A CASE STUDY EXPLORING PRACTITIONERS' VIEWS OF RISK TAKING IN A SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS FOREST SCHOOL

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Abstract

The aim of this small scale case study was to examine the views of practitioners who work in a special educational needs school on children's risk taking in the Forest School (FS). The research was undertaken in a special educational needs setting in Dudley. The small scale study utilised the interpretivist paradigm which took a case study approach resulting in qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. Four semi-structured interviews were carried out with; a Forest School leader, a KS1 phase leader, a teacher and a learning support assistant (LSA). These participants were selected through purposive sampling. The researcher wanted to conduct research in a special educational needs setting following working with special educational needs children for two years. Additionally, the researcher was particularly interested in conducting research with practitioners to explore their views of special educational needs children and risk taking in a Forest School. The researcher gained different responses and views about children risk taking which suggest risk taking depends upon the attitudes of the practitioners and the ability of the child. In essence, children with special educational needs may not be exposed to risk taking because of their needs as it is perceived they are unable to assess danger.

Table of contents

1504768

1) Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the aims of the research study through the key questions. The chapter will also explore the rationale for conducting the research, giving an overview of the topic chosen and the methodology that was adapted.

The aim of this research was to find out practitioners' views about children risk taking in a SEN FS, located in Dudley. To achieve this aim the following subsidiary questions were identified:

1) What strategies do practitioners' incorporate in their management of risk?

2) How might the FS environment support the needs of children with SEN?

3) What is the practitioner's role in supporting children with risk-taking?

Examining a SEN FS has been the focus of this study to establish how practitioners in a SEN school view risk taking. White (2009, p.61) asserts the importance of ensuring questions are answerable. The subsidiary questions were designed to help the researcher answer the main question through providing a structure that informed the methodology through semi-structured interviews. Additionally, answering the subsidiary questions enabled the researcher to address the main question which was quite broad.

The research was undertaken with four practitioners in a SEN school: a Forest School leader, a KS1 phase leader, a teacher and a learning support assistant. The researcher used purposive sampling which helped the researcher gain different views of risk taking. Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to identify particular characteristics of the participants and their relevance to the research. The research employed the interpretivist paradigm which resulted in qualitative data (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, p.7). A case study approach enabled the researcher to focus on a specific study with the use of four semi-structured interviews to gain data.

FS's originated in Scandinavia that encourage children to embrace risks. Although, FS's have become increasingly popular across the UK (Harris, 2015, p.275), research suggests children's opportunity to take risks is influenced by the attitudes of adults who have concerns about children and subsequently wrap them up in cotton wool (O'Brien and Murray, 2007; Jones, 2009; Connolly and Haughton, 2017). In contrast, a principle of the FSA is that children should be given the opportunity to take supported risks (FSA, 2011). Consequently, children will not be provided with the opportunity to take risks if adult's conceptions of risk are negative; something that should be avoided. Furthermore, Gill (2007, p.16) argues if children are not exposed to risk taking opportunities they will be put at a greater risk. Gill (2007) stresses the importance of children being provided with the opportunity to take risks.

This research was inspired by my previous experience of working in a SEN school and observing their use of a FS. Academically, a FS which children attend every fortnight was chosen for the scope of this study as the researcher believes FS is a way which supports SEN children's holistic development which further provides them with confidence and self-esteem. Examining practitioners' views of SEN children risk taking provided the researcher with more of an insight into how FS is perceived and embraced at the school. Professionally, it has been suggested that risk taking is an important part of a child's development (Stephenson, 2003; Little, Sandseter and Wyver, 2012; Harris, 2015). Therefore, as an early years professional it is important to understand the perception of risk taking. Carrying out a study on practitioners' views of risk taking has helped the researcher gain knowledge of how risk taking is viewed and embraced at a SEN FS.

Following this chapter there will be a consideration of the literature. The chapter following the literature review will be justification of the research design. Following this will be the presentation of the findings and analysis. Finally, the conclusion that will present a conclusion of the research.

2) Literature review

The purpose of this literature review is to critically analyse previous research in the chosen topic to gain a wider understanding (Oliver, 2012, p.6). Additionally, the literature review will demonstrate understanding of the context of the research and will indicate rationale for the particular research design. The literature review will explore key themes that have arised through reading literature around the research question: What are the views of practitioners' who work in a special educational needs (SEN) school risk taking in a Forest School?

The chapter will be organised around three themes: Risk in childhood, benefits of FS and the role of the adult in FS.

2.1 Risk in childhood

Risk is defined as 'any behaviour in which there is uncertainty about the outcomes of the behaviour' (Little, 2006, p.142). According to Tovey (2007, p.100) over centuries, notions of risk have changed. Lindon (2011, p.11) argues there are consequences for children if valuable experiences from taking risks are eliminated as their experience depends upon the confidence of adults.

Towards the end of the industrial revolution in the late 19th century new ideas emerged around the relationship between children and adults, influenced by the work of Rousseau and the romantic discourse (Kehily, 2009, p.5). Stanter *et al.*, (2007, p.43) argues children now live in a culture where safety is a

priority and concerns around their safety sit within the romantic discourse of risk. The discourse takes a cultural view of childhood that children are innocent and in need of protection (Clark, 2010, p.22). Findings indicate the romantic discourse has significantly increased its influence in the contemporary era as adults are fixated on providing safe places for children (O'Brien and Murray, 2007; Connolly and Haughton, 2017). Equally, Clark (2010, p.11) proposes attitudes as a society underpin the need to protect children as they are viewed as in need of protection. However, the over protection creates limitations for children as Little (2006, P.145) asserts children's learning and development is limited if they are over protected. Additionally, a negative perception of risk causes problems as children may not be given opportunities to engage in positive risk taking experiences.

Allowing children to take risks and have freedom may largely be influenced by media which causes concern for adults, leading to overprotect children (Lindon, 2011, p.2). Correspondingly, Holland (2004, p.116) states protection plays a central role in the concept of childhood. Childhood is referred to as a 'damaging culture' by Palmer (2006, p.62) who also argues children can grow in independence if they are provided with the opportunity to take risks. Consequently, as there is more of a concern of risk aversion, this becomes problematic as risk free environments may not provide challenges for children which can help them grow in independence. Conversely, Guldberg (2009, p.32) argues over-protecting children could deny them the opportunity of

growing in confidence. Thus recognising the importance of children taking risks.

