

**How Effective Is Phonological Awareness Training for  
Pre-Schoolers with Speech and Language Difficulties?  
Exploring The Perspectives of Teachers Working in  
Preschool Settings in Dubai.**

ما مدى فعالية التدريب على الوعي الصوتي لمرحلة ما قبل المدرسة للذين  
يعانون من صعوبات في النطق واللغة؟ استكشاف وجهات نظر المعلمين العاملين  
في مرحلة ما قبل المدرسة في دبي.

by

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** It is well documented throughout the literature that phonological awareness (PA) development in early education is a strong predictor of later reading success. Children with speech and/or language (S&L) impairments are at an increased risk of PA deficits and may face ongoing challenges and persistent difficulties, which impact literacy and language outcomes and academic success beyond the preschool classroom.

**Aims:** This qualitative study aims to explore how preschool teachers perceive the effectiveness of PA instruction for children with S&L difficulties.

**Methods and Procedures:** Forty preschool teachers working in private preschool settings in Dubai, UAE, were recruited. Following an initial survey to ascertain teacher knowledge about PA instruction in early education, teachers were invited to participate in a 4-week online training program aimed at developing PA skills in preschool children with S&L difficulties. 30% of the sample completed semi-structured interviews or a questionnaire following the intervention phase. Thematic analysis was applied and involved a process of manual coding to construct and interpret themes based on patterns that emerged from the data reflecting preschool teachers' perspectives.

**Findings:** The themes identified in this study are consistent with findings found in the literature. Teachers expressed that they lacked knowledge and skills regarding PA assessment and intervention methods. Similarly, teachers expressed that they lacked appropriate training to effectively support children with S&L difficulties in the preschool classroom. Whilst teachers acknowledged the need for early intervention and recognised the importance of PA in early literacy development for children with S&L deficits, they expressed limited opportunities to engage in collaborative practice alongside speech and language therapists (SLTs) who are experts in the field. Thus, professional development opportunities are warranted within

preschool settings in Dubai as findings highlight the need to improve teaching practices and provision for children with lower levels of language and literacy abilities. Furthermore, preschools must ensure that inclusion policies are reflected in practice so that children with additional educational needs have equal and equitable opportunities to access learning alongside typically developing peers. Therefore, policymakers and stakeholders must closely monitor and evaluate the quality of provision. The findings also reinforce the need for initial teacher training courses to be reviewed so that early educators enter the classrooms better equipped with knowledge, tools, confidence and strategies to effectively meet the needs of all preschool children.

## ملخص البحث

**الخلفية:** من المثبت جيدا في جميع الأدبيات ذات العلاقة أن تطور الوعي الصوتي (PA) في التعليم المبكر هو مؤشر قوي على نجاح مهارة القراءة لاحقا. إن الأطفال الذين يعانون من إعاقات في النطق و / أو اللغة (S&L) معرضون لخطر متزايد من عجز الوعي الصوتي وقد يواجهون تحديات مستمرة وصعوبات مستمرة ، مما يؤثر على التعليم ونتائج اللغة والنجاح الأكاديمي خارج الفصل الدراسي في مرحلة ما قبل المدرسة.

**الأهداف:** تهدف هذه الدراسة النوعية إلى استكشاف كيفية فهم معلمي مرحلة ما قبل المدرسة لفعالية تعليم الوعي الصوتي للأطفال الذين يعانون من صعوبات في النطق واللغة في التعليم.

**الأساليب والإجراءات:** تم إجراء دراسة على أربعين معلما في مرحلة ما قبل المدرسة يعملون في نفس البيئة في مدارس خاصة في دبي ، الإمارات العربية المتحدة. و بعد إجراء مسح أولي للتأكد من معرفة المعلمين حول تعليم الوعي الصوتي في التعليم المبكر ، تمت دعوة المعلمين للمشاركة في برنامج تدريبي عبر الإنترنت مدته 4 أسابيع يهدف إلى تطوير مهارات النطق واللغة لدى أطفال ما قبل المدرسة الذين يعانون من صعوبات في العلوم وقد أكمل 30٪ من العينة مقابلات شبه منظمة أو استبياننا بعد مرحلة التجربة. تم تطبيق التحليل الموضوعي وشمل ذلك عملية ترميز يدوي لبناء وتفسير الموضوعات بناء على الأنماط التي ظهرت من البيانات التي تعكس وجهات نظر معلمي مرحلة ما قبل المدرسة.

