A consideration into the tensions of teaching literacy in reception year

Amy Hendry

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Amy Hendry
BA (Honours) Childhood and Youth

The author has a first class degree in Childhood and Youth Studies and is currently studying for a PGCE in Early Years teaching.
Abstract

This research study looks to explore an issue within the area of Childhood and Youth. Specifically, the study will focus on the tensions of teaching literacy to children in reception year, which is the first year of formal education in the United Kingdom. Within this the project, the goals set for literacy will be identify and discussions into how children are assessed will be made to ensure these goals are appropriate for all pupils.

To ascertain the data findings for this study, interviews surrounding this topic were carried out with the head teacher and a teaching assistant to a reception class within the chosen setting. To ensure a variety of findings, an observation of a literacy session was made to enhance knowledge on the subject.

Analysis and discussion of the findings made from the chosen research methods identified key themes that contribute to the tensions in teaching literacy in reception year. These include when the formalisation of education occurs, staff ideals and beliefs regarding how literacy should be taught and issues surrounding goals set and transition into Key Stage 1.
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1.0 Introduction

The chosen topic for this study, within the area of Childhood and Youth, is a consideration into the tensions of teaching literacy in reception year. This topic can be seen to be important as research consistently emphasises that the experiences of infancy have a significant impact on achievement and well-being seen as a child or adult (Tomlinson, 2013). With regards to the importance that literacy plays in early childhood, it can be perceived that effective language acquisition is essential for social, emotional and cognitive development and without this a child may not thrive (Basford and Hodson, 2009). The National Literacy Trust (2013) reflects that throughout all the changes in the curriculum, the improvement and development of literacy skills has always been vital to the curriculum and government policies.

The topic of literacy within reception year can be viewed as relevant to the Childhood and Youth degree as an appropriate curriculum for four to five year olds has been subject to debate for years (Walsh et al., 2007). It can also be seen that the importance of quality learning for young children that has been giving increasing recognition (Pugh and Duffy, 2010). This is apparent in the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfE, 2012).

Interest in this topic has stemmed during experiences of promoting literacy within school settings as a University Ambassador and through the progression of the Childhood and Youth degree, where placements and assessments promoted agency in choosing topics that were of interest to the individual.
This choice of topic is appropriate to the progression of the career choice of the researcher, as an Early Years teacher.

The study begins with a literature review of evidence and policies that contribute to the chosen topic (chapter 2). During this review, definitions of the key terms were identified, the background of the Early Years Foundation Stage was explored and issues such as the teaching and assessment of literacy, transition into Key Stage 1 and the importance of play are investigated as contributing factors to the tensions of literacy in reception year.

Once a review of the literature was completed, it was important to establish a research design and acknowledge the factors affecting this design within the methodology (chapter 3). This explored the appropriate research methods and discusses issues surrounding reliability, validity, bias and ethical considerations.

After the research took place the findings were established and analysed into categories to establish key themes. The themes of formalisation of education, staff ideals surrounding the teaching of literacy and goals and transition to Key Stage 1 will then be explored, relating to the literature review, in the discussion (chapter 4).

The main outcomes from the findings were then acknowledged within the conclusion, related to the key themes mentioned above, with recommendations for future studies and practices, such as studies into a wider variety of studies being identified.
2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

During this review evidence from existing research and policies will be evaluated to explore important issues surrounding the teaching of literacy in reception classes. When analysing this topic it is important to identify the framework used for education in this country and if and how this varies from other education frameworks. Once this is established, it is necessary to understand the importance of literacy within education for children in reception classes and the advantages and disadvantages surrounding how it is taught and assessed. Whilst exploring these topics, definitions of the key terms will be used in order to fully understand and support arguments presented.

To gain a better understanding of this project it is necessary to look closely at when formal education begins in the United Kingdom and how this impacts on children. It is therefore necessary to define what is meant by the formalisation of education. Yeboah (2002) views formal education in early childhood as learning that occurs in settings such as pre-schools or nurseries and informal education is that which takes place at home. Rogers and Rose (2007) however, view the formalisation of education as the first year in which a child enters primary education. This is also the definition that will be used for the purpose of this project.

However, the age in which formalisation of education happens can differ from country to country and even between the different education systems within these countries. The first year
that a child enters formal education in the United Kingdom is known as the reception year.

2.2 Background of Early Years Foundation Stage

The term curriculum can be hard to define. Pugh and Duffy (2010) express that more recent definitions of the term emphasize that it is much more than a body of knowledge that needs to be delivered to young people. They also argue that an early years curriculum needs to describe all experiences a child has in their setting. The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) support this idea by stated that the curriculum is used to ‘describe everything children do, see, hear or feel in their setting, both planned and unplanned’. Pugh and Duffy (2010) have noted that ‘in recent years all four countries of the United Kingdom have reviewed their curriculum frameworks for the youngest children’. In England, this has resulted in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfES, 2007). The EYFS brought together the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) and Birth to Three Matters (DfES, 2002). In 2002, the guidance for the Foundation Stage was made a statutory part of the curriculum to ensure it gave learning for our youngest children the same importance as older children. However, it did draw attention to the lack of continuity between this and Birth to Three Matters, emphasizing the differences between their principles and content (Pugh and Duffy, 2010).

Pugh and Duffy (2010) also acknowledged that there was an increasing recognition of the importance of quality learning for young children. The study of the effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE: Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004) highlighted this importance. The findings informed policies such as Every
Child Matters (DfES, 2004), Childcare Act (2006) and ‘Choice for Parents, The Best Start for Children, A Ten Year Strategy for Childcare’ (HMT, 2004), (Roberts-Holmes, 2011). This single quality framework for services from birth to five developed into the EYFS.

In comparison to other European countries, where children enter formal education at the age of six or seven, the United Kingdom’s policy of admitting children into school at the age of four or five, as part of the EYFS, can be seen as unusual (Rogers and Rose, 2007).

