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"You run about, saying 'woof woof'!": Reception Children's Perspectives of free flow

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Abstract

The implementation of free flow provision in Foundation Stage settings is supported by evidence of a positive impact of independent learning on development as learners (Whitebread & Coltman, 2008). This study aimed to examine the relationship between children's enjoyment of free flow and its impact on independent learning development as well as which aspects of free flow children enjoy the most. Participants took part in a semi-structured interview which also involved drawing and discussing their own drawings. The results displayed a positive relationship between independent learning and enjoyment of free flow. Participants' preferences during free flow support previous findings for increased learning development: play (Timmons, Peletier & Corter, 2015), a secure environment (Whitebread & Coltman, 2008) and being outdoors (Waller, 2007).

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Introduction

> "The capacity to become involved in one's own learning, to take responsibility for it, and to manage it are keys to success in school and beyond."
>
> (Featherstone & Bayley, 2011, p.8).

Statutory documentation relevant to the Foundation Stage, states that young children should be encouraged to become 'independent learners' (DfEE/QCA, 2000). This is further supported by a large body of research which finds level of independent learning development to be an indicator of individual differences in development as learners (Whitebread & Coltman, 2008).

Galton (1989) argues independence is restricted due to teachers being resistant to relinquishing control to children. This can be combatted by implementing a practice of 'free flow'. This involves children being free to choose where they want to be and what they want to do. Critically, free flow provision functions via the importance of choice and independence given to the child in their environment. This allows the essential shift of responsibility, from teacher to child, for developing independent learning (Meyer, Harwood, Darshan & Faraday, 2008). However, as Whitebread et al. (2005) point out, not all children respond well to open-ended, child-initiated activities as found in free flow. Therefore, this study aims to discuss two questions:

1. Does enjoyment of free flow provision have an impact on independent learning development?

2. What aspects of free flow are most enjoyable to children?

Literature Review

What is independent learning and why is it important?

> "The aim of a good teacher is to make themselves redundant. If we are to properly educate others, then we must enable them to become independent learners."
>
> (Whitebread et al., 2005, p.2).

Within current cognitive developmental psychological literature, 'independent learning' is characterised as 'learning how to learn' (Nisbet & Shucksmith, 1986), 'metacognition' (Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994) and 'self-regulation' (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). These terms suggest the idea of the child's developing understanding, awareness and control of their own mental processing. Throughout this paper, these terms will be used interchangeably to illustrate the development of independent learning; being aware of one's own learning and being capable of carrying out tasks to expand what one knows.

An important finding of this body of research is this aspect of development has been found to be responsible for individual differences in children's development as learners (Whitebread & Coltman, 2008). This finding is gaining support from government documentation. For example, the curriculum guidance for Foundation Stage states practitioners must "Value, support and encourage independent learning" (DFEE/QCA 2000, p.34). Similarly, this push is mirrored in recent statutory documentation such as the Early Years Framework which states that for 'Personal, social and emotional development: self-confidence and self-awareness' children must be 'confident to try new activities, and say why they like some activities more than others' (DfE, 2017). This exemplifies independent learning as children are trying new things and reflecting on their learning.

As well as support from government documentation, there is also a trend in the Early Years' literature focusing on fostering independent learning in young children, for example, publications from Featherstone and Bayley (2006; 2011) which promote pedagogy for development of independent learning in the Early Years' classroom. Similarly, the popularity and backing for practices such as Reggio Emilia and High/Scope which hold children's autonomy and control of their own learning as key beliefs (Whitebread et al., 2005).

However, despite the barrage of support for promoting independent learning, studies suggest that whilst practitioners want to endorse independent learning, there are mixed perceptions of what it is

about and how it can be developed (Hendy & Whitebread, 2000). Similarly, Coltman (2006) states that, despite the evidence for young children being capable of self-regulation, this is not acted upon in Foundation Stage settings. It is unclear whether this is due to misunderstanding of the concept, how to implement support or lack of importance placed on the idea. This suggests that there is scope to explore pedagogical practices which are said to promote independent learning, examine how they are working for the children and the ways in which they can be made more effective in order to support practitioners.

How can independent learning be promoted in the classroom?

The application of the theory of independent learning to the education world transpires via sociocultural theory founded on the ideas of Vygotsky (1978; 1986). This is the idea that to develop independent learning, the learner needs to move from 'other-regulation' (completing task with the support of a more knowledgeable other) to 'self-regulation' (completing a task by themselves). This is linked to the idea of the Zone of Proximal Development which states that when learning a child has a level of actual achievement, attainable independently and a level of potential achievement which can be achieved with the support of a more experienced learner (Vygotsky, 1978). This support is sometimes referred to as scaffolding (Bruner, 1960). Importantly, research has shown that an effective 'scaffolder' has the ability to withdraw support as the learner becomes more able to carry out a task independently (Schaffer, 2004). In Vygtosky's view learning begins as a social process, indicating the importance of adult-child interaction in the classroom, which gradually leads to internalisation of learning and the ability to talk oneself through a task; therefore, self-regulating one's own learning. This indicates that both opportunities for discussion with more knowledgeable others as well as opportunities to explore alone are crucial for the development of independent learning.