**النتائج:** تتفق الموضوعات المحددة في هذه الدراسة مع النتائج الموجودة في الأدبيات ذات الصلة. وقد أعرب المعلمون عن افتقارهم إلى المعرفة والمهارات اللازمة فيما يتعلق بأساليب تقييم الوعي الصوتي وتدخلها وبالمثل ، أعرب المعلمون عن افتقارهم إلى التدريب المناسب لدعم الأطفال الذين يعانون من صعوبات في النطق واللغة بشكل فعال في الفصول الدراسية لمرحلة ما قبل المدرسة. في حين أقر المعلمون بالحاجة إلى التدخل المبكر واعترفوا بأهمية الوعي الصوتي في تنمية محو الأمية المبكرة للأطفال الذين يعانون من عجز في العلوم والتعلم ، فقد أعربوا عن فرص محدودة للمشاركة في الممارسة التعاونية جنبا إلى جنب مع معالجي النطق واللغة (SLTs) الذين هم خبراء في هذا المجال. وبالتالي، فإن فرص التطوير المهني لها ما يبررها في بيئات ما قبل المدرسة في دبي، حيث تسلط النتائج الضوء على الحاجة إلى تحسين ممارسات التدريس وتوفير الأطفال ذوي المستويات المنخفضة من القدرات اللغوية ومحو الأمية. وعلاوة على ذلك، يجب أن تضمن رياض الأطفال أن تنعكس سياسات الإدماج في الممارسة العملية بحيث يتمتع الأطفال ذوو الاحتياجات التعليمية الإضافية بفرص متساوية ومنصفة للوصول إلى التعلم جنبا إلى جنب مع أقرانهم الذين يتطورون بشكل طبيعي. يجب على واضعي السياسات وأصحاب المصلحة رصد وتقييم نوعية الخدمة المتاحة عن كثب. وتعزز النتائج أيضا الحاجة إلى استعراض الدورات

التدريبية الأولية للمعلمين حتى يتمكن المعلمون المبتدئون من دخول الفصول الدراسية وهم مجهزون بشكل أفضل بالمعرفة والأدوات والثقة والاستراتيجيات اللازمة لتلبية احتياجات جميع أطفال ما قبل المدرسة بشكل فعال.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate my dissertation to my late grandfather Edward O'Neill. I am forever grateful for your guidance, words of wisdom and for helping me to believe in myself since my early school days. Your hard work ethic, love for your family and the strength that you showed throughout your life continues to inspire me and has pushed me to finish my dissertation this year. I love you very much and will forever cherish the memories of the fun times and laughter that we shared. You are sadly missed and always in my heart.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>EL</b>	Emergent Literacy
<b>EYFS</b>	Early Years Foundation Stage
<b>KHDA</b>	Knowledge and Human Development Authority
<b>MOE</b>	Ministry of Education
<b>PA</b>	Phonological Awareness
<b>PD</b>	Professional Development
<b>PHAKS</b>	Phonemic Awareness Knowledge and Skills
<b>SEN</b>	Special Educational Needs
<b>SLCN</b>	Speech, Language and Communication Needs
<b>SLI</b>	Specific Language Impairment
<b>SLT</b>	Speech and Language Therapist
<b>UAE</b>	United Arab Emirates
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Creating a language-rich environment supports young children as they develop their linguistic skills, acquire language, begin to understand the world around them and interact with others. A UK study found that as many as 42% of preschool children enter early educational settings with speech and/or language (S&L) difficulties (Jordan and Coulter 2017). Similarly, research conducted in the UAE reports a high prevalence of toddlers presenting with early language and communication impairments, warranting further investigation across the region (Almekaini et al. 2017). Therefore, it is important to explore and evaluate the effectiveness of current teaching practices and provision for children with special educational needs (SEN) in preschool settings. In recent years, educational and regulatory bodies in Dubai have placed a greater emphasis and responsibility on schools to establish inclusion policies and improve the quality of support for students with additional learning requirements. However, a recent report has identified common misconceptions about inclusive education amongst stakeholders throughout the private school sector across the emirate. Therefore, teachers and schools must advocate for students with SEN to be educated alongside their peers, strive to break down barriers and challenge negative attitudes to ensure equity and equal opportunities for all learners (KHDA 2019).

Early educators play a crucial role as significant adults who influence the lives of young children from the moment they step into the preschool classroom. Teachers should be armed with a toolbox of strategies and skills to help shape the hearts and minds of little learners through appropriate play-

based opportunities whilst scaffolding learning and providing words of encouragement along the way. Furthermore, it is essential that teachers utilise and differentiate resources effectively to support preschoolers with SEN who require individualised educational plans and more specialist provision.

Children with S&L difficulties face greater challenges and may present with expressive and/or receptive language problems. Thus, building strong language and literacy skills in the foundation stages proves critical so that children can effectively communicate with others, convey ideas, develop their understanding and access learning across the curriculum. Worryingly, however, throughout the literature and in practice, teachers report limited knowledge and expertise within the area of S&L development. A survey of over 1200 respondents was conducted by the communication trust (2017) and revealed that 49% of early educators lacked knowledge and skills within the area of S&L due to gaps in training and limited opportunities for professional development (PD). Such a high percentage is concerning and suggests that many teachers are unable to effectively meet the needs of children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Arguably, training courses and PD opportunities for teachers must be reviewed. Core objectives should emphasise best practices for assessment, intervention and differentiation so that teachers implement evidence-based practices which truly foster inclusive learning environments for pupils (ICAN/RCSLT 2018).