The infant-toddler centres and preschools in Reggio Emilia, northern Italy are an example of an education system that can be seen to differ from the EYFS and National Curriculum. The Reggio approach, first created in 1945, by primary school teacher Lori Malaguzzi, is based around six core values. These are relationships, creativity, environment, time, learning and teaching and reflective practice (Thornton and Brunton, 2007). It can be seen that the main differences identified in Thornton and Brunton (2007) relating to this project, are that in the Reggio approach the adults and children are seen as co-constructers of the curriculum. Teachers believe in building the curriculum framework around the individual needs of the children. Although the EYFS can be seen to actively encouraging spontaneous and independent learning through play (DfE, 2013), children are helped to make these connections mostly through adult-led activities in order to reach pre-determined goals (Thornton and Brunton, 2007).

The second key difference can be seen is the age and length of schooling. As mentioned previously, the EYFS sets out guidance for children from birth to five. The Reggio approach however
covers from birth to eight, after which children will start elementary school. It can be seen that the formalisation of education occurs later than that in the United Kingdom, leading us to question why this happens.

Martlew et al. (2011), argue that children in the United Kingdom are amongst the youngest around the world to start formal education. In addition to this they have to cope with a classroom environment which is teacher-led and in direct contrast to a nursery setting. Walsh et al. (2007) reflect that an appropriate curriculum for four to five year olds has been subject to debate for years, as theorists, practitioners and policy makers all have conflicting views. Rogers and Rose (2007) also suggest that there are only a few studies that focus on whether the length of schooling and age impact on overall school attainment. The fact that there are so many different models for early years education also supports these arguments.

2.3 ‘Readiness’ for school

This project aims to identify tensions within teaching literacy in a reception class and as discussed previously the age in which a child enters formal education is an important factor. A concept that links to this is school readiness.

However, defining ‘readiness’ for school can be difficult. Mashburn and Pianta (2010) argue that there are many ways in which school readiness can be defined, and each of these definitions lead to different ways in which this concept can be achieved. Murray and Harrison (2011) believe that the concept of readiness covers two overlapping areas. These areas are school readiness which relates to the cognitive and language skills required for a child to perform as a student, and also learning readiness which identifies a child’s ability to cope with
academic demands and participate and engage in the classroom. However, Mashburn and Pianta (2010) argue that these sorts of definitions do not identify ways in which children can learn the abilities required to be ready for school.

It is important throughout this project to be aware of the impact school readiness has on a child. Yeboah (2002) argues that readiness for school has a significantly positive effect on performance in the first few years of school. However, it can also be noted that the United Kingdom base entry to formal education on age rather than readiness, which can be seen as unusual because as previously mentioned, it is more common for children elsewhere to start school two years later (Rogers and Rose, 2007). It could therefore be questioned if children are too young to be part of formalised education at four or five.

2.4 Literacy

When evaluating the effectiveness of literacy in a reception classroom, it is essential to define its meaning. This however, can be difficult as it can be noted that ‘literacy is not a unitary construct’ (Vygotsky, 1978 in Riley, 2006). Raban-Brisby et al. (1995) define literacy in the most basic terms as the ability to read and write and to use written information appropriately in a range of contexts. This also includes the recognition of mathematical signs. Riley (2006) alternatively views literacy as a concept in education, that society expects increasing levels of. Huge emphasis is put on literacy as the marker of achievement in schools and is fundamental to success in formal education.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Handbook (DfE, 2013) defines literacy development as ‘encouraging children to read and write, both through listening to others reading and being encouraged to begin to read and write themselves.’ This definition will also be
the understanding for literacy in this project. The reasoning behind this is that reception classes currently follow the Early Years Foundation Stage and therefore this definition should be their marker for achievement in literacy.

The government can be seen to be actively promoting and committed to improving literacy skills (DfE, 2012). The National Literacy Trust (2013) can be seen to support this. They reflect that throughout all the changes in the curriculum, the improvement and development of literacy skills has always been vital to a child’s future life chances and that without them full participation within the workforce, as an adult is difficult. The introduction of the National Strategies for Literacy (DfEE, 1998) marked a change in the way children would experience literacy. Its purpose, to raise levels of performance meant that children spent a lot more time taking part in adult-led activities, as lessons were expected to meet intended learning outcomes (Fisher, 2010). An example of this is the ‘Literacy Hour’, a central feature of the National Strategies, where in which a class spends one hour of dedicated time to literacy every day (Hancock, 2002).

Alongside the focus on improving literacy within the classroom, the Department for Education (2012) also lays great emphasis on young people reading for pleasure. An article from the Department for Education (2012) sources evidence from The National Literacy Trust indicating a decline in the amount of time young people read for pleasure. The article also argues its importance, as children who read for pleasure often perform better in reading skills tests. Research from the Department for Education (2012) suggests that reading at home has a positive impact on not only text comprehension, but also emotional and social behaviour (DfE, 2012).
Although the government can be seen to promote reading for pleasure, Lockwood (2008) emphasizes that reading for pleasure has not always been seen as important, during the seventeenth and eighteen centuries, it was regarded as a waste of children’s time. Evidence from an OFSTED report (2009) also shows that reading at home is not a common activity as there is not enough endorsement for it. Linking the idea of wider reading to this project, it can be noted that there is a strong link between enjoyment of reading within a classroom environment and enthusiasm for reading at home (Capper, 2011). Capper (2011) also argues that when children are able to develop their confidence and ability in literacy at school, this can then encourage them to participate and engage in their own wider reading.

2.5 Assessment in the Early Years Foundation Stage

When looking at whether children in a reception class are achieving the goals set to them for literacy, it is important to understand how they are assessed and the advantages and disadvantages surrounding this assessment.

