aware of the horrific reality their play would represent, if it were carried out in real life. Practitioners’ responses suggest fantasy is safe as it can never happen; however practitioners infer the likelihood of children coming across a gun could be a reality and the belief children are unable to make appropriate decisions if this occurred, lead to an outright ban of WWSP. This echoes the message that the concepts of childhood that adults hold influences practice (Sorin, 2006). Additionally the responses reflect the socio-political view that children will learn harmful messages if allowed to engage in WWSP (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006). Additionally, literature found that adults have incorrect perceptions of characters that are seemingly innocent but actually portray violence and aggression (Logue and Detour, 2011). This is reflected in the setting where they accept fantasy characters such as Ben10 (who as a character morphs into deadly weapons with no need for a gun). The inclusion of children’s interests in learning could be considered as result of government focus on supporting boys’ achievements (DCSF, 2007). The acceptance of fantasy but not reality enables practitioners to show an inclusion of children’s interests whilst abiding by the setting policy or ethos of zero-tolerance.
5.2 What factors influence practitioner attitudes to WWSP?

The belief in the existence of a whole school policy that banned WWSP appeared to influence the attitudes of practitioners. In the KS1 classroom their zero-tolerance was aligned with their belief the Behaviour Policy detailed gunplay was not allowed; the EYFS classroom believed the policy did not give specific guidance or were unsure as to the guidance given. In reality the Behaviour Policy for the school, which both classrooms must abide by, gives no mention to WWSP and therefore zero-tolerance is not a requirement. Therefore the policy of zero-tolerance in KS1 was governed by the unwritten ethos that is held in the school; this social construction of zero-tolerance is reflective of the settings researched by Holland (2003) who could find no paper trail to support anti-weapon play culture and practice.

The divide of key stage attitudes and practice may also be influenced by the different curriculum guidance that the practitioners follow. The EYFS classroom practices reflected the EYFS guidance that recommends valuing and including children’s interests creating a child focused ethos (DfE, 2012). The KS1 classroom is subject to a more focused ethos under the National Curriculum; Hurst (1997) acknowledges this challenge yet suggests the adult role is to mediate between children’s innate need to play and the social requirement of National Curriculum expectations.

5.3 How does current practice reflect the literature reviewed?

As discussed in both classrooms at times play can be redirected or discouraged: at all times in KS1 and only if play becomes aggressive or emotionally harmful in the EYFS. The inclusion of children’s interests reflected child centred ethos (Holland, 2003; DfE, 2012). The practitioners working within the EYFS classrooms had more positive attitudes towards the play and the practitioner could not recall any specifically negative experiences of WWSP. The practitioners working within to KS1 classrooms, acknowledged a zero-tolerance ban did not eliminate WWSP, had more negative attitudes towards WWSP and could recall more negative experiences of WWSP. This comparison suggests a zero-tolerance policy may be consistent with more negative
experiences and supporting WWSP may result in a more harmonious atmosphere (Paley, 1984); however the age of the children in the classrooms are different therefore this could be a developmental or maturity issue. Nevertheless this data is reflective of literature reviewed as overall practitioners acknowledged that when the play was discouraged or redirected it would continue without adult supervision or support; this suggests zero-tolerance practice is ineffective (Bauer and Dettore, 1997; Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987; Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006; Holland, 2003; Rich, 2003; Jones, 2001).

No practitioners stated they would encourage or extend WWSP; Rich (2003) suggests it is practitioner’s responsibility to support and extend war and weapon play in order to enable children to make sense of their social and cultural world. Furthermore the research explored suggested without adults enabling and supporting this play, children will develop understandings about this controversial subject without guidance which can be detrimental to their well being (Holland, 2005; Rich, 2003; Smidt 2011). Additionally dismissing children’s interests can detrimentally affect their self image and self esteem (Holland, 2005). Practitioners acknowledged WWSP is repetitive and the same children continually engage in this type of play even though it is discouraged; this is echoed the literature reviewed and further suggests adult support is required to move this imitation to meaningful learning (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987; Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006; Holland 2003).