Various studies emphasise the value of S&L therapy in schools versus clinical settings in obtaining better outcomes for children (Hadley et al. 2000; Throneburg et. al. 2000). Similarly, teachers recognise the benefits of working in partnership with speech and language therapists (SLTs) because collaboration provides opportunities to share expertise and to develop knowledge and skills about best

practices and strategies for children with language, literacy and communication difficulties in the preschool classroom (Gallagher et al. 2019).

This qualitative study aims to explore how preschool teachers working in Dubai perceive the effectiveness of phonological awareness (PA) instruction for children with S&L difficulties. Numerous studies highlight the benefits of PA instruction in improving language and literacy outcomes in early education (Bode and Content 2011). Young children begin to learn about the functions, form and structure of language by engaging in activities that support early literacy and language development through play-based learning. For example, preschoolers are encouraged to explore rich text during story and rhyme time and to develop language and literacy skills by engaging in role-play activities, pretend play and when mark-making. However, circle time sessions provide teachers with opportunities to focus on elements of PA development directly so that young children can begin to decode and analyse spoken language. Therefore, the intervention phase in this study provides teachers with opportunities to observe online training videos and lesson plans aimed at targeting PA skills. The researcher (who is a qualified SLT) has outlined specific activities that will help teachers to improve provision for children with S&L difficulties in the classroom.

Without early intervention, children with SLCN are at an increased risk of experiencing persistent language, learning and literacy problems impacting academic progress beyond their early years. Gillon et al. (2019) assert that further research is necessary to investigate the effectiveness of class level early literacy instruction for children with lower levels of oral language and this current study aims to add evidence to the literature.



Teachers working with preschool children in private early educational preschools in Dubai, UAE, were invited to participate in the study. All teachers are native English speakers with various experiences and qualifications ranging from diplomas to master's degrees. The study focuses on exploring teacher perspectives about the effectiveness of PA instruction in the preschool classroom for children with S&L difficulties. Findings from teacher interviews and questionnaires provide insight into current assessment methods and PA interventions for children in early educational settings across Dubai. Furthermore, findings reflect the perspectives of teachers regarding their knowledge of S&L and PA within the broader context of early literacy development.

## **1.2Statement of the Problem**

The study was conducted due to several problems identified by the researcher. Whilst the literature highlights that PA instruction can lead to improved outcomes for children with S&L difficulties, there is a lack of research investigating the impact of PA interventions for children with S&L impairments in preschool settings within the context of the UAE. Furthermore, there are limited studies that have explored how teachers perceive the effectiveness of PA instruction for young learners with SLCN (Alshaboul 2018).

Preschool children with S&L difficulties often face greater challenges and barriers as they embark upon their early learning journey (Gillon 2002). In contrast to their typically developing peers, children with communication impairments may struggle to understand language or to express themselves effectively which impacts their social and emotional development. Therefore, it is important to explore how children are being supported in preschools across Dubai.

Research shows that children present with lower PA skills due to limited vocabulary and poor language modelling during adult-child interactions (Lonigan et al. 2009). Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in supporting emergent language and literacy development. Concerningly, teachers report a lack of training in S&L development and PA instruction. Their lack of confidence, skills and knowledge is troubling due to research highlighting the significance of early intervention for young children in reducing the risk of ongoing literacy problems (Almekaini et al. 2017). Furthermore, various studies reinforce the significance of PA activities in promoting the development of expressive and receptive language and social skills. However, there is a lack of studies and research relevant to the topic and within the context of the UAE.

The private preschool settings involved in this study do not have specialist staff on site. The researcher conducting this study is a qualified SLT but is working formally as a teacher in one of the preschools. In contrast to many UK based preschool settings which are government-funded, children with SLCN attending British curriculum schools in Dubai are typically required to pay for additional support and provision outside of the preschool setting. In recent years, the regulatory education authority has devised a framework which highlights that schools must strive to ensure equity, equality and inclusivity for all students (KHDA 2019). However, whilst this is a positive step in the right direction, both the MOE and KHDA need to work in partnership to monitor compliance, standards and the quality of provision for children with SEN in preschool settings.

### **1.3The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers perceive the effectiveness of PA instruction for preschool children with S&L difficulties. The researcher aims to ascertain what types of assessment

tools, intervention programs and strategies are being implemented to support PA skills within the wider context of early literacy development preschool settings in Dubai. Importantly, the purpose of the study is to empower teachers by providing them with PA training, activities and lesson plans so that they can better support children with S&L difficulties. Furthermore, the researcher aims to explore the perspectives of teachers about collaborative practice when working alongside SLTs.

### **1.4Research Questions**

1. What do preschool teachers in Dubai understand about PA development and instruction?
2. How do preschool teachers in Dubai assess PA?
3. What PA programs, activities and strategies do teachers deliver to effectively support PA development for children, including children presenting with speech and/or language difficulties?
4. How do teachers working in Dubai perceive PA training and collaborative practice with speech and language therapists?