There are a number of pedagogical practices which have emerged from this Vygotskian framework. These include 'co-operative group work' (Forman & Cazden, 1985), 'reciprocal teaching' (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) and 'self-assessment' (Black & Wiliam, 1998). However, Galton (1989) suggests offering children a role in decision making in the classroom warrants the responsibility needed to take ownership of own learning. This principle is the focus of this study. This is supported by Perry, VandeKamp, Mercer and Nordby (2002) who found evidence for children

planning, monitoring, problem-solving and evaluating their learning when given this responsibility of choice in learning.

Consequently, free flow is an ideal pedagogical practice to provide children with this opportunity of choice. Children are free to move around the classroom/area in the setting as they wish, choosing the activities they would like to do and carrying them out independently. This allows children to rehearse the essential components for developing independent learning as outlined by Perry and colleagues above.

How can free flow promote independent learning?

Meyer, Harwood and Darshan (2008) claim that the essential ingredient to foster independent learning is the shift in responsibility for learning from teacher to pupil. Thus, a successful free flow set-up must accommodate this shift in responsibility by giving the children choice in what they will be learning and how.

A free flow set-up allows for child-initiated learning; a concept with much empirical support for development of independent learning. One explanation for this finding is adult-led activities nurture a dependence on teachers. Evidence comes from Robson (2016) who found both adult and child initiated contexts were supportive but child-initiated activities were significantly more likely to lead to self-regulation of learning. This was thought to be because children relinquished control to adults when they were present; and hence, did not consciously evaluate what they were learning. There is further support from a multitude of studies which found adult-initiated activities had a detrimental effect on children's problem-solving skills (Ramani, 2012) and their independence and initiative (Marcon, 2002). These are factors that child-initiated learning would promote, as the child is forced to utilise these techniques in order to carry out their chosen task. Conversely, there is research support for child-initiated learning leading to a greater sense of personal control and autonomy (Krafft & Berk, 1998), more positive attitudes to learning (Maynard & Chicken, 2010), better persistence (Robson & Rowe, 2012) as well as enhanced engagement with task (Vitiello, Booren, Downer & Williford, 2012). Although these findings suggest child-initiated activity is fundamental, this does not negate adult interactions altogether. It is important to remember the value of the more knowledgeable other for transition from other to self-regulation. It is the choice element of free flow that is imperative; adults should still be present to scaffold learning when necessary.

The impact of choice in the development of independent learning is reinforced by Perry, VandeKamp, Mercer and Nordby (2002) who state the role of choice is significant; when children are offered choice and opportunities to control the level of challenge, a range of metacognitive behaviours are displayed. This argument is summed up by Bergen (1988) as cited in Ivrendi (2016, p.895): 'since children have the power to make decisions as to the type of play, ways of playing and whom to play with, free play incorporates the utmost level of internal control, reliability and motivation'.

The CIndLe Project (Whitebread et al., 2005) is key to this body of research. This two-year project examined the development of independent learning in three to five-year-old children attending 32 Foundation Stage settings in Cambridgeshire. Four underlying principles for a pedagogy promoting independent learning emerge, including the one of most interest for the purposes of this study: feelings of control. The authors suggest this includes feeling in control of their environment and learning, having confidence in their abilities and being able to respond suitably to challenges. They conclude that practitioners must allow for child-initiated events to enrich a sense of ownership and responsibility for learning, ensure children have access to a range of materials to undertake self-planned activities and are given opportunities to make decisions and choices about activities. All of these elements are possible through effectively executed free flow provision.

However, Whitebread and Coltman (2008) point out that children differ between how they respond to open-ended, child-initiated tasks. Some children prefer support from an adult, linking back to the Vygotskian idea of the Zone of Proximal Development. Therefore, this study will explore children's preferences towards a free flow environment, with an aim to answer the question, 'Does enjoyment of free flow provision have an impact on independent learning development?' Further, the study will gather pupils' perspectives of free flow in order to examine which elements of free flow work best to foster enjoyment for pupils, to maximise the benefits for independent learning free flow has been proven to provide.

Research Design

Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, and Wintersberger (1994) comment that children are often assumed to be incompetent of making their own judgements resulting in denial of the right express their views. Instead, it would be better to use UN guidelines, as outlined in article 12 of Human Rights of the

Child act, that 'children who are capable of forming their own views have the right to express them freely in all matters that affect them' (UN, 1989) to assess the child's competence and proceed accordingly. This highlights the importance of gathering pupils' perspectives of pedagogical practices that will affect their daily lives. In spite of this, Colliver and Fleer (2016) report that research continues to lack investigation of young children's perspectives. Therefore, this study aimed to address this gap by collecting qualitative data in the form of interviews and drawings from the children and comparing this to quantitative data from an independent learning checklist. This allowed for triangulation of children's responses to ensure they were consistent (Roberts-Holmes, 2011).

The reception classes in which the research was completed fit the descriptors outlined by Whitebread and Coltman (2008). During free flow the children can choose where they would like to go and what they would like to do (child-initiated activities), there is a range of different materials and resources available to the children and they are allowed to make choices about the activities they do and in what order. There is often one table set up with a 'job' for the children to complete with adult guidance. When the child chooses to do this is their decision. Importantly, the children are not just free flowing within one classroom, they have the opportunity to cross the corridor and access both reception classrooms and their accompanying outdoor spaces, resulting perhaps in a greater deal of self-confidence and independence in order to leave the safety of their own classroom. This set up allowed for the examination of the views of the children in this study in relation to free flow provision that fits the guidelines laid out in the literature.