Firstly it is necessary to identify the definition of assessment for this investigation. Pugh and Duffy (2010) note that the word ‘assessment’ can have different meanings in different contexts. Nutbrown (2006) has identified that the purpose for assessment in teaching and learning involves ‘identifying the details of children’s knowledge, skills and understanding in order to build a detailed picture of their individual development and subsequent learning needs’. Pugh and Duffy (2010) also suggest that whatever the national policy entails, assessment will always be about the adult’s views on children. It is important to consider if
this is always in the best interest for young children and their achievement in school.

For the EYFS it can be seen that assessment is defined and used within the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (DfE, 2013). This profile details assessment in all areas of young children’s learning to ascertain if they have met goals set by the EYFS and is conducted completely by adults (Bradbury, 2010). It is essential in this project to be aware of assessment in the EYFS, as this is what the setting used for this study will use to identify achievement amongst reception children. Therefore, it is also important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of assessing young children.

The assessment carried out in the EYFS is said to go through a cycle of observation, assessment and planning. It can be seen that the EYFS profile allowed for a more flexible approach to assessment of children through observation (Pugh and Duffy, 2010). The Children’s Plan (DfES, 2007) also supports this idea arguing that children’s needs should be central to their learning and that they should be allowed to develop at their own pace. These ideas directly correlate with those of the EYFS Handbook (DfE, 2013) who state that it is important practitioners note learning that happens spontaneously and must judge whether children are meeting the ‘Early Learning Goals’ set out in the EYFS. It also lays great emphasis on the idea that the government does not prescribe how ongoing assessment should be undertaken, suggesting that the EYFS allows for greater freedom than previous policies (Pugh and Duffy, 2010).

However, disadvantages to assessment in the EYFS can also be identified. The EYFS profile, a summative assessment of learning that has taken place by the end of the EYFS (end of reception...
year) has shown to be too formal and similar to the assessments made in Key Stage 1, part of the National Curriculum, used for children in the year group after reception (Pugh and Duffy, 2010). Examples of this can be seen in the goals set in the profile around literacy. They state that by the end of EYFS, children should be able to read, write and understand simple sentences, using phonic knowledge. It could be argued that these goals are too structures and do not allow for children to explore and learn at their own pace.

Additionally Pugh and Duffy (2010) identify that because local authorities are able to access outcomes in the children’s EYFS profile, there is a potential for ‘league tables’ as in the National Curriculum, meaning young children may be lost in statistics that promote the idea of ‘raising standards’. Evidence in a report from Fisher (2009) found that although most children are expected to meet the ‘Early Learning Goals’ set by the EYFS, data shown that consistently around 90% of children move into year 1 without having achieved all of the goals. This evidence asks questions about the formality and necessity of assessment in the EYFS and also supports the idea that statistics will be used to promote ‘raising standards’.

These arguments suggest that assessment for literacy, in a reception class should be based around observations made by practitioners, who would then plan for appropriate activities to progress each child’s learning in this area. However, it has also been suggested that in some instances this is not the case and assessment of literacy in a reception class is too similar to that of Key Stage 1. This links closely to the argument between the importance of learning that is based around play and that which is increasingly adult-led.
2.6 Play within the Early Years Foundation Stage

Leading on from looking at how children in reception classes are assessed, it is necessary to investigate if ‘play’ is as central to children’s learning as the EYFS claims. As noted previously the EYFS bases learning for children in reception class as being play based stating that ‘Play underpins all development and learning for young children…and it is through play that they develop intellectually, creatively, physically, socially and emotionally’ (DfES, 2007).

When looking at the concept of ‘play’ in its own right, Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) argue that because ‘play’ has a different meaning for each individual, it is increasingly difficult to define. They view play however as something that is a natural component of children’s everyday lives, it is something that they like to do best, which is initiated by them. Education therefore can be seen as a juxtaposition to play, because on the whole it is created to promote learning rather than play.

Although the EYFS emphasises the importance of play in every aspect of learning for young children, other factors can be seen to have an impact of a child’s experience of a reception class. As mentioned previously, assessment in the EYFS can be seen as too formal (Pugh and Duffy, 2010). Robert-Holmes (2011) has noted that spontaneous and child-led play that is encouraged by the EYFS may be seen as unnecessary in terms of the agendas of practitioners. This is because it can be seen to sit awkwardly with the regulations of the EYFS framework. It was also argued that the EYFS has become increasingly subservient to the needs of compulsory education and that although it is not part of the national curriculum, reception classes can feel the impact of national assessments. Pugh (2010) supports this idea stating
that ‘there are continuing concerns that the downwards pressure of Key Stage 1 into reception classes... is creating a less than ideal situation for many four-year-olds’. Rogers and Rose (2007) also provides evidence that shows that the practice in reception classes often resembles that of key stage 1 rather than foundation stage emphasizing that ‘play’ may not be as central to reception class children’s learning and experiences.

2.7 Conclusion

The evidence throughout this literature review can be seen to suggest that there are tensions within the way literacy is taught to reception class children. It can be argued that it is difficult to identify the most efficient way to teach children of reception age as there are many different models around the world to do this. It should be noted that the age in which children start formal schooling is of great importance, as this can affect overall attainment at school and also the ‘readiness’ of children to start learning. With regards to the Early Years Foundation Stage, it can be seen that the government promote play- based, child-led learning, however evidence provided shows that pressures from the National Curriculum mean that practices and assessment within reception classes are much more adult-led and that goals for literacy are perhaps too formal for children of this age.

It is therefore important in this project to identify how the provision within this research interprets the guidelines set to them by the EYFS for literacy and if their practices and assessments are too formal and influenced by key stage 1. It is also necessary to identify if the views and ideals held by the head teacher for literacy in reception classes is the same for the rest of the teaching body, including teaching assistants. Lastly, it
is important to see if children are able to meet the goals set to them for literacy enabling them to be ready for the next stages of learning.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Context of setting

The setting at the focus of this project is a primary academy in the centre of a large town. The academy caters for over 300 children between the ages of 3 and 11. There is a diverse range of ethnicities within the school, with a lot of the children having English as an additional language.