### **1.5The Significance of the Study**

Various studies emphasise that early intervention for children with poor PA is crucial to reduce the threat of long term and more complex language and literacy problems (Gillon et al. 2019). Furthermore, research has shown that teachers lack adequate knowledge and skills relevant to PA development which impacts their ability to appropriately assess PA skills and to implement effective PA instruction which can meet the needs of all students (Driver et al. 2014; Dickinson and Brady 2005). Kilpatrick and O'Brien (2019) assert that many preschool teachers are unaware of evidence-based PA programs which promote literacy development due to a lack of PD opportunities and

collaborative practices. Furthermore, few studies in the literature have explored the efficacy of programs being delivered by teachers (Kelly et al. 2019). Therefore, this study proves significant for several reasons. Firstly, data analysis will help to strengthen the current evidence base by providing scope for exploration of teachers' perspectives about the phenomenon.

Secondly, teachers involved in the study have access to training focused on improving PA skills in young children with S&L difficulties. The training has been developed by a qualified SLT with ten years of experience in the field. Research shows that teachers welcome opportunities to engage in collaborative practice and therefore, the study provides opportunities for teachers to expand their knowledge and skills within the areas of PA and S&L development.

Thirdly, above all and most importantly, empowering teachers helps to improve their practice relevant to the area of PA and within the wider context of literacy development, which may subsequently lead to improved PA skills in preschoolers. Thus, all children will be better supported in the classroom so that they meet learning objectives through appropriate differentiation and support.

Finally, in recent years, the authority that oversees the private education sector in Dubai (KHDA) has produced a framework placing greater responsibilities on schools to implement policies and improve provisions for children with SEN. Therefore, this study proves significant in advocating for equity, equality and inclusive practices in preschool settings within the private early year's sector.

### **1.6Outline of the Chapters**

This research study is presented in five chapters. The introductory chapter is labelled chapter one and outlines background information that is relevant to the phenomenon being studied. The chapter

describes the problems identified by the researcher which sparked her interest to conduct the study. Furthermore, the chapter details the context and purpose of the research and highlights the significance of the study.

Chapter two contains the literature review. This chapter outlines the conceptual and theoretical frameworks underpinning the research. The chapter also presents a review and critical analysis of relevant studies in the literature.

Chapter three contains the methodology. It describes the research design and methods implemented by the researcher throughout the duration of the research project. The chapter outlines the research questions, sampling methods, research instruments and describes how data was collected and analysed. Furthermore, the chapter also outlines how the researcher maintained ethical conduct and took measures to ensure reliability, validity and trustworthiness.

Chapter four contains the findings and discussion section. The chapter describes the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. Chapter four also discusses how the researcher interpreted the findings by reflecting on teacher narratives as well as theories and concepts already published within the literature.

Chapter five is the final chapter and contains the conclusions and recommendations. The chapter provides a summary of the research conducted and also addresses the limitations of the study. The

researcher affirms the conclusions made and provides recommendations as a result of the findings from the research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

It proves crucial to conduct an extensive literature review to explore and discover the current evidence base that is relevant to the phenomenon being studied by the researcher. Therefore, chapter 2 outlines the conceptual framework and theoretical framework which underpin the research being conducted. The chapter also contains a critical evaluation of studies in the literature that are relevant to this research project.

#### **2.2 What is Phonological Awareness?**

PA is a meta-linguistic skill involving the conscious ability to distinguish and manipulate the sounds in spoken language (Marquis et al. 2020; Choi et al. 2016). Within the area of phonological processing, PA concerns the phonological structure of words. Young children must develop explicit awareness of speech sounds so that they can analyse sounds heard in isolation and within words (Neuman, Copple and Bredekamp 2000; Torgesen 1999). PA is a broad term encompassing the skill to auditorily process oral language by breaking sentences and words into smaller chunks at the level of syllables and individual phonemes (Gillon 2004). It embodies the concept that speech sounds are separate from the grapheme representation of sounds in written language (Sodoro, Allinder and Rankin-Erickson 2002). Children learn to make associations between spoken and written representations of words by developing specific awareness of the phonological structures required for word building (Gillon 2004).

Various studies have proven that PA instruction leads to better outcomes for children with underdeveloped PA skills (Gillon et al. 2019; Bode and Content 2011; Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti and Lonigan 2008). Throughout the literature and in practice, there is great variation regarding assessment tools and interventions for PA development in preschool settings. When planning PA lessons, teachers must decide how best to structure and deliver instruction whilst utilising available resources to provide appropriate provisions for children who are struggling readers. Although PA methods may vary greatly, exposing children to nursery rhymes is typically common practice. Teaching traditional songs and nursery rhymes supports children to recognise rhyme and alliteration when they are encouraged to sing, identify words that rhyme (and words that do not), and engage in rhyme production tasks (Almost and Rosenbaum 1998). McKinnon (2017) asserts that word rhyming and rhythm activities prove fundamental as part of early literacy training. Children are encouraged to learn to recognise syllables within words and begin to understand that the initial consonant or consonant blend at the beginning of a word is termed the ‘onset’ and is preceded by ‘rime’, being the vowel and letters that follow (Suortti and Lipponen 2016; Carson and Bayetto 2018; Ehri 2004; Lynch 2021).