Participants

A 'convenience sample' (Roberts-Holmes, 2011) of six children; three from each of the two reception classes was selected from the children who had parental consent. Drawing from a list of children with consent, three boys and three girls were selected. It was important to choose children of both genders, reception classes and a range of ethnicities, as diversity in participants adds validity to the research (Booth & Ainscow, 2004).

Drawings

Participants' drawings were used in conjunction with interviews for data collection, as drawings can often represent a child's attempt to make sense of their experiences (Hawkins, 2002). This is

supported by the idea of the 'multiple languages of children' promoted by Reggio Emilia settings (Gandini, 2008). In these settings children are encouraged to express themselves and communicate through a variety of media, including artwork.

Everley and Macfadyen (2017) advocate the use of drawings as a stimulus for further discussion, this allows the child to set the direction of the interview and highlights what is important to them. This creates a shift in disparity of power from adult to child; one of the biggest ethical challenges for researchers working with children (Morrow & Richards, 1996). The drawings were used for analysis but drawings were also discussed with the children as this allowed for accurate interpretation of the pictures (Pearce & Bailey, 2011). The drawings and interviews were cross-referenced to ensure participants' ideas were accurately represented and this allowed them to showcase views they may be unable to articulate.

Interviews

Interviews were chosen above questionnaires as they provide flexibility in being able to respond to and develop participants' answers, which is not possible in a structured questionnaire (Drever, 2003). A semi-structured interview was chosen, as a structured interview has similar draw backs to a questionnaire in relation to depth of data collection (Denscombe, 2007). As this research was carried out with young children, flexibility was essential as it is important to have the opportunity to rephrase questions, repeat for understanding and probe for further information (Roberts-Holmes, 2011). A semi-structured interview allows the researcher to give direction to the interview but does not constrain the participant from sharing their own ideas and suggestions.

The interviews were analysed in two ways. First the qualitative data was thematically coded to find key themes. As well as this, the qualitative data was converted into quantitative data in the form of 'number of positive comments about free flow in order to compare this with individuals' scores on the independent learning checklist.

CHILD 3-5 Checklist

The CHILD 3-5 (Checklist of Independent Learning Development 3-5) was created as part of the CIndLE project (Whitebread et al., 2005). It consists of 22 statements, which measure key behaviours indicating independent learning for this age group. The child is given a rating of always

(4), sometimes (3), rarely (2) or never (1) for each statement, to give an overall score of independent learning. As a pre-existing checklist, this is a reliable measure of independent learning. The ratings were based on observations of the children throughout the four-week trainee placement.

Ethics

Roberts-Holmes (2011, p.13) asserts that "ethical issues should continuously permeate all aspects of the research process… all research can be potentially beneficial and inadvertently harmful". Therefore, it is important to ensure any research project is ethically sound.

To ensure this, I followed the guidelines of the Ethics Checklist provided by Cambridge University. One element of the guidelines was to read The Guidelines for Educational Research from the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011). This outlined the importance of "voluntary informed consent" (p.5), "right to withdraw", "children should… be facilitated to give fully informed consent" (p.6) and "privacy" (p.7). The various steps taken to ensure these factors were met are outlined in this section.

Firstly, I shared my research proposal with my tutor, class mentor and the head teacher of the school to ensure what I planned to do was within ethical guidelines. The school did not have blanket consent for pupils to participate in research; thus, parental consent was sought via letter. Special permission for the use of audio recordings was made clear. This letter reassured parents of participant's anonymity, explained the nature of the research and provided them with contact details to ask any questions about the research.

The children involved in the study had written parental consent. However, in order to adhere to the BERA guideline to facilitate children in giving their own consent, I explained what was going to happen at the start of each interview and reminded the children at various stages of the interview that they didn't have to participate; as consent is an ongoing process (Roberts-Holmes, 2011). The interviews were carried out in a group room between the reception classrooms within clear view of the corridor and both classrooms.

To ensure privacy of participants all names of pupils, teachers and the school have been changed or removed throughout this report. The audio data collected in this study was destroyed at the end of the academic year 2016-2017.

Critical evaluation of findings

Relationship between enjoyment of free flow and independent learning

The participants' scores from the CHILD 3-5 Checklist can be found in Table 1. The results of this measure show variation between participants' level of independent learning, with scope to explore what could underlie this difference. Ellie had the highest score, whereas Milly had the lowest. Whilst providing information about individual children, the checklist also highlighted certain areas of strength and weakness across the sample. The highest average scoring statement was 'can control attention and resist distraction'. This indicates the setting is working well to promote independent learning characteristics such as this, and one could conclude they are stimulated via the utilisation of free flow to provide children at this setting with the opportunities to carry out a self-chosen task, as well as encourage them to focus on task and see it through. This is supported by research which states child-chosen tasks promote persistence (Whitebread et al., 2005; Robson & Rowe, 2012). However, the weakest area highlighted by the checklist was 'plans own tasks, targets and goals'. This indicates that the setting may need to develop additional techniques in order to promote independent learning of this kind. This is especially pertinent as Boekaerts and Niemivirta (2000) assert the positive link between self-set learning goals and self-regulation.