Risk is framed as a problematic social phenomenon as for those who work with children have to fulfil their legal obligation especially as current policy and legislation has become highly influential (Tuckers and Trotman, 2010, p.112). This is supported by Little's (2006, p.145) research that concludes practitioners' decisions on providing risk taking experiences for children are highly influenced by the development of policies and guidelines. The growing importance of safeguarding and the associated practice of risk assessments in settings represent the influence of the romantic discourse hence, negative attitudes towards children taking risks. Ofsted for example, reinforce this discourse through inspections of settings as their aim is to ensure the safe and secure provision for children (Tovey, 2007, p.101).

Adults/practitioners may think overprotecting children is a good thing as it protects them from risks. However, overprotecting children may create social problems as children may not develop self esteem and confidence through taking risks. This view is supported by Stephenson (2003, p.40) who argues children will lack confidence if all risks are removed. Stephenson (2003, p.36) refers to risk for children as 'something never done before' and feeling out of control often because of speed or height and overcoming fear. Videos were used as a research tool for Stephenson's research to record children. This is strength as it increases reliability of the research as they were recorded for

verification of the events as they occurred. Moreover, risk should not be viewed as negative as through play children seek out challenges and if they are prevented they will never understand risk (Gill, 2007, p.8).

Little (2006, p.142) asserts there is less importance on the role of positive risk taking for children and therefore, addresses the need of children engaging in risky behaviour through reviewing literature. Little (2006, p.145) argues early childhood setting experiences reflect the values of society and parents. This suggests settings that provide children will positive risk taking behaviours will influence parents or societies into doing the same. This view is further supported by Savery *et al's.*, (2016) mixed method approach that explored parent's perceptions and concluded they understood the importance of their children taking risks. As opposed to many other parents with the expectation that education should be risk free (Gill, 2007; Helen, 2007). Savery *et al's.*, (2016) research is particularly useful as it involves a specialist school thus the parents of children with difficulties were involved in the research. Moreover, there is insufficient literature about SEN and risk.

2.2 Benefits of Forest School

At the heart of the FS movement is the view that children are capable and it encourages them to take risks which provides them with the opportunity to learn through exploration and discovery (Gill, 2007, p.70). In Scandinavia FS has been developed as a normal part of their early years provision (Knight, 2013, p.4). This FS philosophy has also emerged into the UK, giving British

school children the opportunity to experience risk and practitioners to recalibrate attitudes towards it. However, UK Research by Connolly and Haughton (2017, p.106) states children are denied exposure to risk because of over-protection caused by fears of the modern world. Scandinavian countries follow the intrinsic philosophy of education that takes implies children should take risks. Consequently, if children are not empowered to take risks in FS and to explore freely their curiosity may be reduced. Furthermore several studies in the UK suggest benefits of FS to children in several ways; socially, emotionally, cognitively and developmentally (Maynard, 2007b; O'Brien and Murray, 2007; Savery *et al.*, 2016, Connolly and Haughton, 2017).

FS may meet the needs of children as firstly it engages children with nature and secondly, gets them involved in taking risks. Findings from Maynard's (2007b) research concludes providing children with small achievable tasks in FS as beneficial in raising children's self esteem. This can particularly help children with SEN who may require additional support indoors but in FS they just need the opportunity to take 'supported risks' (Savery *et al.*, 2016, p.519). Correspondingly, Xavier and Hutchinson's (2011, p.145) findings suggest in FS the difficulties a child may have, do not matter as importance is in the child developing skills and abilities. Skills and abilities are important but what is more significant is if the child develops confidence though FS. Though confidence children can develop skills and abilities and through confidence children may be more willing to take risks. This is supported by the findings of

O'Brien's (2009) research that conducted interviews and concludes FS increases children's confidence. O'Brien's research is valuable as it is part of a two phase study that looked at two countries; a variety of FS's and spoke to a whole range of professionals. Smith *et al.*, (2017) also identified confidence as a positive outcome of FS. However, their research makes conclusions from other studies and is therefore a limitation as it is based on other opinions rather than conducting their own research.

FS also provides children with the benefit of developing curiosity that can encourage them to take risks at FS (Knight, 2011a, p.73). This is confirmed by Nikiforidou's (2017, p.328) qualitative study who confirms from her research that children develop curiosity through experience which helps them take risks. The research clearly highlights children learn to interact with the environment when driven by curiosity however, fails to mention not all children have the ability to take risks themselves as some may require adult involvement to support them for example, children with SEN or children who do not have confidence in taking risks independently. In contrast, Harris's (2015) research is valuable which asserts children gain confidence through FS but further to this recognises the importance of the practitioner's role in helping children gain confidence by taking children at their own pace which helps them build confidence with the right support(p.280). Additionally, literature review by Santer *et al.*, (2007, p.8) recognises the importance of adults adopting a structured approach to support those who require it.

Moreover, with the right support children including children with SEN can gain the potential benefits of FS.

Knight (2009, p.12) asserts references to FS are evident in government reports from 'Department of Health' and the 'Department for Children, Schools and Families' suggesting benefits of FS for children. Additionally, Knight (2011b, p.86) addresses the use of FS for children with additional needs through establishing their self esteem and learning styles. Thus recognising the importance of the practitioners knowing the child well which can help the child experience benefits of FS. Furthermore Wilson (2012, p.91) highlights natural environments provide opportunities for all children to explore and states natural environments support children holistically as a whole, mentally, socially, emotionally and aesthetically. Children with SEN face barriers because of teacher's attitudes and behaviours which can prevent them from experiencing benefits (Wilson, 2012, p. 92). Moreover although there are a lot of benefits of FS there is insufficient research that explains the benefits for children with additional needs/SEN.