The main principles underpinning PA instruction involve teaching children to understand that sentences can be deconstructed into words, syllables and sounds. The most complex aspect of PA development is phoneme-level awareness (Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti and Lonigan 2008). This requires young children to be able to identify the smallest unit of speech and is highly predictive of literacy outcomes for reading and spelling beyond the preschool years as children learn to read and write by blending phonemes and manipulating sound segments in words (Ehri 2004; International Literacy Association 2019; Hodgins and Harrison 2021).



Research highlights that working memory capacity and vocabulary development are associated with PA (Jing et al. 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to nurture and develop emergent language and literacy skills in the early year's classroom by building strong foundations for later and more formalised reading instruction (Lonigan 2003). Frost et. al (2009) comment that to develop both speech and reading processes, children must understand the sound structure of language. This is because PA supports the ability to decode, encode and recognise words when learning to read and write by following the alphabetic system of the English language (Westby 2020). Rohde, Paciga and Cassano (2021) convey that PA instruction should be effective, efficient and equitable for all learners.

### **2.3 Speech and Language Difficulties**

For a child with speech and/or language (S&L) difficulties, early intervention proves critical and should focus on developing literacy and language skills concurrently (Gillon and McFarlane 2017). Stoeckel et al. (2013) assert that around 47% of children with S&L needs continue to experience difficulties with spelling, reading and writing which impacts academic attainment throughout their school years. Furthermore, Longitudinal data highlights that a child with poor literacy skills may continue to face challenges with literacy skills in adulthood (Del Tufo and Earle 2020).

Many young children with S&L impairments present with poor PA development which places them at an increased risk (by 5 times) of being diagnosed with dyslexia before grade two (Catts et al. 2017). Phillips, Clancy-Menchetti and Lonigan (2008) assert that deficits in PA are often the root causative factor in children with reading impairment despite cognitive and language difficulties which may prevail. Thus, in consideration of the research conducted, it proves significant to consider the nature

of S&L diagnoses and the intrinsic factors related to common communication disorders within the preschool classroom (Barton-Hulsey, Sevcik and Ronski 2018; Moats 2014). One of the aims of this current study is to also ascertain how teachers assess PA in the preschools due to the lack of valid assessment tools for this population (Thurlow 2010).

## **2.4 Speech Sound Disorders**

Young children with speech sound disorders (SSD) are at an increased risk of delayed PA skills (Rvachew and Grawburg 2006; Anthony et al. 2011). SSD can be defined as a developmental disorder that is reflective of difficulties in phonological processing or articulation, which impacts the production of speech sounds (Nowak and Jacquemont 2020). This may be attributed to difficulties with motor production, structural deficits, linguistic processes, perceptual processes or indeed, result in a mixed presentation (McLeod and Baker 2017). Whilst some children may gradually develop intelligible speech, a significant percentage of preschool and school-aged children continue to experience speech difficulties with prevalence rates estimated at around 12% for children aged between 4-6years old (McLeod and Harrison 2009). Children with SSD have been found to encounter long term difficulties with reading, often scoring significantly below typically developing peers (Bird, Bishop and Freeman. 1995). Important indicators of persistent literacy difficulties for children with SSD are associated with the severity of deficits in phonological processing, PA and with the production of speech sounds (Tambyraja, Farquharson and Justice 2020). In addition to delayed PA skills, children with SSD may also demonstrate poorer vocabulary development and speech perception abilities (Benway et al. 2021). Difficulties in phonological processing skills due to deficiencies with the underlying representations of words result in the production of more speech

errors (Rvachew and Grawburg 2006; Rvachew, Chiang and Evans 2007). Such difficulties may be attributed to atypical phonological processing at the level of phoneme awareness (Shakeri et al. 2014). Furthermore, research shows that SSD frequently coincides with language disorder (Stefanatos and Postman-Caucheteux 2010).

## **2.5 Language Disorder**

Children with language disorders have difficulties with receptive and expressive language skills. Should communication difficulties persist beyond preschool years, children may face lifelong learning adversities (Clegg et al. 2005). Poor vocabulary development and PA attainment are associated with language disorders (Munson, Swenson and Manthei. 2005). Research also conveys that children with specific language impairments (SLI) also demonstrate difficulties with print awareness, early writing development and alphabet knowledge (Pavelko et al. 2018).

Buschmann et al. (2008) assert that preschool children identified as being late talkers (under the age of 30 months) face ongoing literacy and communication difficulties. SLI is one of the most common developmental disorders being also referred to as ‘developmental language disorder’, ‘developmental dysphasia’ or ‘language delay’ (NIH 2019). Children who receive a diagnosis of SLI have a communication disorder without the presence of cognitive, hearing or physical disabilities (Justice et al. 2005). There is robust evidence indicating the high prevalence rates between SLI and poor reading ability, inclusive of difficulties with PA (Catts et al. 2002; Catts et al. 1999; McCardle 2001). Spear-Swerling (2006) asserts that 40-75% of children with SLI experience deficits and challenges when learning to read due to problems constructing sentences, limited vocabulary and poor grammar.