	Emotional (out of 25)	ProSocial (out of 25)	Cognitive (out of 35)	Motivational (out of 25)	Total Score (out of 110)
Ellie	15	16	25	11	67
Adam	14	17	22	11	64
Markus	12	13	18	12	55
Daniel	12	8	14	16	50
Jenny	14	15	21	11	61
Milly	11	11	15	10	47

Table 1: Table of participants' scores for each section of CHILD 3-5, including total score of Independent Learning.

Although it is thought-provoking to find a disparity in levels of independent learning an explanation for this finding is also an interesting prospect. The interviews were examined and number of positive comments each child made about free flow were recorded. The relationship between independent learning score (CHILD 3-5 checklist) and enjoyment of free flow (number of positive comments from the interview) is shown in Figure 1. From this graph, it is clear there is a positive

relationship between the two variables: as enjoyment of free flow increases, independent learning score does too. This suggests the more the children in this study enjoyed free flow, the more benefits of free flow they have access to and therefore the higher their level of independent learning. This suggests enjoyment of free flow is linked to overall development as learners (Whitebread & Coltman, 2008). Consequently, it was important to analyse participants' views of free flow to find out what works, what doesn't and what needs to be changed to increase enjoyment. Pupils' perspectives and opinions from interviews and drawings are outlined in the next section.

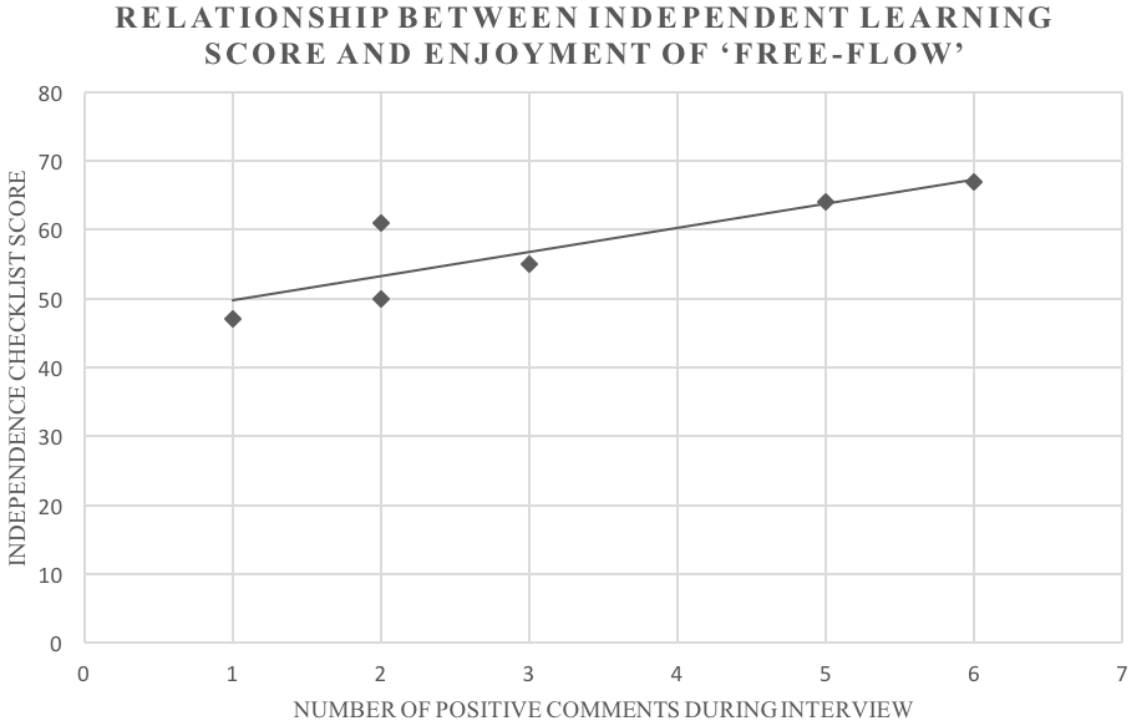

Figure 1: Graph to show the relationship between independent learning score and enjoyment of free flow

Preferences during free flow

To identify the preferences for different elements in free flow a thematic analysis of the children's responses to interviews was completed. These themes were then cross-checked with themes from the children's drawings. There were five drawings available for analysis as one of the children decided she did not want to draw but was happy to answer interview questions. The main theme consistent in both drawings and interviews was 'doing jobs' or playing during free flow as all children in the study drew themselves doing one of these two activities. Similarly, in general, the children who drew themselves with a smiley face also scored highly on number of positive

utterances during the interview; indicating this finding was also consistent between measures. One interesting finding was that all children in the study, other than one who drew herself with Elsa from 'Frozen', drew themselves alone. This did not fit with the findings of the interview data in which children in the study all mentioned at least one friend they liked to spend time with during free flow. However, this could have been a product of the question: "Can you draw *you* during free flow time?" This means that, overall, it can be assumed that findings from the interviews and drawings are consistent and allowed children in the study to express themselves. Key themes that emerged from the data will now be discussed.

What is free flow and do I like it?