Practitioners understanding of children’s motivation towards this play in part reflected the research, through acknowledgment of re-enactment of media and cultural exposure (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006; Bauer and Dettore, 1997). Opposing the research of Smidt (2011) who suggested some of children’s play is not for enjoyment, practitioners considered children’s motivations to be because this play is fun and exciting. Practitioners alluded to the opinion WWSP replicates the compulsion to shoot and kill; this is reflective of the notion that children are born evil, or with primitive thought (Sorin, 2006; Zhao, 2011) The data suggests children are considered to require control and instruction in order to make the right moral
decisions (Johnny, 2006); as opposed to the notion childhood as a period of participation and growth (Dewey, 1938). Practitioners did not acknowledge WWSP can be driven by children’s innate motivation to make sense of their world through play (Smidt, 2011; Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006); this could be considered an understanding that may be central to effectively supporting WWSP in practice.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to ascertain current practitioner attitudes towards WWSP and identify factors that influence attitudes and ultimately shape practice. The research methods collected data that gave insight into practitioner attitudes and established evidence to suggest factors such as setting ethos and setting policy influenced practice in these classrooms. Attitudes practitioners held towards WWSP were reflective of the literature explored; it is apparent WWSP continues to be an area of children’s interests and play. This is contentious and highly debated as my research identified a clear divide in opinion even though the classrooms were at the same setting and followed the same policies. Historical social unwritten rules continue to govern practice and shape children’s learning experiences. This suggests a need for the behaviour policy to be written to give clear guidance for dealing with WWSP; this guidance should take into account research that makes recommendations of how to support WWSP and ensure practice enables children to make sense of their exposure to violence, weapon and war culture that exists in our society through play and exploration. Practitioners must also recognise and acknowledge that a zero-tolerance policy regarding WWSP is ineffective, as play continues without the valuable adult support.

Practitioner’s held comprehensive understandings of the social issues that are relevant to the motivations of children engaging in WWSP such as gang culture, media exposure, home background and cultural experience. This understanding reflected the literature reviewed and illustrated the need for further research and development in this area as children’s exposure to violence, war and weapons is an ever increasing issue in our society. The research has provided evidence to suggest that in order to utilize this understanding, practice could be developed to ensure that play is valued as a tool to enable children to make sense of the society that, we, the adults expose them to.

Due to the setting’s structure, all participants in the research were female; perspectives from male practitioners would be required to gain a wider and deeper understanding of the subject. Participants did have
varied backgrounds, ages, experience and qualifications which went some way to ensure validity and rigour. When comparing practitioner attitudes to backgrounds and family experience the data gave little evidence to suggest these factors influenced practitioner attitudes or response towards WWSP; however, the small scale nature of this study suggests these results cannot be considered conclusive and further research into backgrounds and personal experience as a contributing factor would be required. Parental support and understanding the value of WWSP is essential for successful practice (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006). This study did not address the key subject of parental participation, therefore research into this issue is required. A deeper insight into WWSP would be achieved through research into children’s own perceptions which is also considered a subject for future research.

In summary, as this was a small scale project, to generalise the results to a wider population beyond the setting would be inappropriate (Burton et al, 2008); to fully understand the current attitudes of practitioners, wider, larger scale research with a more diverse participant selection would be required.

The research has highlighted the powerful existence of unspoken rules in settings that shape practice. Practice is also shaped by practitioners attitudes towards children and childhood; this practice then shapes childhood itself and children’s participation in childhood construction. This cycle appears to be centred around the notion young children are not capable of making appropriate decisions regarding WWSP; that they require instruction not support, direction not mediation. This notion was considered to be a historic perspective of childhood, which appears to be ever apparent in today’s society. The literature reviewed demonstrated children are in fact skilled mediators able to assimilate their behaviour in order to conform with social constructs; this is seen in practice as many children abide by zero-tolerance rules, or have skilfully adapted their play and behaviour to deceive adults into believing this to be true.

In practice, I will be mindful of unwritten rules and views of childhood that bind children into passivity and compliance. I will advocate and promote child centred practice that does not only include interests but
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is interested in children’s participation, co-construction and co-operation. I will consider the impact of our modern society and children’s historical cultural experiences that motivate them to replicate their exposure; I will endeavour to support children in their plight to make sense of the world through the powerful vehicle of play and ensure children’s learning and development is not stifled by obsessive or repetitive play. I will be mindful that not all practitioners hold the same views of childhood as I do, and be sensitive to this fact; I would aim to support their understanding with knowledge and positive experiences. As my views are so strong working in a setting with a zero-tolerance policy would prove to be challenging, however I would strive to maintain my own core beliefs whilst abiding by the setting’s rules in the hope that I may one day create change.
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