Gillon et al. (2019) acknowledge that children with S&L difficulties may not have access to SLT specialist intervention due to barriers and constraints which impact the quality of provision and support that is available to meet their needs. Teachers play a crucial role when it comes to identifying children with SEN. Therefore, it is important to evaluate their perspectives on PA instruction for children and to ascertain their knowledge and skills within the wider context of early literacy and language development in the preschool classroom.

### Overview of Research Questions, Design, Sample and Instrumentation

Study Questions	Method	Instrument	Sample	Data Analysis
1.What do preschool in Dubai understand about PA development and instruction?	Qualitative	Survey  Semi-structured interviews  Questionnaires	40 participants  30% of sample	Thematic analysis
2.How do preschool teachers in Dubai assess PA?	Qualitative	Semi-structured Interviews  Questionnaires	30% of sample	Thematic analysis
3.What PA programs, activities and strategies do teachers deliver to effectively support PA development for children; including children with speech and/or language difficulties?	Qualitative	Semi-structured Interviews  Questionnaires	30% of sample	Thematic analysis
4.How do teachers working in Dubai perceive PA training and collaborative practice with speech and language therapists?	Qualitative	Semi-structured Interviews  Questionnaires	30% of sample	Thematic analysis

**Table 1**

## **2.6 Theoretical Frameworks**

### **2.6.1 Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (EYFS)**

The EYFS British curriculum is heavily influenced by the work of play-based theorists such as Bruner, Vygotsky and Piaget. At the heart of EYFS lies four main themes: ‘Learning and Development’, ‘Positive Relationships’, ‘Enabling Environments’ and ‘A Unique Child’ (DFE 2021). Within the preschool classroom, children actively learn through different forms of play and multi-sensory experiences aimed at developing language and communication, personal, social and emotional development, literacy, expressive art, physical skills, mathematics and an understanding of the world (Keman 2007). Pre-schoolers are encouraged to explore, inquire, and interact with peers whilst constructing ideas. It is important to understand the theory underpinning the EYFS curriculum and how this influences PA and literacy instruction delivered by teachers working in preschool education.

### **2.6.2 Constructivist Theory**

The constructivist theory of Piaget outlines the four stages of cognitive development depicting how demands and capacities change as children learn and develop greater levels of intelligence. These stages include: sensorimotor (0-2 years), preoperational (2-7 years), concrete operational (7-11 years) and the formal operation stage (12 years and above). It is crucial to gauge an understanding of a child’s cognitive ability through formative and summative assessment to plan appropriate and effective interventions. Early educators are most concerned with the first two stages considering the close links between language, play, cognitive development and early learning experiences.

Vygotsky's theory of constructivism emphasises that cognitive development is attributed to a child's social experiences and interactions. He defined the Zone of Proximal Development as the gap between what a child can do independently versus what a child can achieve when guided by adults or more advanced peers (McLeod 2019). Therefore, when planning PA lessons, the constructivist approach encourages more interactive play-based activities aimed at developing inquisitiveness to enhance learning (Morrow 2009). Scaffolding supports children who are struggling with PA and literacy skills. McGee and Ukrainetz (2009) comment that intensive scaffolding involves isolating phonemes, emphasising sounds and providing children with tactile and visual cues. Therefore, teachers must guide, comment, model and determine the level of help needed to enable students to achieve the learning outcomes albeit with assistance.

Similarly, a constructivist approach empowers early educators, by providing them with PD opportunities to construct their knowledge through reflection, interpretation, and collaboration within a supportive learning environment (Howe and Stubbs 1996; Fung 2000). This study encourages educators working in preschools to reflect on prior knowledge about PA instruction and to expand their perspectives by engaging in training and consultation alongside a specialist SLT.

### **2.6.3 Emergent Literacy Theory**

Strong reading and writing skills prove crucial for academic and professional success throughout life. Maire Clay's Emergent Literacy (EL) theory stresses the significance of developing young children's oral language, writing, and reading abilities from birth and reinforces the importance of teacher scaffolds in promoting emergent literacy skills (Clay 1991). EL theory highlights that literacy skills

develop along a continuum and must be supported by appropriate learning opportunities to obtain mastery (Whitehurst and Lonigan 2001).

The components of EL theory focus on the functions of literacy, vocabulary development and reading comprehension, as well as letter and sound knowledge which include the development of metalinguistic skills such as PA (Mason and Stewart 1990; Senechal et al. 2001). Rode (2015) asserts that PA proves critical in EL being closely associated with causative factors attributing to underlining reading impairments. The theory of EL is reflected throughout the EYFS curriculum with clear learning outcomes outlined for developing both early language and literacy skills within the preschool classroom. A critical aspect of the theory concerns the experiences that shape the attitudes of young children towards reading and writing. Children are actively encouraged to develop their literacy skills by engaging in writing and reading activities through positive play-based activities and exploration (Senechal et al. 2001). Therefore, preschool teachers should endeavour to make reading enjoyable by providing experiences that are fun and exciting; instilling a love for reading as children begin to understand the function of books and the processes involved in reading. McKinnon (2017) asserts that good readers will be better writers. Within the preschool environment, writing opportunities should be set up appropriately and embedded into play, being scaffolded by teachers.