The first critical, and encouraging, finding was all children in the study had the same definition of free flow. Two children's responses to the question 'can you tell me what you think free flow is?' exemplify this:

> *Ellie: Err it's where you change classes.*
>
> *Adam: When you can go to each classroom.*

This is important as it shows consistency in understanding of the concept. Additionally, this confirms the assumption that free flow allowed these children to feel in control and therefore meets one of the underlying pedagogical principles to promote independent learning as outlined by Whitebread and Coltman (2008).

The next important finding was whether the participants explicitly stated if they liked free flow or not. Four of the children responded to the question "Do you like free flow?" with a simple "yeah" whereas those who didn't like it eluded to preferring to stay in one classroom. For example, this quote from Daniel:

> *Researcher: So [Daniel], can you tell me what you think free flow is?*
>
> *Daniel: It's when you're free to go in both classes.*
>
> *Researcher: Ok, and do you like doing that?*
>
> *Daniel: Er, well I do it sometimes, not really often.*
>
> *Researcher: So, what do you normally do?*
>
> *Daniel: I normally stay in there, in [Class A].*

Significantly, the two children who indicated a preference to staying in their own classroom were two of the lower scorers on the independent learning checklist. This indicates an intervention to encourage their enjoyment and confidence to go to the other classroom may allow them to fully experience the opportunities for ownership of their learning, a characteristic found crucial to developing independent learning (Galton, 1989), offered by free flow.

What do children enjoy doing most during free flow?

In order to find out how to improve enjoyment of free flow for the children in this study, and also develop their independent learning, it is important to look at what the children enjoy doing most during free flow. This will allow us to see which elements work well to increase enjoyment and give a focus when setting up activities and the environment in the classroom. As outlined briefly above, in both drawings and interviews participants were polarised around enjoying 'playing' or 'doing jobs' best, as can be seen in Figure 2.

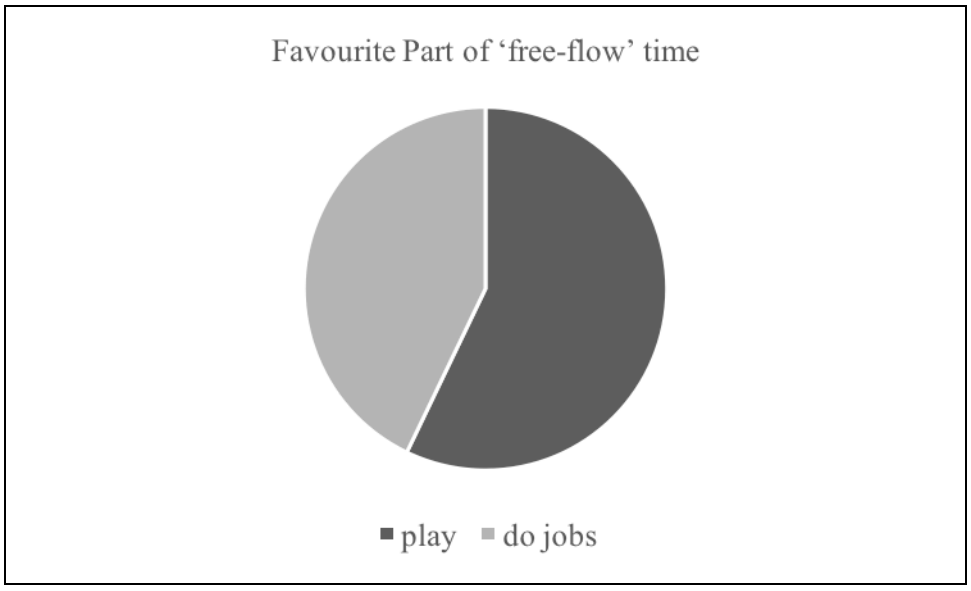

Figure 2: Graph to show children's favourite thing to do during free flow

Four of the six children stated 'play' as their favourite part of free flow. This is an important and promising finding as the role of play in developing self-regulation is supported by research and policy documents worldwide (Timmons, Peletier, & Corter, 2015). However, in this study, what constituted children's description of 'play' varied. Three of the four children cited forms of 'role play' as their favourite activity during free flow. This ranged from dramatic play:

Researcher: What's your favourite thing to do during free flow?

Milly: I like playing doggies.

Researcher: Playing doggies? How do you play doggies?

Milly: You run about, saying "woof woof"

To small world play:

Researcher: What's your favourite thing to do during free flow?

Adam: Playing with that castle [pointed to a toy castle in the room]

Researcher: What would you do if you were playing with the castle?

Adam: I would play with one of the toys and then I would play with them with the castle and pretend that one of them is in jail. And they would get locked in forever!

This preference for role play is interesting as Elkonin (2005) suggests imaginary play allows children to understand the rules and roles of the real world in order to deepen their understanding of the world they live in. This in turn will help to promote independent learning as it gives the children a safe environment to try out ideas and activities, evaluate their effectiveness and increase their confidence to make plans and carry them out on a bigger scale. This idea is supported by research from Vieillevoye and Nader-Grosbois (2008) which found incidences of pretend play predicted development of self-regulation. The variety of types of play participants chose is important to note as it emphasises the relevance of allowing children free choice in what they want to do in order for pretend play to have the desired effect on independent learning development.

One child's favourite activity falls somewhere between play and 'doing jobs' as can be seen in the quote:

Researcher: What about inside? What do you like doing inside during free flow?