In the work of O'Brien and Murray (2007), Gill (2007), Lamb (2011), FS is highlighted as important as it provides children with the benefit of learning through hands on experience. Dewey (1993) believes when learners are actively involved they process meaning and knowledge. Additionally, children make meaning through FS which can help them develop socially (O'Brien, 2009, 47). Gribble (1989, p.7) expresses learning does not have to occur for

children to gain knowledge as he argues value has to be passed on. Importantly, FS should be used as a concept that should provide children with meaningful experiences that can help them grow as an individual. Furthermore, if children are provided with first-hand experiences they will develop curiosity (Milchem, 2011, p.15). Research above suggests the importance of exposing children to nature.

There are problems associated with the delivery of FS as adults in England are risk averse. However, in the context of a risk-averse society the potential benefits of FS have been attracted by early childhood practitioners in England.

2.3 Role of the practitioner in Forest School

Although FS in an alternative approach to early childhood that changes attitudes and addresses some concerns about risk, there are limitations in the way the FS philosophy has been embraced in the UK, that may impact on the benefits FS can provide to children. Issues towards protection prevent children from taking risks and experiencing the potential benefits FS can provide them with.

Research by Maynard (2007a, p.379) addresses the relationship between two early years teachers and two FS workers in regards to their perception of how children should be subject to risk in FS. Through semi structured interviews the research established that the two early year's teachers did not know much about FS so their approach was being protective and directive. In essence,

they viewed risk as negative and were reluctant to let go of children's hands. As opposed to the FS workers role, which was seen to be as facilitators as they allowed children to explore and take risks. There appears to be no triangulation as no other method were used. Triangulation is useful to see if responses of the participants are consistent (Holmes, 2011, p.70). Bartlett *et al.*, (2001, p.53) asserts the validity and reliability is also affected by a small sample size. Essentially as the research was based on only four interviews this reduces to the extent to which the research can be generalized however, the research did produce in depth qualitative data that discovered different perceptions of risk. Knight (2011b, p.73) argues the role of the facilitator should be allowing children to explore, further supported by Piaget (2001). Additionally, Piaget states that learning is created by the child's interaction with the environment (Mooney, 2000, p.61).

In addition, Maynard and Water's (2007) conducted research on four schools through the use of semi structured interviews on practitioners and direct observations on adult-child interactions which show the importance of protection as high. Teachers and head teachers indicated the need for children to be closely monitored. Cultural changes are reflected in this research that shows how the profession has changed as a head teacher from the research said in her own experience they were allowed to play unsupervised. The research concludes outdoor environment opportunities are limited due to concerns of safety. Interestingly, the research fails to appreciate the value of risk; something which is now more widely recognised.

Furthermore, a grounded theory approach was used to analyse data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p.2) in which ethical consideration was not addressed for the observations. In addition the practitioners knew they were being observed this could have affected the behaviour which is referred as the 'hawthorn effect' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.66).

Connolly and Haughton's (2017) qualitative study carried out focus groups with 37 participants who were all trained or in training to be leaders in FS. The authors themselves as FS leaders were involved in the training; this can be seen as potentially unreliable as the results could have been bias. The participants viewed risk as positive, in contrast to Maynard and Waters's (2007) research that viewed risk as negative. As Connolly and Haughton's research was conducted via focused groups, participants may not have been able to say what they wanted in front of others. This may have been because the participants were all trained or training to be leaders. Therefore, they probably did not want their role as a FS leader to be undermined by other participants or the researchers.

Three semi-structured interviews were carried out on FS by Maynard (2007b) to find out about aims, approach and ethos of FS. The FS workers understood the importance of children being able to take 'appropriate risks' in having an important impact on children throughout life (p.323). Although the findings of the research were appropriate to the aims of the study, the research could have further explored the potential benefits of children taking risks

considering the participants interviewed were FS workers. On the other hand, Harris (2015) explored FS practitioners' perceptions of learning at FS through 20 semi-structured telephone interviews and concluded children were encouraged to take risks. Practitioners understood the importance of children taking risks in developing personal responsibility (p.280). For example, children would be taught the correct skills to take appropriate risks which they can learn from. Similarly, Savery *et al's.*, (2016) research involved interviewing parents and identified children reiterated safety rules they learnt at FS at home, which is a benefit of FS.

Findings by Harris (2015) and Savery *et al.*, (2016) value children taking risks. A contrasting view towards risk is evident in Maynard and Waters (2007) research that seems to view risk as negative because of the possibility of children getting hurt. The schools from Maynard and Waters research did not make use of the outdoor environment November to March which does not fit into the FS ethos that supports the use of outdoor environment in all weather conditions (Knight, 2011a, p.3). Essentially, children will not learn to explore through different environments. Conversely, Waters and Begley (2007) research involved carrying out observations on two children with the aim to explore if either the FS environment was better able to support the development of positive risk-taking behaviours or the school outdoor play space. Observations indicated children displayed more risk-taking behaviours in FS than the school outdoor play space (p.371). The observations were useful that allowed the researcher to meet their aims. Permission to observe

was obtained from parents and practitioners therefore, the research considered the importance of ethical approval. Additionally, the research seems to be reliable as behaviours of children were compared between the two outdoor environments. However, reliability could have been increased if children were observed over a longer period of time as they were only observed twice, two months apart.

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory argues the importance of the practitioner's role in helping children develop belief in their potential (Gray and MacBlain, 2015, p.119). However, helping children develop belief may involve a facilitative style which is not easy to implement. Limitations involve practitioners having parents to please, setting leaders to please and risk assessments to do that creates tensions, as reflected in several studies (Maynard, 2007b; Maynard and Waters, 2007; Savery *et al*, 2016). Practitioners may face the pressure from setting leaders asking questions about what children learned in FS. However, there is more to FS than learning as it provides children with confidence, raises their self esteem, improves their social, emotional development and provides them with the skills of working together (FSA, 2011). As mentioned earlier, the romantic conception of childhood presents limitations as practitioners may not understand the importance of exposing children to FS scenarios that expose them to risk.

Research shows how modern society deprives children of first hand experiences of the real world (Palmer, 2006, p.238). In contrast, research by

1504768

Little *et al.*, in (2012) carried out semi-structured interviews on Australian and Norwegian practitioners to find out their perceptions of risky play. The importance of risky play for children's development and well-being was recognised from practitioners from both countries. Conversely, research conducted on UK practitioners by Maynard (2007a) as noted above, shows a contrast in the perceptions of risk taking. Nonetheless, risk is socially constructed and depends on values and perceptions (Helen, 2007, p.101).