## **2.7 Relevant Studies**

Schools internationally are being urged by leaders and educationalists to strategically invest resources to improve literacy outcomes for future economic growth and development (UNESCO 2013). Therefore, teachers are challenged to improve language and literacy outcomes by implementing the

most effective interventions relevant to the age and learning needs of all children in the preschool classroom. However, it is clear from the literature and in practice, that many early educators fail to comprehend the complexities of grapheme-phoneme correspondence when targeting PA and literacy skills in young children with SLCN (Verissimo et al. 2021; Law et. al 2000; Brady 2011). Therefore, there is a need for teachers to develop a greater understanding of the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in reading acquisition, whilst appreciating the interdependencies of written and oral language.

A recent study conducted by Uysal, Guduk and Tura (2019) revealed that 46% of preschool teachers did not feel that they could adequately support children with more complex communication difficulties due to limited experience and training. Similarly, The Communication Trust (2017) conducted a survey which explored teacher perspectives and found that nearly half of the 1200 respondents reported a lack of understanding and reduced confidence within the area of SLCN (ICAN/RCSLT 2018). Furthermore, Justice et al. (2008) explored the quality of preschool literacy and language instruction across 135 early educational settings and concluded that the quality and level of instruction delivered by most of the teachers was poor. Teachers failed to employ evidence-based strategies when supporting early language and literacy development in preschoolers. This is alarming as findings revealed that teachers were lacking in the most basic skills relevant to language modelling, word repetition and open-ended questioning. Worryingly, teacher limitations could evoke stark consequences for children due to gaps in their knowledge about PA and best practices for supporting children with SLCN.



Several studies have proven the importance of PA in word recognition, fluency, speed reading and comprehension. Thus, having a toolbox of resources and methods can effectively stimulate this meta-skill and boost literacy outcomes in early education (Newbury et al. 2020; Wanzek, Otaiba and McMaster 2019). PD opportunities for teachers to work alongside SLTs within the educational sector would enhance knowledge and skills, ensuring that they are best equipped to differentiate PA instruction to meet the needs of all children (Dockrell and Lindsay 2001). However, throughout the literature and in practice, there is great variance when it comes to literacy training for preschool children and teachers are challenged when deciding whether PA instruction, phonics programmes and/or mixed approaches prove most effective within the context of play-based curriculums (McIntosh et al. 2007). Such variables prove significant when planning class-based literacy intervention (Carson, Gillon and Boustead 2013).

O'Connor, Jenkins and Slocum (1995) suggest that teachers should target a range of PA skills by implementing age-appropriate activities that can facilitate generalisation and support the development of more complex skills, keeping in mind that early linguistic and word decoding abilities predict reading comprehension in later years (Troppa et al. 2016). Not only do teachers need to understand the significance of PA in developing early literacy skills, but they must also appreciate that 'one size does not fit all' and lessons must be tailored to meet the individualised learning needs of children. Furthermore, it is also important to consider preferred learning styles, motivation and modalities when teaching PA skills. Multi-sensory concepts consider how children learn best by seeing, feeling, hearing and moving which helps stimulate frontal, temporal and angular gyrus parts of the brain involved in language, speech, comprehension, sound identification and decoding (Institute of Multi-Sensory Education 2020).

### **2.7.1 Explicit Teaching**

PA is not an innate skill as it involves a conceptual level of understanding relevant to the sound structure of words (Oktay and Aktan 2002). Research reveals that explicit and systematic teaching should be purposeful and functional to increase participation and advance emergent literacy skills so that children can comprehend text, learn new information, develop their imagination and build on prior knowledge whilst reading for pleasure (Justice et al. 2008; Ukrainetz, 2006). In the early year's classroom, a two-tiered systematic approach to PA training has been shown to have positive outcomes for children and comprises whole class and small group learning which creates opportunities for teachers to deliver a more direct and intensive level of instruction through modelling and scaffolding based on the specific needs and abilities of students (Foorman and Torgesen 2001).

Ziolkowski and Goldstein (2008) found that an explicit PA intervention embedded within shared book reading improved literacy outcomes for 13 preschool children from impoverished backgrounds with language delays. Within the preschool classroom, shared book reading provides great opportunities to promote language development, imagination and literacy development (Wesseling, Christmann and Lachmann 2017). The study highlights the effectiveness of PA instruction by targeting phoneme awareness, rhyme and alliteration. Contrary to the findings of this paper, some older studies report minimal effects of shared book reading on phonological processing, despite improved outcomes on language for children with typical language abilities (Whitehurst et al. 1988; Lonigan et al. 1999). However, the repetitive opportunities for children to practice PA skills taught within the context of small groups may have attributed to better outcomes in PA and should be considered for future research and in teaching practice (Ziolkowski and Goldstein study 2008). Although the instruction

was delivered by SLTs and students, social validity ratings showed that teachers (blinded to the specific experimental conditions) noted improvements in the children's PA during daily activities, suggesting that students were able to generalise what they had learnt during the PA instruction. Thus, collaborative practice and partnership working between teachers and therapists can lead to improved outcomes for children with language difficulties (Ziolkowski and Goldstein study 2008).