Daniel: Erm I like playing with…er…I like to…erm…I…I…I think I like to do the making table.

Researcher: The making table? What kind of things do you make?

Daniel: Er…my family pictures

Researcher: Yeah?

Daniel: And I draw things and practice things.

This extract exemplifies the use of 'play' to rehearse activities within a 'safety net', where there is no right or wrong. For this child, the use of play for this purpose is made more evident by the fact that when asked if he liked to work with a teacher he said he would rather work by himself. This shows that without opportunities for free play, his incidences of mark-making and composition (early indicators of independent writing) would be diminished. The label of a 'job' when working with an adult is a repellent, this supports the positive effect of child-led learning found in the literature (e.g. Robson, 2016).

However, there were two children in the sample who preferred to do 'jobs' over play, such as:

> *Researcher: What's your favourite thing to do during free flow?*
>
> *Markus: I like to help do jobs and stuff.*
>
> *Researcher: What kind of jobs do you help with?*
>
> *Markus: Erm like they say what the jobs are then I like go to them, after that I do another.*
>
> *(Later in the interview)*
>
> *Researcher: So, you like doing jobs and playing during free flow time? Do you like them both the same or is there one you like more?*
>
> *Daniel: I like doing jobs best.*

Interestingly, Markus was one of the lower scorers on the CHILD 3-5 checklist. This suggests that his reliance on adult-led and planned activities may be the reason his independent learning development is hindered. Robson (2016) suggests that when adults are present, children allow them to take responsibility in setting goals and checking progress. This responsibility element of free flow is crucial to development of self-regulation of learning and independent learning (Whitebread et al., 2005).

Nevertheless, it is important that adults are not removed from the situation entirely as they have an essential role to play in scaffolding children's learning through the Zone of Proximal development in order to move from other-regulation to self-regulation (Bruner, 1960; Vygotsky 1978). What is important is how the adult interacts with the child (Robson, 2016) and how this support is gradually removed to allow the child to self-regulate their own learning (Schaffer, 2004).

Where do children like to be during free flow?

A final theme emerging from the interviews was the participants' preference for where they liked to be during free flow time; preferences for different classrooms and for outside compared to inside were found.

Preference for which classroom children in the sample liked best can be seen in Figure 3. It seems from this information that these children are split between the two classes, with a slight preference for Classroom B. However, if the data is examined differently to look at whether the classroom the child prefers is their own the data looks like Figure 4. This indicates that children in this study prefer to remain in their own classroom rather than cross the corridor to explore opportunities in the other classroom. This is surprising, as even participants with higher scores on the independent learning checklist had a preference for their own classroom. This could be explained by one of the underlying principles for a pedagogy of self-regulation outlined by Whitebread and Coltman, (2008): emotional warmth and security. The children in this study may feel secure in their own classroom, where they can still make choices about the activities they want to complete but have the emotional support necessary for the confidence to take risks and be resilient when encountering difficulties; essential components of developing as an independent learner.

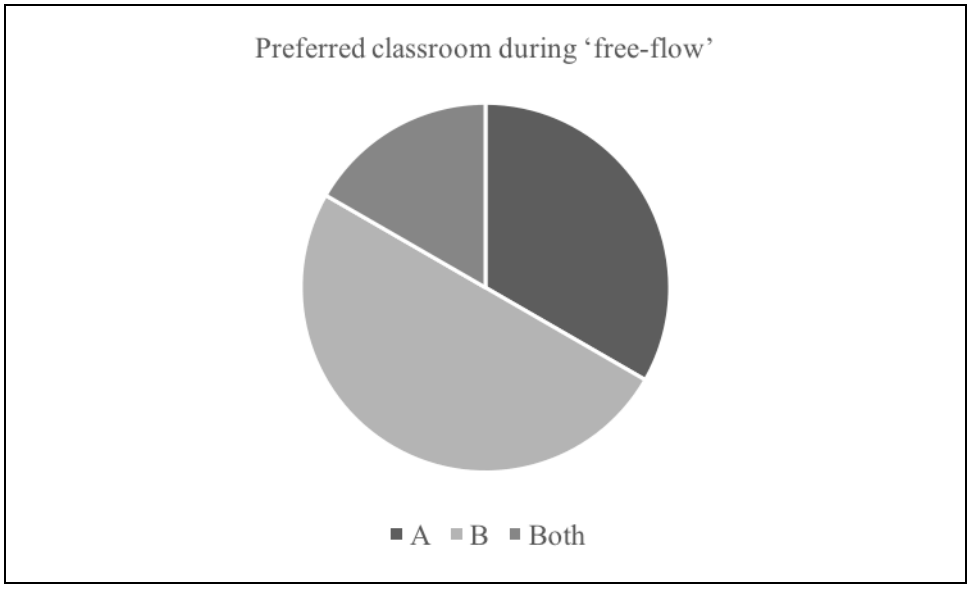

Figure 3: Graph to show children's preference for either Classroom A or Classroom B