Fitzsimons (2014, p.1277) argues rather than free exploration schools are constrained as they focus on instruction. Although FS in the UK provides children with benefits, more focus may be on children learning curriculum subjects. Consequently, this may have an impact on the delivery of FS as children may not gain the full benefits FS can provide them with. Moreover, FS in the UK seem to follow the instrumental philosophy of education that fails to understand the importance of children gaining experience. The extent to the way FS is embraced in the UK is limited as practitioners seem to focus more on embedding curriculum subject learning into FS sessions.

Practitioners should assist children in developing a positive attitude towards risk however, if a practitioner does not have a positive attitude towards risk, this may impact on the child taking risks. This is supported by Lindon (2011, p.3) who argues children learn a lot from adult's attitudes therefore, a positive attitude for FS is necessary. Consequently, this becomes a significant barrier for the child when being exposed to risk as they may be afraid to take

risks. In accordance with previous research, Stephenson (2003) and Waters and Begley (2007) assert positive opportunities for risk taking depend on how risk is perceived by adults. Guerriero (2016, p.3) supports this view postulating that attitudes and skills contribute to affective teaching and learning. Additionally, the practitioner should value the importance of children participating in FS by developing a positive attitude towards FS.

Literature above demonstrates cultural attitudes affect the way FS is delivered in the UK and therefore is not embraced the same way as it is in Scandinavian countries. Perceptions and attitudes of risk taking may affect the benefits that FS can provide children with. Accordingly, the researcher is interested in the opportunities FS presents for practitioners and children but also the difficulties it provides in practice that limits exposure to risk. After exploring literature the researcher understands the challenges around overprotection and the difficulties around risk and the value around risk. The researcher is interested in looking at how these tensions operate as a practitioner and is interested in exploring different perceptions. Moreover, the researcher wants to explore this in a specific early childhood context with a particular focus on practitioners.

3) Methodology

A methodology evaluates reflects upon and justifies methods that have been chosen (Wellington, 2015, p.33). Within this chapter, chosen approaches used will be justified to address the research question: What are the views of practitioners' who work in a special educational needs (SEN) school of risk taking in a Forest School?

In the first instance the research paradigm chosen will be examined, following this the research approach will be considered, the sampling strategy, research setting, researcher's position, the use of a pilot study. Then the researcher will critically reflect upon the choice of methods. Finally, the researcher will consider the importance of ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Paradigm: Interpretivist

This research has adopted the interpretivist paradigm. MacNaughton *et al*., (2001, p.31) assert the choice of paradigm influences the methods used. Therefore, the interpretivist paradigm for this research has focused on a case study and has conducted qualitative research. Punch and Oancea (2014, p.43) assert the interpretivist research paradigm does not believe in fixed concepts of social reality because they believe the social world can be understood through social interactions. The Interpretivist paradigm has been selected as the most appropriate paradigm for this study that allowed the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge through perceptions of the participants (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, p.25). This paradigm was selected as opposed to the positivist paradigm that focuses on gaining quantitative data through

scientific means (Corbetta, 2003, p.8). Furthermore, Mukherji and Albon (2015, p.49) argue the positivist approach is seen as unethical by interpretivist researchers. This may be as the positivist paradigm puts experiments into place, seeks to look for the truth and then makes judgements.

This research has sought to understand practitioners' perceptions through conducting semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the interpretivist approach has allowed the researcher to gain detailed information in a naturalistic setting hence, useful in helping the researcher explore the views of practitioners through gaining in depth qualitative data that has helped the researcher understand perceptions of risk taking. Willig (2013, p.13) also identifies the importance of a qualitative study being naturalistic.

3.2 Research Approach: Case study

Mukherji and Albon (2010) state that the case study approach is useful for early childhood researchers. The case study approach has produced qualitative data that has been appropriate for this study. The researcher adopted a case study approach, focusing on one particular case that has provided the researcher with rich data that has been explored. Case study research involves gaining extensive data (Bassey, 1996, p.77). Additionally, participants' perceptions have been explored to help answer the research question.

Punch and Oancea (2014, p.148) highlight that generalizability is a limitation for case study. Although generalizability is important for scientific research, Thomas (2011, p.23) argues generalizability is not required for case study research as it provides researchers with analytical insight. Although the setting cannot generalise data, similar possible settings will have similar dynamics (Bell, 2014, p.228). Yin (2014, p.21) further indicates a concern for case study research is that it can result in a lot of data and can take too long to analyse. However, the researcher ensured effective research was carried out by preparing for data collection in advance. Preparation allowed the researcher to gain key insights through qualitative data.

The researcher selected this approach as it helped support the research aim by collecting in depth data. Moreover, a case study approach is suitable for small scale studies that aim for detail and understanding (Bartlett *et al.*, 2001, p.45). Cohen *et al.*, (2011, p.289) indicate the importance of a case study approach by asserting it enables researchers to understand ideas more clearly and provides the researcher with real people in real situations. Correspondingly, the case study approach has enabled the researcher to gain participants views and opinions with the focus on gaining participants perceptions of children risk taking in a FS.

3.3 Data type: Qualitative

As qualitative research focuses on meaning and gaining rich data, it was appropriate for the researcher to carry out a qualitative study. To meet the

needs of this study, the use of a qualitative methodology was crucial that investigated the FS phenomenon in depth (Yin, 2014, p.16). Connolly and Haughton's (2017) research carried out a qualitative study that resulted in rich data about how risk is perceived, managed and performed by teachers. Their research highly influenced this researcher to carry out a study that involved qualitative methods.

3.4 Sampling strategy

To access appropriate data the researcher adopted a non probability sampling strategy. Denscombe (2010, p. 25) favours non probability sampling by highlighting how the selection of the sample establishes good practice rather than random sampling. This is further supported by Daniel (2012, p.73) who suggests that the strength of non-probability sampling is that it targets specific elements of a population. Purposive sampling a type of non probability sampling used which involves choosing who is in the sample. Johnson and Christensen (2012, p. 231) articulate that in purposive sampling researchers select participants based on their characteristics, therefore this researcher selected participants that worked in a SEN school that has a FS.