3.2 Outline of research and paradigm

The term paradigm derives from the work of Thomas Kuhn (1970) and can be defined as a particular way of viewing the world (Arthur et al., 2012). Burton and Bartlett (2009) further this definition by arguing that within each paradigm, there are research methods that are viewed as more appropriate for gathering data. It can be seen that in education research the notion of different research paradigms can be seen as vital when trying to ascertain what the researcher is aiming to achieve and how they are setting out to achieve this (Taber, 2007).

It can be viewed that education research is often divided into two paradigms; the positivist and interpretivist (Burton and Bartlett, 2009). The positivist paradigm is based around a scientific approach, using experiments to prove or disprove assumptions made by the researcher, using statistical or quantitative evidence (Burton and Bartlett, 2009). The interpretivist paradigm uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to
explain what is happening in an educational setting through the perspectives of those involved, for example, teachers or pupils (Burton and Bartlett, 2009). The interpretivist paradigm would look to use qualitative data such as insights into how an individual interprets the situation or world they find themselves in (Opie, 2004).

This research project can be seen to sit within an interpretivist paradigm. From the evidence sourced in the literature review, it can be seen that assumptions about the way literacy is taught in a reception class cannot be made and it is more effective for this research to focus on the natural setting of a school.

Important themes brought up by the literature review were how the setting interprets the guidelines set by the Early Years Foundation Stage, if the views and ideals of senior staff about the way literacy should be taught are the same as those of teaching assistants and if children in reception classes are meeting the goals set for them in literacy. Therefore it is essential to research the perceptions of the participants for literacy and to observe literacy sessions as opposed to using statistics to mark the achievement of literacy (Burton and Bartlett, 2009). This chosen paradigm therefore leads to the types of methods necessary to conduct effective research for this project.

3.3 Methods

As previously mentioned, the chosen paradigm for this research lends itself towards the approach of acquiring qualitative data. However, Bell (2010) comments that it is important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of chosen approaches to identify the appropriate methods to answer the research aims.
In order to answer the research aims mentioned above, it can be seen as appropriate to carry out structured interviews (see appendix B). Denscombe (2007) comments that interviews are a suitable method of research to gain insights into the participant’s ‘opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences’ (p. 174). An interview can be seen as a more appropriate method than a questionnaire in this instance, as although questionnaires can be seen as time and cost effective, they are more suited to collecting simple facts, whereas interviews allow for an in-depth look at the subject matter (Denscombe, 2007). Furthermore to this, even though a structured interview provides set questions, an interviewer can follow up any unexpected answers or ideas and investigate the participant’s feelings, this however cannot be said of questionnaires, as their answers have to be taken at face value (Bell, 2010).

Disadvantages of an interview are apparent however, as they can be viewed as time-consuming, both to carry out and to analyse the data once completed (Denscombe, 2007). This disadvantage can be overcome due to the sampling for this method being relatively small. Interviews were only planned to be carried out with a head teacher and two teaching assistants. However, after an explanation of the study, one of the teaching assistants decided not to take part in the study as they did not enjoy the interview process. It was important to anticipate this as emphasis was made to the participant that they have the ability to withdraw from the project even though they had initially consented to the study (Burton and Bartlett, 2009). After a discussion with the dissertation supervisor it was decided that an interview with one teaching assistant would be adequate for this study.
As well as the use of structured interviews, further methods were used in order to provide a greater depth of results. Unstructured, naturalistic observations of a literacy session in reception class were carried out in order to establish how the setting interprets the guidelines set out by the Early Years Foundation Stage. These types of observations were used because although the purpose of the observation is clear, the details that were obtained by the observations are not and this allows for themes to emerge when analysing the data (Bell, 2010). This type of observation has advantages over structured observation as they allow a focus or theme of the research to emerge as opposed to already having a hypothesis or objective formulated (Bell, 2010). Newby (2010) comments that observation allows for a holistic viewpoint of a situation, meaning that although interviews with staff would suggest how literacy is taught in reception classes, a full picture of literacy cannot be established without first-hand experience of these literacy sessions. Denscombe (2007) identifies access and naturalness of the setting as a weakness when using observations in a research project. This is due to staff being concerned about what observations the researcher will pick up on and therefore behaving in a different way. Denscombe (2007) argues that it is important therefore, for the researcher to cause as little disturbance to the setting as possible.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

When looking at the reliability of chosen research methods, it is important to define what is meant by reliability. Bell (2010) views reliability as the extent to which the research methods would produce similar results on all occasions. Cohen et al. (2011) argue that reliability can be a difficult concept when producing qualitative data as the idea of a naturalistic study, that
produces unique and in-depth findings, is hard to replicate and that this should be seen as a strength not a weakness. However, reliability in qualitative studies does need to be addressed through suitability of methods chosen and accurate accounts from participants (Burton and Bartlett, 2009). For this research project, it is likely that the results acquired from this setting would probably differ if gathered in a different setting, therefore it is necessary to ensure that the data that is recorded is a realistic in-depth representation of what actually happens in the setting (Cohen et al., 2011).

Bell (2010) defines validity in terms of how the design of the research is produced to provide credible conclusions. Winter (2000) in Cohen et al. (2011) comments that with regards to qualitative data, validity can be ‘addressed through honest, depth, richness and scope of data achieved, the participants approached and the extent of triangulation’ (pg. 179). When looking at the validity of the research methods chosen for this project, it is important to establish if information acquired is of a factual nature and to corroborate data with other sources (Denscombe, 2007). This can be achieved through triangulation, which is viewed as using mixed methods to answer the research aims. Denscombe (2007) emphasises that the key to triangulation is to use different approaches to allow the researcher to see things from as many perspectives as possible and gain a better knowledge of the subject. Triangulation can be viewed as an effective way of demonstrating validity (Cohen et al., 2011).