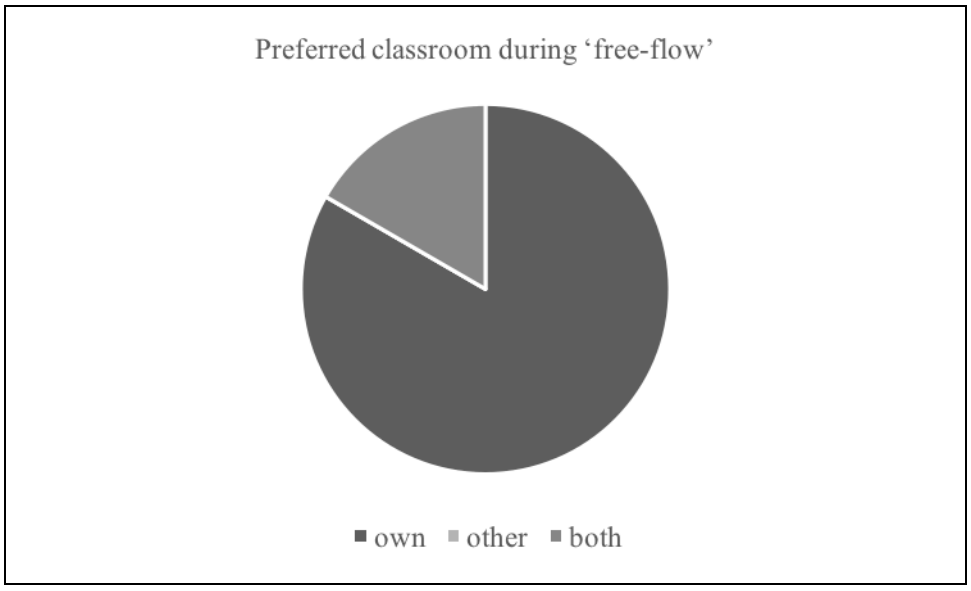

Figure 4: Graph to show children's preference for own classroom

Children interviewed also had a clear preference for being indoors or outdoors (Figure 5) as well as varying explanations for this choice. Children who preferred to be inside cited reasons such as:

> *Jenny: They're indoors all the time.*
>
> *Researcher: What's indoors all the time?*
>
> *Jenny: The jobs!*
>
> *Researcher: The jobs are always indoors so you prefer to be indoors?*
>
> *Jenny: [nodded].*

This indicates that it is not something about the indoors these children like; it is the activities available there. One way to combat this and encourage more exploration of the outdoor environment, might be to run an adult-led activity outdoors in order to support those children who still need 'other-regulation' of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). However, participants' preference for the outdoor environment seems to stem from a different source. Two children interviewed had the same reason for preferring the outdoors: being able to go fast on the bikes. This is interesting as the interviews were completely separate, so physical play is seemingly appealing. This may warrant further research to investigate a range of physical play opportunities and their impact on enticing children to explore outside learning. The learning benefits of the outdoors are well documented (e.g. Waller (2007)), so it is important to promote this as an element of free flow provision.

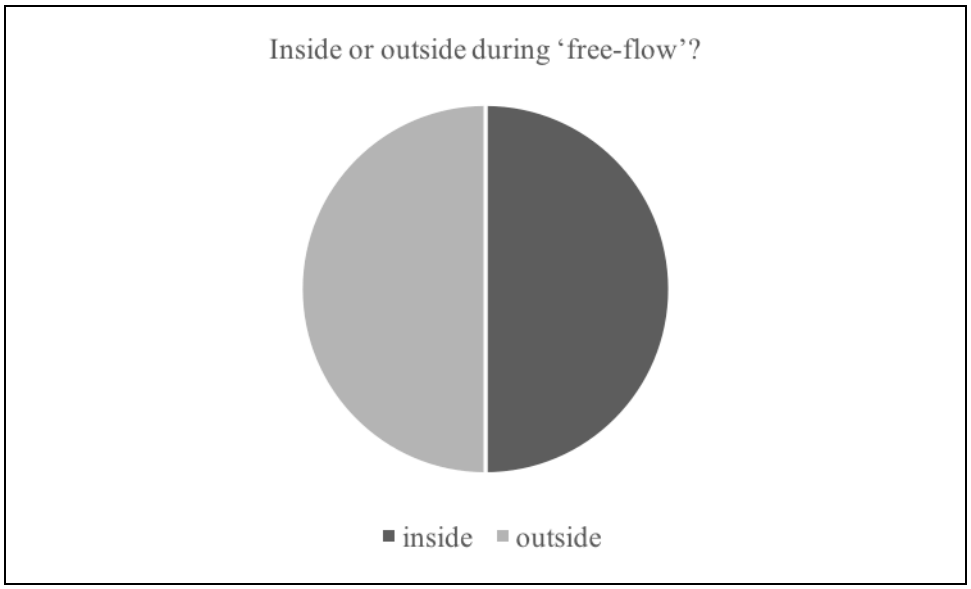

Figure 5: Graph to show children's preference for indoor or outdoor environment during free flow

Summary of findings

Overall, the findings highlight an important factor in the development of independent learning in that participants who enjoy free flow more have increased independent learning development. To address this, the research has also found out what the children in this study like about free flow and how this relates to the literature. However, it is important to remember these findings are relevant to the children in this study and cannot be generalised to all. The classroom implications for the findings of this study will be discussed later.