This researcher has selected participants that worked in a SEN school that has a FS. These participants included a FS leader who leads sessions who was chosen because of his broad knowledge about FS. A class teacher was chosen to gain her views about children risk taking. A LSA was chosen to also get a

broader understanding of his views of risk taking when supporting children in FS. Finally, a strategic person, a ks1 phase leader was chosen to get their perspective. Although the phase leader does not directly attend FS sessions, it was interesting to gain their views of children's risk taking from an organisational perspective. The different characteristics the participants have, bought the study to life and therefore, the different positions provided the researcher with triangulation. Moreover, research undertaken by Savery *et al.*, (2016) on perceptions of risk taking adopted purposive sampling as part of their case study research design which has informed the research design for this study.

Etikan (2016, p.4) proposes in purposive sampling the researcher is bias and subjective in choosing the participants of the study. By definition there is bias because the researcher has selected people for a particular purpose, however the researcher has acknowledged this.

3.5 Research setting

The research setting has been chosen because it is a SEN school that has a FS. Choosing a setting that the researcher was familiar with from carrying out a placement there and being employed there on a short-term basis was useful, hence the use of a purposive sampling strategy. Having connection with the setting was useful and helped with the design as it eliminated groundwork from meeting new people and finding out how they do things. Therefore, the researcher was at advantage. The researcher ensured all

findings were participants own meanings. However, there is potential for their responses to be influenced by the researchers established relationship, so there is the issue of bias. Moreover, the researcher has acknowledged and understood the research has opened up the possibility for bias that could have impacted on the validity of the data.

3.6 Researcher's position

Validity is referred to as the degree to which the findings are interpreted in a correct way (Kirk and Miller, 1986, p.19). Reliability is described as the dependability, consistency and repeat ability of the data collection (Given, 2008, p. 754). Internal validity is defined as 'the extent to which the casual statements are supported by the study' (Lewis *et al.*, 2014, p.356). Internal validity is ensured as the semi-structured interviews gathered data that reflect back onto the researcher's question.

Silverman (2010, p.288) states when data is recorded and transcribed, the reliability is weakened. There is a potential for bias however, to minimise this the researcher sent participants transcribed data to ensure the data was an accurate record of what they said. In reality, the familiarity with the setting put the researcher at advantage because participants were relaxed and were

able to say what they wanted. Furthermore, the research focused on the views of the participants only.

Lapan *et al.*, (2012, p.70) argue researchers find it difficult to immerse themselves within settings and therefore may choose to gather data through various other ways. Importantly, it has been beneficial for this researcher to gather research at a setting they are familiar with.

3.7 Pilot study

Yin (2003, p.78) asserts a pilot study is important in developing questions. Similarly, Seidman (2006, p.39) emphasises the importance of carrying out a pilot study so researchers can develop on interview techniques. The pilot study affected the research design as it was apparent some questions were misunderstood so the responses were not as completed as the researcher hoped, therefore the questions were adapted. Additionally, undertaking a pilot of the interviews strengthened the validity of the research as it attempted to ensure the methods used were specifically related to the issue the researcher explored (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, p.19). The researcher spent time ensuring the questions were not misleading or biased which ensured the interview method was 'fit for purpose'.

Reflecting on the pilot experience is also an important step for researchers (Seidman, 2006). This is further supported by Mason (2002, p.75) who states a pilot study is important in reflecting on the research design. Reflecting

helped the researcher ask the pilot participants what they think and therefore, helped the researcher to revise the approach.

3.8 Semi-structured interviews

Seidman (2006, p.10) states interviews allow researchers to understand meanings of behaviours. Equally, semi structured interviews helped the researcher understand why practitioners may be reluctant in allowing children to take risks. Semi-structured interviews were conducted rather than structured interviews that involve the use of an interview schedule that is standardised.

Additionally, an advantage of semi-structured interviews are that they allowed the researcher to probe questions when needed. Drever (1995, p.13) further suggests semi-structured interviews are useful in encouraging in depth answers by probing. The use of probing was implemented effectively, the researcher knew when to probe participants for more information, which Holmes (2011, p.149) refers to as an important skill. The researcher ensured the questions were formulated in a way that allowed for interesting answers, hence the use of probing in the semi-structured interviews (Mason, 2002, p.20).

Yin (2003) highlights limitations of interviews include poorly constructed questions. However, the researcher ensured the questions were appropriate and effectively constructed by carrying out a pilot study. Bias responses are

1504768

also seen as a limitation in interviews (Yin, 2003; Bell, 2010). Although it can be difficult to remove bias completely the researcher ensured participants did not feel influenced when responding to questions, by not asking leading questions that use emotive language (Bell, 2010, p.147). The semi-structured interviews provided participants with the opportunity to respond the way they wanted.

Punch and Oancea (2014, p.191) highlight a limitation of semi-structured interviews is that transcribing data takes time. However, transcribing single interviews was convenient for the researcher as opposed to group interviews that would include responses of several participants and would be more difficult to transcribe.

Furthermore, previous research by Harris (2015) and Maynard (2007a) carried out semi structured interviews that resulted in rich qualitative data that captured knowledge and understandings that influenced on the researchers choice of what interviews to conduct that will enable the researcher to gain in depth knowledge.

This researcher conducted four semi-structured interviews on practitioners that resulted in rich qualitative data. Similarly, three semi-structured interviews were carried out in Maynard's (2007a) research that were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed that further encouraged the researcher to do the same.

3.9 Ethics

The purpose of ethical considerations is to protect the welfare of the participants and to support the validity of the data. Prior to gathering any data the researcher obtained consent from the gatekeeper and practitioners to get involved in the research. It was important ensuring the participants were well informed and gave their voluntary consent. Denscombe (2010, p.331) argues researchers must make it clear that participation is voluntary. Moreover, this avoids deception.

Planning was important for this research as the researcher had to know how to gain access to the setting, who to interview, what questions to ask, how to record, transcribe and analyse interviews. Importantly, before conducting out any research ethical approval was required from the university. The researcher adhered to the ethics and ensured participants fully understood their role in the research by providing them with a consent form and an information form before carrying out any data.