3.5 Bias

When carrying out research it is vital to be aware of the effect bias and individual perceptions can have on a research project.
Newby (2010) defines bias as a process that generates data that is not representative and can occur through faults in sampling, mistakes in data collection or misinterpretation of data. An issue of bias that can affect the project is the perception of the researcher in observations. Denscombe (2007) comments that different factors such as competence of researcher, powers of observation and commitment of individual can have an effect on observational data produced. Cohen et al. (2011) also argue that what a researcher records from the observation can be selective, this can be both intentional and unintentional. In order to overcome these issues, it is important to write-up results from observations straight away. Also, for this research project, having a child in reception class could affect the perceptions and judgements of the researcher. Cohen et al. (2011) suggests that the researcher should ensure they distance themselves from the research and not make personal judgements.

3.6 Ethics

During the process of research it is essential to be aware of the ethical concerns affecting your project. Cohen et al. (2011) argues that an ethical concern is something that requires the researcher to strike a compromise between the demands for finding the truth within the project and the rights and values of its participants. With regards to this project, several ethical concerns can be seen to be evident. It is important to consider these concerns and explain ways to overcome them and ensure the project is ethical.

The first concern when approaching a setting to conduct research is to establish informed voluntary consent. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011) in Article 10 of their ‘Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research’ state that this
is when ‘participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress’. To ensure this, meetings with the head of the institution will take place to ascertain consent. These meetings will also allow for an explanation of what the research entails and the aims it wishes to achieve. This importance of doing this is reflected in both the University of Northampton’s Ethics Codes and Procedures and Article 11 of the BERA guidelines, stating that participants should ‘understand the process in which they are engaged, including why their participation is necessary and how it will be used’. An Ethics Approval Form and Consent Letter can be found in Appendix A.

Whilst explaining the process to the participant, it is also important to explain what will happen with the research gathered once the project has been completed. Article 25 of the BERA guidelines emphasises the importance of participant’s anonymity throughout the research project. Following on from this, Article 26 states that participants should be made aware of how personal data will be stored and who it will be made available to. This is something that will also need to be discussed prior to research taking place.

Another ethical concern raised was to ensure that participants were aware that they were able to withdraw from the research process at any stage. Article 15 of the BERA guidelines note that it is ethical to recognise the right of the participant to do this and ensure them of this right. With regards to this project, all participants were made aware of their right to withdraw before research took place.

3.7 Conclusion

Once the data findings have been collected, the data acquired from each research method will be closely analysed and coded
into categories. These categories will then be developed into the main themes of the data findings (Seale, 2012), which will then be explored within the analysis and discussion.

4.0 Data Findings, Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This research project looks to consider the tensions of teaching literacy within the Reception year and within this whether the goals set for achievement are appropriate for all of its pupils.

The methods used in this project to collect data; interviews and an observation of a literacy session were used to answer the research aims found in the literature review. To recap, these aims were how the setting interpreted the guidelines set to them in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) with regards to literacy, are the views and ideals held by the head teacher reflected in those of the teaching assistants and are children able to meet goals set to them so they are ready for key stage 1.

This chapter looks to analyse the findings made using these methods and then provides an in-depth discussion of the findings in relation to the themes established in the findings.

4.2 Findings

In order to make sense of the findings collected, data from each research method was established into the formation of categories. Small amounts of data from these categories were constantly compared to ensure that the interpretations made remained grounded in the data (Seale, 2012). Seale (2012) notes that once categories are established it is important to develop them into themes. The themes could be found from one
The themes developed from this process for this study are:

- Formalisation of education
- Staff ideals surrounding the teaching of literacy
- Goals and transitions into Key Stage 1

These themes can be seen to link with one another, providing a holistic view of literacy in reception classes in this setting. Denscombe (2007) notes that this is typical of a qualitative study which looks to view findings in context, with emphasis on issues being related and interdependent as opposed to being isolated from each other.

The full transcripts of the interviews can be found in Appendix B and the findings, including the classroom layout, of the observation can be found in Appendix B.

4.3 Discussion and Analysis

From the findings, key themes have been recognised and it can be seen as essential to examine and explore these themes in turn, linking them to theories and issues that were established in the literature review (chapter 2), providing a context to which the research was conceived (Denscombe, 2007). It can be equally important to acknowledge and examine findings that were not expected or bought about by the literature review.

4.4 Formalisation of education

The first theme highlighted from the research methods were the issues surrounding the formalisation of education, specifically literacy. Data collected from the interviews and observation
showed that participants believed children required formal education of literacy, but that they were not always ready for this. The head teacher (HT) noted that ‘I don’t think many of our children are ready for that (formal schooling) unless they have had lots of nursery experience and lots of home support’. This directly relates to research found in the literature review suggesting that there are conflicting views of the appropriate age in which children should begin formalised education and that this has been in debate for a long time (Walsh et al., 2007). Evidence from the HT further supports this conflict, due to a large number of children with English as an additional language being part of the setting’s intake. When talking about these children, the HT commented that ‘it is a completely alien concept for them even coming in and being in school’. This could suggest that schools that have fewer children with English as an additional language might be better prepared for schooling and this is something that could be taken into consideration.