Analysis and Critical Reflection of Research Methodology

Most aspects of the research methodology worked well for the purposes of this small-scale research study. The use of semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to question children further about ideas and allowed prompting when children were hesitant or confused. Similarly, the choice to use individual rather than group interviews worked well in order to give all children the chance to voice their opinions and in preventing one child from dominating the conversation, as has been frequent factor in the literature (Smithson, 2000). When themes from the interviews and the drawings were cross-matched, most of the findings were consistent; suggesting reliability in children's responses. The drawings also worked to stimulate discussion, as advocated by Everley

and Macfayden (2017). This was evident in the interview with the participant who decided not to draw; she was quieter and offered fewer ideas than participants who had drawn. Finally, the use of the CHILD 3-5 checklist was successful, as it was an existing measure and thus reliability does not require verification. Additionally, the validity of using the checklist as a measure was improved by the completion by someone familiar with the children, rather than a one-off observation which may not have caught the children at their best; true evidence of their independent learning may not have been clear.

Still, there are certain areas of the study which can be improved. Firstly, the sample size; due to the small scale and time restraints of the study only a handful of children from one setting were studied. The issue here is that free flow is characterised differently in other settings. This limits the generalisation of the trends found between enjoyment of free flow and levels of independent learning. To secure validity for the identified trend the study should be replicated in alternative settings with larger groups of children.

Another issue identified was some children requiring encouragement to provide answers during the interview. Whilst the drawings helped, other ideas such as using a book, game or puppet may engage the children further (Browne, 1998). Similarly, children could have been anxious about giving the correct answer as they are used to adults asking them questions they already know the answer to (Brooker, 2001). Therefore, this may have manifested in a reluctance to respond through fear of giving an incorrect answer. Another way to combat this might be to use a Mosaic Approach (Clark & Moss, 2005). This plays on the idea of the 'one hundred languages of children' and involves allowing children multiple opportunities to express themselves; through photographs, maps, interviews, tours and drawings in order to build up a true representation of the child's ideas. Perhaps offering more opportunities for communication would allow those children who feel uncomfortable expressing verbally an opportunity to share their thoughts.

Implications for future practice

The completion of this research has highlighted the importance of a free flow environment in my classroom in order to develop a culture of independent learning. The importance of this for future learning is clear (Whitebread & Coltman, 2008). To implement this understanding in my own practice, I plan to complete the CHILD 3-5 checklist at the beginning, middle and end of the year.

This will allow me to identify those children who are not benefitting from the current free flow set up and highlight areas that require updating. The study found enjoyment of free flow can have an impact on children's independent learning development and it will be important to create an environment which all children can enjoy. As I have uncovered what children in this cohort enjoy, I feel comfortable in identifying what aspects of free flow are important to explore with my own class. For example, ensuring there is role play of different forms freely available to the children and following their current interests to guarantee the role play will entice them; having the desired effect on their self-regulation development (Elkonin, 2005).

Similarly, I will be strategic when placing adults around my classroom to allow opportunities for child-initiated activity and therefore encouraging independent learning through taking responsibility for planning and carrying out own tasks (Robson, 2016). I will also ensure adults are available to tactically 'scaffold' children's learning in order to move their learning through the Zone of Proximal Development (Bruner, 1960; Vygotsky, 1978). This decision is supported by Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, and Bell (2002) who propose child-led learning should be interspersed with sensitive and informed adult interaction to support children in their thinking and learning. For children who prefer doing 'jobs' with an adult to playing, a good strategy could be to encourage these children to think of their own jobs to complete whilst still providing adult support; thus, taking ownership of their own learning but with an approach they feel comfortable with.

It is clear from the research that free flow may not be enough to support all children in their development of independent learning. Therefore, it is important to provide support for these children in order for them to fully engage with the process and reap the benefits. The importance of the layout of the classroom is emphasised in the literature. For example, Murray (2012) outlines a number of factors to encourage exploration of the environment: freely available materials, a wide variety of different materials and opportunities to initiate and pursue personal interests. This means ensuring the classroom has accessible and clearly labelled (with pictures) storage to allow children to source their own materials for their planned activity and showcase their independence through relinquishing adult support. Additionally, the culture of the whole setting, not just the classroom, needs to be safe and supportive (Whitebread & Coltman, 2008), as not all children in this study liked to spend time in the classroom not assigned to them. This could be combatted by the movement of adults around the setting, as it may be the class teacher providing a secure base for exploration in their 'home' classroom (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2006).

Moreover, it is important to look at the areas of weakness identified in the CHILD 3-5 checklist scores of this study in order to inform future free flow pedagogy. The weakest area was 'plans own tasks, targets and goals'. One way to improve this might be to introduce the High/Scope 'plan-do-review' approach (Featherstone & Bayley, 2011). This involves the child planning, explicitly, what they are going to do in the session, encouraging them to complete it independently, supporting them to find alternatives when problems arise and reviewing with the group after their session. This would allow the children to take ownership of the task, develop skills to be resilient as well as becoming reflective learners. This would allow children to self-set learning goals, crucial to self-regulation development (Boekaerts & Niemivirta, 2000).

In summary, this study has been insightful and inspiring whilst allowing me to explore a pedagogical principle at the core of the Early Years classroom. I have learnt about the underlying theories of the use of free flow to promote independent learning and plan to use everything learnt to effectively implement free flow in my own classroom, to benefit all learners.

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