Providing participants with a participant information sheet was necessary in protecting their welfare and supporting the validity of the research. The participant information sheet included: purpose of study, procedures, confidentiality, participant withdrawal and the researchers details for any questions or concerns. Farrimond (2013) further asserts participants who understand what the research involves are less likely to withdraw. The

participants were well informed of the process and on their right to withdraw from the research at anytime with assurance that any data that was collected would be destroyed.

A Dictaphone was used to record the interviews. The participants were informed of this and gave their consent. To ensure confidentiality of the participants all data was kept anonymous and only the researcher had access to it. Practitioners involved were also provided with a copy of the transcribed data before destroying it.

Ethics involves treating participants with respect. However, Scientific methods place the researcher in a powerful position than the participants (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, p.21) which essentially, is not treating participants with respect. In contrast, qualitative studies share power with researchers (Given, 2008, p.2). Reliability and validity of the data could have been reduced if ethics was not carried out (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, p.15). Moreover, ethical considerations were evident throughout the research process to meet legal requirements from Newman University.

This chapter has explored approaches and methods the researcher used guided by the key question and the subsidiary questions. The next chapter will present and analyse data.

4) Findings and analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from the data collected and analyse them with reference to the literature discussed in the literature review (Kumar, 2014, p.317). This chapter will be organised into emerging themes: benefits of FS, how FS supports children with SEN, risk and the role of the practitioner. The research was carried out through four semi structured interviews with practitioners from a SEN school.

The first participant, a FSL has been working at the school for two years and has worked with children with SEN for four years. He is not an early year's specialist however; he has responsibility for FS for the whole school. The teacher has been working at the school for five years and has worked with children with SEN for seven years in KS1. The phase leader has been working at the school for 14 years and has 14 years of experience with children with SEN. The LSA has been working at the school for 2 years and has experience of working with children with SEN for 5 years in KS1. From this point onwards the participants will be referred to as their titles. As the researcher used just one method of data collection this meant triangulation was not achieved through a variety of methods. However, triangulation was achieved through the different positions of the practitioners who were interviewed.

Benefits of Forest School

All four participants gave similar answers reflecting on the benefits of FS's and responded positively to *'what might be the value of the Forest School environment?'* All four participants agreed FS provides children with hands on experience and provides them with confidence. In the words of the teacher '*FS provides children with the ability to gain hands on experience'*. The FSL said '*FS is all to do with meeting the needs of the child as a whole'*. This was also reflected in the work of O'Brien (2009, p.48) who concluded FS increases children's confidence through workshops with practitioners to establish the impacts of FS on children who took part in FS.

Additionally, answers from all participants emphasised the importance of freedom in the FS environment. In the words of the LSA '*they feel they have a sense of freedom being outdoors'*. Additionally, the FSL said '*they learn through play at FS so more freedom than being inside a classroom'*. This is in accordance with the work of O'Brien and Murray (2007, p.263) who state FS provides children with the freedom to express themselves physically and verbally. However, the teacher's response was interesting in that she agrees that FS provides children with freedom but later mentions the need *'to be keeping an eye on children at all times'* and *'they can't perceive danger'*. It might be that although she understands the benefits of FS there may be restrictions for these children with SEN as a closer eye on them is required which reflects concerns about children getting hurt. Children's safety is also evident in the work of Connolly and Haughton (2017, p.106) who also highlight due to over-protection children are denied exposure to risk.

The teacher and the LSA both emphasised the importance of FS for children, as the teacher said *'children don't usually get out often with their parents'* and the LSA said *'its freedom being outside, some children don't usually get the opportunity being outdoors'*. This suggests they see the importance of children being allowed to explore outdoors in an environment they may not be exposed to outside of schools.

How Forest School supports children with SEN

All participants believed FS supports the needs of SEN children through sensory experiences. This was no surprise to the researcher who also understands the importance of sensory experiences for children with SEN. Unfortunately, as stated in the literature review there is insufficient research that talks about SEN and FS which represents a gap in the knowledge. However, answers from the four participants explain how FS supports children with SEN which has helped the researcher answer one of the subsidiary question which is *'how might FS support the needs of children with SEN?'*.

Collectively, all practitioners agree that FS supports children's needs holistically. In the words of the phase leader *'FS meets children's needs holistically by providing them with experience with nature, meeting their social and learning needs as well as providing them with confidence'*. Additionally, the LSA said *'FS is particularly effective for those who don't do well in the classroom'* when asked to elaborate on this answer the LSA said *'it's because some of them with behavioural needs require some time out to*

explore freely in open space'. Similarly, the phase leader also said 'positive impact on behaviour when children are back inside and also on their learning too'. This could be supported by O'Brien's (2009) research who observed children over an eight month period at FS and concluded FS increased children's confidence.

Although there hasn't been significant discussion of this point in previous research, teachers from Waters and Begley's (2007) research also highlighted the importance of children having freedom and space outdoors. Additionally, when staff from Bridgwater College were inspired about FS and developed a FS programme they offered sessions for children with special needs and found that FS benefited children's self esteem, confidence and well being (Knight, 2013, p.5). The teacher further emphasised that children have breaks at FS and can have time out if they wish, this supports what the phase leader said 'children being able to explore in unstructured sessions'. Although the phase leader mentioned 'unstructured sessions' she mentioned how FS links into the 7 areas of learning and development in the EYFS which suggests that the FSL might be expected to incorporate these requirements into his lessons.

When asked 'how might FS support the needs of children with SEN?', the FSL said 'senses is a big part of development especially with SEN and it's about looking at how they react, how it meets their needs and how it helps support their development'. Additionally the FSL said 'activities depend on the child's level; it's about little steps and linking every activity to their needs'. Interestingly a similar response was achieved from the teacher who said

'*activities are differentiated, sensory experiences at their own pace'.* Equally, earlier research by O'Brien and Murray (2007, p.263) carried out observations and found children were given the opportunity and time to learn and develop confidence at their own pace. Further to this more recent research by Harris (2015, p.280) also found practitioners took children at their own pace at FS which helped them achieve small tasks which allowed them to gain confidence. It is apparent that FS supports the desire for differentiated learning for children with SEN.