It can be seen that in the United Kingdom entry to formal education is based on age rather than readiness (Roger and Rose, 2007). The findings therefore suggest that this is perhaps not the most effective way to decide when children should begin education, as children in this setting are not all ready for what the school experience entails. The HT acknowledged this when commenting that ‘our children come in so low that we have to do an incredible amount of work until we have caught them up and even be at age-related expectations’. This may be apparent due to the fact that children in the United Kingdom start formalised education two years earlier than in comparison to other countries (Rogers and Rose, 2007). In some cases, such as the infant-toddler centres in Reggio Emilia, formalised education does not begin until eight years old (Thornton and Brunton, 2007).
This relates to the concept of ‘readiness’ for school, which is a key theme within the literature review. Murray and Harrison (2011) defined readiness as covering two overlapping areas. These areas are school ‘readiness’ which relates to the cognitive and language skills required for a child to perform as a student, and also learning readiness which identifies a child’s ability to cope with academic demands and participate and engage in the classroom. It can be viewed as essential for a child to be ready for schooling as Yeboah (2002), argues that readiness for school has a significantly positive effect on performance in the first few years of schooling. This is reflected in the views of the HT who stated that ‘with just the small amount of data you get in reception, you start to plan their school life and what interventions might be necessary’. This highlights the importance of children being reading for education and that this has an effect on the rest of their school career.

Although the formalisation of education can be related to the importance of ‘readiness’ for school and when children actually begin education, the HT also highlighted the formalisation of education in regards to how formally children are taught within a classroom setting. When being asked if they thought children in reception year are ready for formal schooling, it was said that ‘if you mean sitting down at tables then no, I don’t think many of our children are ready for that’. This is also reflected in the observation as the session was carried out on the rug as opposed to tables and chairs and was taught in manageable segments, involving games and play. The Department for Education and Skills (2007) makes emphasis about the importance play has and that it underpins all learning for children allowing them to develop ‘intellectually, creatively, physically, socially and emotionally’. Evidence from the findings promotes the concept of
play when learning literacy and this is explored further in the next theme.

4.5 Staff ideals surrounding the teaching of literacy

It is highlighted throughout the data collected, that the staff share ideals and beliefs about the importance of literacy and how this should be taught in reception year. Both the HT and teaching assistant (TA), when asked about the importance of literacy in reception classes, stated that ‘it is key’, with the TA also adding that reception class ‘is where the key learning starts’. This notion of literacy correlates with evidence from the literature, which argues that literacy, as a concept in education, is something society expects increasing levels of. Huge emphasis is put on literacy as the marker of achievement in schools and is fundamental to success in formal education (Riley, 2006). It is also important however, to establish which elements of literacy the setting believe to be most important in the development of children in reception classes.

Both the HT and TA, emphasised the importance of children learning to speak correctly in order to then be able to read and write. The HT commented that ‘speaking and listening, that’s first and foremost... unless children can speak, they can’t read and they can’t write’. This can be seen as vital when there are a lot of children with English as an additional language. The TA also referred to the importance of ‘modelling’ language to not only these children, but all the children in reception year. They commented that ‘we need to model language for them (children with English as an additional language), children with speech and language problems, all children really need to have sentences
modelled for them’. This ‘modelling’ of language was also observed in the literacy session, where the teacher would model appropriate sentences when children were answering questions. This concept however, can be viewed as dissimilar to the definition of literacy in The EYFS Handbook (DfE, 2013) which defines literacy development as ‘encouraging children to read and write, both through listening to others reading and being encouraged to begin to read and write themselves’. This definition seems to focus more on the importance of reading and writing, therefore the evidence could suggest that speaking and listening should have an increased focus, especially for schools with children from diverse ethnicities. This view of teaching literacy however could be different for schools where English was the first language of most of its pupils.

Another key issue within this theme, and mentioned previously, was the importance of play when learning literacy. Both HT and TA mentioned that play was essential in learning literacy with the HT commenting that ‘play is just how to do everything... it might not always be called play, but practically and physically doing things is playing at learning something and that is a whole school ethos I would say’. The TA also supported this ethos by commenting that play ‘is very important, children cannot always sit down to learn, they need to use their energy, which the school provides’. It can be seen that the EYFS actively encourage spontaneous and independent learning through play (DfE, 2013) and that this corresponds to the ideals held by staff. However, these ideals may not always be apparent in daily practice of literacy.

Evidence from the HT suggested that play and child-directed learning often occurred after knowledge and adult-directed activities and this was when observations of children were made
to ensure knowledge had been embedded. This is supported within the observation, as although games were used within the session, it was very much an adult-led session and did not allow for spontaneous child-directed activities. This way of teaching literacy seems to contradict the ideals of the EYFS which promotes that teaching for literacy in a reception class should be based around observations made by practitioners, who would then plan for appropriate activities to progress each child’s learning in this area (DfE, 2013). Conversely, it is appropriate to acknowledge that even though the EYFS promotes this ideal, the EYFS profile (DfE, 2013) goals for literacy can be seen to be quite formal suggesting that by the end of reception year children should be able to read, write and understand simple sentences, using phonic knowledge. It could be argued that because goals set can be viewed as too formal that this in turn is reflected in the practices of the setting. This research could be developed by investigating if this is apparent in other settings.

An issue that was not raised directly through the literature review but was made apparent by the HT and TA was the use of intervention when teaching literacy in reception classes. The data collected showed that each year the capabilities of the children that come into reception get lower and there is such a variety in the abilities of each child. The HT commented that to overcome this issue, targeted support and intervention is used. They noted ‘We run lots of nurture groups, lots of guided groups, some target time, where three children might get 15 minutes with the teacher getting high quality intervention help’. It can be seen that it was mostly the role of the TA to carry out the interventions throughout the day. The TA commented that ‘we have interventions throughout the whole school with groups of children or single children... I do handwriting skills first thing...
and nurture groups, this is for children that need extra encouragement’. The observation backed-up these findings as a group of lower-ability children were working with the TA during the session, receiving targeted support. The Children’s Plan (DfES, 2007) also supports ideas like intervention for small targeted groups arguing that children’s needs should be central to their learning, allowing them to develop at their own pace. It therefore can be viewed that intervention allows these children to develop at their own pace, which is important as certain children may not be able to meet their full potential within a large group and do not appear able to take advantage of the benefits available within whole class circle time (Nash et al., 2011).

4.6 Goals and transition into key stage 1

It can be seen that goals set for children in reception year are strongly linked to assessment, as seen in the EYFS Profile (DfE, 2013). The profile details assessment in all areas of young children’s learning to ascertain if they have met goals set by the EYFS. Issues surrounding the assessment of children within the EYFS can be seen as having great importance, with emphasis being put on a more flexible approach to assessment of children through observation, assessment and planning (Pugh and Duffy, 2010). It can be seen from the data collected in the interview with the HT that the goals set to reception children for literacy relate to the EYFS Profile. ‘We would want children to be expecting or exceeding in the prime and specific areas of learning... ideally every child would leave at age-related expectation and the majority would leave at exceeding’. These are terms used with the assessment guidelines of the EYFS profile.
It can also be perceived that within the EYFS schools are able to be more flexible in how they assess their pupils in comparison to previous policies (Pugh and Duffy, 2010). This can be seen when the HT explains the methods used to assess children. They commented that,

‘if we were to sit with a child and do one on one, it is very much adult-led... then there is child-focused activities, where there might be an adult, but it is mainly the child that is doing it. Then you have your wholly independent activities and that’s where we do formal observations to see if they have learnt what has been taught in the adult-led activities’.

Although it can be seen that the HT has agency over the assessment of reception children, it could be argued that this assessment is too formal as it focuses on adults creating opportunities to observe children. This contradicts the values of the EYFS Handbook (DfE, 2013) which states that it is important practitioners note learning that happens spontaneously. Evidence from the literature review also suggests that whatever the national policy entails, assessment will always be about the adult’s views on children (Pugh and Duffy, 2010). This is reflected within this setting during interviews and the observation, as the staff can be seen to be focused on setting requirements for the children and assessing to see if the pupils have met their expectations. However, the small scale nature of this study means that ideal amount of thorough observations were not carried out and that further observations may uncover different findings.

It may also be identified that teaching and assessment of reception year for literacy may be too formal and not always appropriate for all children because of the pressure put on teachers to get their pupils ready for Key Stage 1. Robert-Holmes (2011) argued that the EYFS has become increasingly
subservient to the needs of compulsory education. Pugh and Duffy (2011) supports this concept commenting that many reception classes are feeling the pressures of Key Stage 1 and this is creating less than ideal situations for four and five year olds. Evidence from the HT appears to contradict these expectations as they emphasised that due to the low capabilities of the children entering reception, Key Stage 1 classrooms often resembled some of the practices of reception classes in order to cater for children who were not prepared and allowed them to slowly adjust to life in Key Stage 1.

However, evidence from the interview with the TA suggested that ‘there is a big jump sometimes from reception to year 1’. They also commented that getting children prepared for year 1 is something that they had to think about a lot. This appears to contradict evidence from the HT and relates more to the evidence in the literature review. This issue therefore, raises questions about why there are differences in the staff views around the transition from reception to Key Stage 1 and would require further investigation which could not be completed in this study.

4.7 Evaluation and Reflection

It is important when discussing and analysing the findings to reflect and evaluate on the strengths and limitations of the way the study was carried out. This needs to be done in order to develop as a researcher and establish more improved methods if the research were to be carried out again.

As emphasised in the methodology (chapter 3), reliability can be a difficult concept when producing qualitative data due to the small scale nature of the study. The aims of the research methods were to provide a naturalistic study that would produce
unique and in-depth findings relevant to that setting. Therefore, the research would be hard to replicate exactly. However, this could be seen as a strength not a weakness (Cohen et al., 2011). The design of the study looked to create reliability suitability of methods chosen and accurate accounts from participants (Burton and Bartlett, 2009).

With regards to the validity of a qualitative study, it can be seen that this project can provide honest and in-depth scope of data from appropriate participants and the use of triangulation (Cohen et al., 2011).

An area of the research design that put limitations on the study was the issue of bias. Due to the researcher having a child in reception year, it was important to neutralise and step away from any pre-conceived notions regarding the subject matter. An attempt to overcome this limitation was to carry out the research at an academy in a large town rather than a school on an estate (Cohen et al., 2011).

Another limitation in the area of bias was the interpretation of the findings, specifically in the observation. Cohen et al. (2011) comment that the researcher’s records can be unintentionally selective and it is possible for the researcher to have a tendency to see what they want to see and this can have an effect on the findings (Newby, 2010). This limitation can be overcome through respondent validation which seeks to check findings with the participants and is another source of validity (Denscombe, 2007).

After completion of the data findings, it could be seen that a limitation of the research design was the sampling of the observation and interviews. In an ideal situation an increased amount of observations would be carried out and it would also
have been advantageous to interview the second teaching assistant, as originally planned in the research design. This would have allowed further exploration of the exclusive distinctiveness of the setting, relevant to qualitative studies and provide a more in-depth view of literacy within the setting (Cohen et al., 2011).

Due to the nature of this small-scale study, the results of the data findings cannot be generalised are not representative of all schools. Cohen et al. (2011) argues that it is unnecessary in qualitative research to do this as it looks to explore the particular setting and if in the process of the research, other settings finds the issues raised apply to them, this is an unexpected advantage.

This discussion and evaluation of the key themes bought about by the data findings has established the key tensions in teaching literacy to the reception classes in this setting, acknowledging issues such as the effect formalisation of education has on these children, the staff ideals and views surrounding literacy and how goal setting and assessments are used to help with the transition to Key Stage 1. The conclusion chapter will look to determine the main outcomes of this research and provide recommendations to further the research.
5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Walsh et al. (2007) reflect that an appropriate curriculum for four to five year olds has been subject to debate for years, as theorists, practitioners and policy makers all have conflicting views. Pugh and Duffy (2010) have also commented that there has been increasing recognition in recent years, of the importance of quality learning in early childhood education leading to the formation of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2013). These issues have been contributing factors in conducting this research project.