The teacher *said 'when children are returned inside from a FS session I ask them what they have learnt, some children respond enthusiastically which tells me they enjoy being outdoors whereas some don't enjoy being outdoors because of the cold'.* The FSL response was *'FS provides children with a stimulating environment, they enjoy it as long as we make it fun for them'.* This supports what the teacher said which suggests FS supports the needs of children with SEN.

To summarise all practitioners make reference to the importance of FS for children with SEN which addresses the researcher's subsidiary question 'How might Forest School meet the needs of children with SEN'?

Risk

In the heart of the FS ethos is that it should provide children with the

opportunity to take supported risks (FSA, 2011). Subsequently, if children are not supported with taking risks they will miss out on the full benefits of FS.

The researcher asked participants *'How do you perceive risks?'.* The researcher achieved different responses. The FSL said *'I think risk is good for children'.* The phase leader said *'Risk is something negative; children have to be looked after if not parents complain'.* The teacher said '*Possibility of danger or injury'.* The LSA said *'children need to learn about risk and experience fear to learn about their own strengths and limitations'.* The different responses suggest the idea of risk generates a wide range of different responses.

The FSL said *'we can't reduce all risks, children won't learn to manage risk, children learn through risk'.* The FSL responses show he understands the importance of children taking risks. This is in accordance with Stephenson (2003, p.40) who argues if all risks are removed children will lack confidence. Moreover, Stephenson (2003, p.36) defines risk as 'something never been done before and feeling out of control because of speed or height and overcoming fear'. Interestingly, the teacher said *'we can't completely remove risk especially in a FS environment'.* Although the teacher said this, her response indicated a different perspective to that of the FSL about not being able to reduce risks because it seemed she indicated it is impossible to remove all risks. The potential benefit of risk did not seem to be indicated from her response. Additionally the teacher said *'Children are a risk to*

themselves because of their behaviour and needs'. This contradicts the findings of Connolly and Haughton (2017, p.113) who encouraged children to take risks and view risk as positive which should be reintroduced into childrens lives.

It seems the FSL is fighting against risk aversion as he wants to embrace the value of risk. This is evident from his response where he says *'they're wrapping up children in cotton wool, especially some of the parents, they view risk as negative, risk can turn into a disaster but I can manage it'.* Participants from Connolly and Haughton's (2017, p.115) research also argued how children are wrapped up in cotton wool. The FSL response indicates the frustration he has to deal with. Over protecting children is also evident in earlier findings who argue safety has become a priority where children are seen as in need of protection (O'Brien and Murray, 2007; Clark, 2010; Connolly and Haughton, 2017).

The researcher gained a strong sense of reluctance in allowing children to take risks from the phase leader and the teacher. The phase leader said *'Our pupils have no sense of danger, they are unpredictable and have severe disabilities'.* Correspondingly, the teacher said *'they can't perceive danger the way we can and that is a risk itself'.* These responses show concern and are supported by Tovey's (2007) research where staff felt 'considerable anxiety' with children taking risks. Their responses suggest to the researcher they are extra careful because of the children's needs. These findings are in contrast

with the findings of Beate and Sandseter (2007, p.245) where they let children do 'whatever really' as long as they understand the boundaries. In this research it seems all the practitioners are aware that the level of risk provided to children is dependent on their level of ability.

The FSL said *'I'm happy on one side and children on another, as long as I can visually see them'.* The FSL indicated he does not mind not being close to children as long as he can see them from a distance. Similarly, the teacher said *'keeping an eye on children at all times'*. Although these two responses are similar the researcher gained a sense that the teacher emphasised more on keeping an eye on children at all times. Both responses talked about supervising children but at different levels of supervision.

Moreover, the FSL and the LSA seemed to view risk as positive as opposed to the phase leader and teacher. The FSL and the LSA seemed to understand the benefits risky play can provide children with. The FSL *said 'I let them explore because they gain confidence, the feeling great after doing something',* the LSA said *'Risk enables children to experience fear and learn strengths and limitations of their own body'.* This compares with several studies that believe risk taking is an important element of FS which is important for children's learning and development (Maynard, 2007b; Little *et al.*, 2012; Savery *et al.*, 2016).

The different attitudes towards risk may be reflected through the different positions the practitioners have at the school that may encourage them to have different views about children taking risks. The phase leader may be more reluctance in allowing children to be subject to risk as she has a senior role which involves reporting incidents; ensuring children are kept safe as well as ensuring all staff at FS are confidence enough to support children. The teacher may also be reluctance in allowing children to embrace risk because she has the responsibility of meeting children's safety needs. The LSA also seems to hold the view that children should be subject to risk as it benefits them but also holds views about children's safety which indicates the need of ensuring children are kept safe. The FSL out of all is more likely to embrace risk taking as he has had the training to become a FSL and understands the value FS can provide children with which is reflected through his answers.

Role of the practitioner

The participants were asked *'What is the practitioner's role in supporting children 'risk-taking?'* Interesting responses rose. Collectively, all practitioners agreed their role is to encourage children to participate in FS.

Interestingly, the FSL said '*In FS the student is the teacher'*, this is also evident in the schools FS policy that also states *'where the student is the teacher'.* Although the FSL states this and wants to embrace this, tensions are evident when he talks about how he gets curriculum from the school and then

has to link it into FS, he said how he finds this *'frustrating'* as it goes away from the ethos of FS. He also states *'Didn't use to evidence but now have to, loads of pressure getting in the way because we know FS is where the child explores but what can I say they pay my wages but it's a strain on me'.* An alternative view arose from the LSA who highlights the importance of regular inspections and minimising risk. Although earlier he mentioned children need to learn about risk. Similarly, alternative views of FS were evident in Maynard's (2007a) research where the teachers viewed risk as a negative concept whereas the two FS workers in this research wanted to engage children in risky activities where children lead them into their learning. A contrasting view is evident in Harris's (2015, p.280) research where children are encouraged to take risks. Furthermore, Stephenson's (2003, p.37) research asserts children's opportunity to take risks is influenced by the adult's attitude towards taking risks. This is further supported by Little *et al's.,* (2012) research that argues personal attitudes play a part in how risk-taking opportunities are embraced.