The purpose of this study looks to establish and explore the tensions surrounding the teaching of literacy to children in reception year and the outcomes of the data findings can be seen to reflect this.

The outcomes of the first theme identified, the formalisation of education, showed that participants believed that reception children needed to be taught in a formal environment at that age, but also stated that a lot of the children were not ‘ready’ for formal schooling. This was seen to be mostly due to these children having English as an additional language or children not having the skills necessary to perform as a student, due to their age (Murray and Harrison, 2011). Evidence from the literature review suggested that this was due to the fact that children in the United Kingdom started formalised education two years earlier than in comparison to other countries (Rogers and Rose, 2007). This leads us to question that entry to formal education should be based more on a child’s ‘readiness’ for schooling and
not simple their age. These outcomes also lead us to question if these findings would be the same in a school where there were fewer children with English as an additional language.

The theme of staff ideals surrounding the teaching of literacy identified that the setting believed that literacy is of great importance in a reception class. This was correlated by evidence in the literature review which suggested that huge emphasis is put on literacy as the marker of achievement in schools and is fundamental to success in formal education (Riley, 2006). However it was established that the setting’s main focus of modelling language to its children, did not entirely reflect the main ethos of the EYFS Handbook which focused more on the importance of reading and writing (DfE, 2013). These findings suggest that speaking should have an increased focus in the EYFS for reception year. However, it is important to question if these results would apply for different settings.

Another key issue within this theme is the importance of play when learning literacy. The findings suggested that staff in the setting believed that play was incredibly important in all aspects of learning and this is reiterated in the EYFS who actively encourage spontaneous and independent learning through play (DfE, 2013). However, the findings of the observation, showed that although the literacy session contained elements of play, it was very much an adult-led session and did not allow for any child-directed spontaneous play. Goals in the EYFS profile also suggested that it was necessary for literacy sessions to be more formal in order for children to reach goals set. Therefore the findings show that the goals set for literacy may be too formal and do not allow for practitioners to base sessions around child-directed activities.
This links to the findings from the theme goals and transition in Key Stage 1. Findings from the interview with the head teacher found that although they had more agency over how to assess children for literacy for reception year, this was sometimes too formal, in relation to the guidelines in the EYFS Handbook (DfE, 2013) which states that it is important practitioners note learning that happens spontaneously. This suggested that the setting were looking for children to meet expectations set to them by adults and that their learning should not have such strict expectations.

Another issue bought about by the findings was the pressures of preparing children for Key Stage 1. Evidence from the head teacher emphasised that due to the low capabilities of the students, practices from reception were used in Key Stage 1. However, evidence from the literature review and the teaching assistant claimed that many reception classes are feeling the pressures of Key Stage 1 and to get reception children prepared for Key Stage 1 (Pugh and Duffy, 2011). This demonstrates that preparing children for Key Stage 1 could have a negative effect on the learning of literacy in reception and does not allow children to learn at their own pace. It is therefore important to question if this is evident in other settings.

5.2 Recommendations

Following the exploration of the findings in the discussion and conclusion, recommendations will be made to identify what other studies may be useful for future research, implications the results may have on existing practices and recommendations for future practice.
The initial recommendation from this research project would be to carry out this research design in varying settings, for example as the setting used for the project was a large school in a town, it would be useful to ascertain findings from a small village school or a school within a city. This would improve validity due to the broader extent of findings which allow for more credible conclusions (Bell, 2010).

Looking into this recommendation in more detail, it was identified within the discussion that one of the reasons that a lot of reception pupils were not ‘ready’ for formal education was due to them having English as an additional language. It could therefore be recommended to explore if this would be the case in a setting that had fewer children with English as an additional language. However, it could also be pointed out that the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), should cater for all diversities, and a more useful recommendation could be to investigate how and if the EYFS promotes learning and development of children with English as an additional language. This can also be used as a recommendation for practice. The setting at the centre of this study were focused and enthusiastic on the development and learning of literacy for children with English as an additional language in reception year and it is important that all practices are promoting the same behaviours and enthusiasm.

It was also identified in the discussion that the EYFS Profile (DfE, 2013) set goals for literacy that could be viewed as too formal and do not promote the concept of child-directed, play based learning. This can be seen to have impacted the formality of the literacy session at the setting, with expectations of its pupils being very much adult-led. It could be recommended that further studies into this topic could be carried out to establish if the goals set in the EYFS Profile have an effect on other literacy
sessions and to hopefully explore practices which are based on more spontaneous learning. Further to this, a recommendation for future practice could be to ensure that goals for literacy in the EYFS were less formal allowing practitioners increased freedom over literacy sessions.

The last recommendation for future study would be to focus on and explore the differences in staff views regarding the transition from reception year to Key Stage 1 and the pressures put on reception year to prepare children for Key Stage 1. Although information from the discussion and the conclusion suggested that there are already studies that focus on this transition (Fisher, 2009; Fisher, 2011; Robert-Holmes; 2011 and Yeboah, 2010), this research study found that staff views about the transition from reception to Key Stage 1 were conflicting and this is a topic that could be explored further. Recommendations for future practice would promote an increased fluidity from reception year to Key Stage 1 to ensure that reception year pupils would not experience the pressure to prepare for Key Stage 1.

This project can be seen to identify factors that contribute to the tensions surrounding literacy in reception year, whether that be looking at the importance of play in literacy, the ‘readiness’ of these children to attend formal education or the pressures put on them to be prepared for Key Stage 1. The research has also explored the appropriateness of goals set for achievement for these children and has discussed its findings in relation to relevant literature.
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