The importance of knowing children well was evident in the answers from the teacher and the FSL. The FSL said *'need to know children and know children's awareness'* and the teacher said *'the FSL in my opinion is responsible for the area and the delivery of the lesson and overall he is the lead but I would say I know the children best'.* To the researcher this indicated the teacher is more aware of what level of risk children should be exposed to as she knows them better, although all children should be exposed to risk in FS as it says in the

FS ethos. Additionally, the FSL is in the position of control as he carries out risk assessments and leads sessions and he may know what children are capable of in FS which can help him differentiate the level of risk they can be exposed to at FS. Surprisingly, no earlier research has mentioned the importance of knowing children well in FS, this may be as in this research children have SEN needs where the practitioners need to know them well, as the phase leader did mention the importance of medical needs in FS.

The FSL emphasised the importance of risk assessments (see appendix 7.1) in supporting him at FS. Similarly, practitioners in Connolly and Haughton's (2017, p.117) research stressed the importance of risk assessments as they provided them with security. Tovey (2007) postulates fear of accountability and litigation makes practitioners feel uncertainty about children taking risks. This aligns with what the phase leader said '*these children are our responsibility parents would not be happy if their child gets hurt'*. Additionally the teacher mentions '*constant headcount and being aware'* and the phase leader mentioned '*keeping them safe'*, which also suggests the concerns about children's safety.

All practitioners stress the importance of ratio at FS. Ratio is also evident in the FS policy where it states 'Ratios will depend on the individual class and student's needs' (see appendix 7.1). In addition, the FSL said ratio is important as once he had to cancel a session as he was not happy with the safety due to lack of staff. This suggests FS sessions highly depend on staff.

The importance of ratio is also evident in Maynard's (2007b) research where practitioners note the importance of ratio in activities they do at FS. O'Brien and Murray (2007, p.6) also mention high ratio of adults is beneficial in allowing children to undertake activities and tasks that challenge them but do not put them at risk.

To conclude it seems all practitioners except the FSL's responses indicate concerns for children's safety that makes them uncertain in children taking risks. There was inconsistency between responses in regards to risk taking as the LSA first mentioned how its important children learn about risk so they can learn about their own strengths and limitations but then later in the interview he mentioned minimising risk. The practitioners' responses reflect their level of confidence in children taking risks which subsequently can prevent children being exposed to risk. Moreover, the responses indicate a high level of safety which may be dependent upon the children's needs. The phase leader and teacher mentioned how they feel children can't perceive danger which suggests to the researcher that children may not be exposed to the potential benefits of risk taking. The research has found that different attitudes of risk taking depend on the position of the practitioner in the school. Furthermore, the research has found that children's exposure to risk taking may be dependent upon their SEN which also reflects high levels of concerns. The research has also identified FS can meet the needs of children with SEN as it provides them with sensory experiences, freedom which is good for them as it helps improve their behaviours and in meeting their needs

through differentiation which is particularly important for children with SEN. Additionally, Gill (2007, p.8) argues risk should not be viewed as negative and if children are prevented from challenges they will never understand risk. The next chapter, conclusion will reflect on the research.

5) Conclusion

The aim of this chapter is to summarise the main findings from the research study by reflecting on the aim of the research to pull out key conclusions to the study. To address the key question 'what are practitioners' views about children risk taking in a SEN FS?', three subsidiary questions were identified:

1) What strategies do practitioners' incorporate in their management of risk?

2) How might the FS environment support the needs of children with SEN?

3) What is the practitioner's role in supporting children with risk-taking?

Examining the subsidiary questions has identified key messages from the research which are that although practitioners understand the value of FS, their views of risk taking is dependent on the individual child's needs. The research has also identified that practitioners require further knowledge about the value of risk taking.

After reviewing literature, it can be concluded that there is limited literature that explores FS in regards to children with SEN. The research sought to understand practitioners' views of children risk taking in a SEN FS. Through the research questions this study has found that the importance of FS is significant for children with SEN holistically which is also evident in some earlier findings (O'Brien and Murray, 2007; Knight, 2011b; Savery *et al.*, 2016). The importance of risk taking is evident through the literature

examined (Stephenson, 2003; Little, 2006; Gill, 2007; Savery *et al.*, 2016). However, this research has identified that practitioners' views of risk taking can at times prevent children from taking risks which goes against the FS principles in providing children opportunities to take risks.

The research methodology employed a case study approach which was successful in answering the research questions. Undertaking a qualitative study was appropriate in meeting the needs of this study through semi-structured interviews which allowed the researcher to understand practitioners' views of children risk taking. Conducting a pilot study helped the researcher to trial the questions beforehand and to make improvements.

A limitation of this study has been not being able to carry out observations with children and interviews with parents. This could have enabled triangulation and therefore could have made the research more valid and subsequently could have helped the researcher gain a deeper understanding of risk taking. Furthermore, limitations of the small sample size due to time scales could have influenced the research findings. However, it has been useful interviewing practitioners that hold different positions at the school which has also helped the researcher gain triangulation of different perspectives.

The research identified issues that could be further explored in future research. A future study could carry out observations with children to see how

they are provided with risk taking experiences at FS. Additionally, the research could also carry out interviews with parents to explore their views of their child who has SEN risk taking.

The findings from this research suggest that although practitioners understand the value of FS for children they are reluctant in allowing children to take risks because of their perceptions of the individual child's needs and abilities. Introducing a risk taking policy could be considered, as literature suggests risk taking is vital for a child's development. Additionally, practitioners could learn from each other about risk taking so practitioners that are less confident about children risk taking could be teamed up with those that have more knowledge and experience of risk taking, allowing those practitioners to learn and become competent in allowing children to take risks.

Moreover, these recommendations could result in better practice with practitioners providing children with the opportunity to take risks which could result in children's confidence increasing. The research has concluded that FS is important for childrens holistic development with risk taking significant for their confidence and self esteem. However, this is influenced by the risk taking opportunities provided by practitioners that are based on the child's SEN.

The researcher has gained a valuable insight into how FS is significant for the development of children with reference to the vital role of risk taking. Moreover, the researcher has enjoyed conducting a qualitative study with a topic they are interested in.

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