Similarly, a study conducted by Kleeck et al. (1998) also highlights the benefits of teachers working in the preschool classroom with more specialist skills and knowledge within the area of language and literacy development. The study investigated the impact of PA training on 16 preschool children with S&L impairments over nine months and showed that children in the intervention group made significant improvements in both rhyme and phoneme awareness. However, it is important to note that children were not matched in terms of the specific nature of their impairment and although comparisons were drawn from a control group of children, these students were older in age. The researchers justify sampling methods due to the small class sizes in the school affirming that improvements were attributed to the specific PA training because children in the intervention group performed above the older control groups' confidence interval on measures of phoneme awareness. Classroom teachers were also qualified SLTs with specialist skills and knowledge. Therefore, in terms of replicating the intervention and generalisability, one may question if preschool teachers would be able to achieve the same results.

Studies have shown that PD opportunities provide scope for teachers to develop the most effective PA instruction programs within preschool classrooms when working alongside SLTs. In a study conducted by McCutchen et al. (2002) early education teachers were recruited into an experimental

group attended a 2-week course aimed at developing their knowledge and skills about phonology and reading concepts. Post-training and classroom follow up showed that teachers who had undergone the training sessions had significantly improved their knowledge and skills, maximizing reading outcomes for students. Researchers found that the students of the trained teachers demonstrated better PA and reading ability when compared to students of teachers who had not undergone training reinforcing the benefits of the training on PA outcomes.

Gillon et al. (2019) provided teachers with training, lesson plans, resources and books to develop PA skills, letter knowledge and vocabulary in children with language difficulties. Following the 10-week intervention phase where teachers delivered the program 4 times weekly for 30 mins, results from standardized assessments showed that the program proved more effective for students with poor oral language skills when compared to their regular literacy curriculum. It should be noted that the researchers and SLTs involved in the study conducted the assessment and there are no details provided about the specific steps taken to reduce potential bias during the data analysis process. Although the children made significant progress in vocabulary development and PA skills which improved word decoding abilities, there was a lack of instruction effect relevant to sound-letter knowledge and fluency and therefore, future studies should consider strengthening the focus of the intervention (Gillon et al. 2019). Furthermore, the researchers claim that collaborative practice proves fundamental in determining a systematic approach toward developing early literacy skills in the classroom but there is no evidence of teacher perspectives regarding the benefits of interprofessional collaboration with SLTs. Teacher interviews for example would help to strengthen the data.

Interestingly, in a follow-up study, Gillon et al. (2020) targeted vocabulary development and oral language skills through shared reading, story recall and writing tasks. It is important to acknowledge that writing ability is reflective of proficiency in PA and the ability to implement phonic strategies (Moats 2014). The delivery of the intervention also integrated cultural constructs within the context of the New Zealand educational framework, based on suggestions presented in a previous article published by the authors (Gillon and MacFarlane, 2017). Over the academic year, student progress was monitored and compared between children with S&L impairment, typically developing children and children who presented with language difficulties alone. Although participants with S&L difficulties showed improvements in phonemic awareness and vocabulary learning, results reinforced the importance of ongoing evidence-based literacy support to develop spelling abilities and word decoding skills. Throughout the literature, few studies have investigated the effectiveness of classroom-based literacy interventions for children with both S&L impairment. Al Otaiba et al. (2009) comment that most studies focus on small group or individual literacy intervention programs for this population. Thus, whilst Gillon et al. (2020) did focus on wider class-based intervention, children with S&L difficulties continued to simultaneously attend small group literacy lessons. The content and delivery of the smaller group sessions were not monitored and may have influenced or contributed to the outcomes presented, questioning validity.

Undoubtedly working in the preschool classroom is fast-paced, fun and challenging due to the age and stage of little learners. Teachers must ensure that they plan and prepare high-quality lessons that are motivating and stimulating, whilst considering continuous provision and differentiation for children with more severe reading difficulties and who require a more rigorous approach. Torgesen et al. (2001) found that intensive PA training which was delivered daily for two-hour periods over 8-

weeks significantly improved reading and comprehension abilities as children doubled their reading rate from pretesting measures. Encouragingly, this intervention showed that 40 % of participants no longer required specialised education services.

Instructional sequencing is a systematic process that helps teachers to plan more effectively by considering the content, order of skills to be taught, learning objectives, resources and classroom management strategies that best support children. Carson, Gillon and Boustead (2013) applied the process of learning sequencing when investigating the effect of an intensive PA program for children with and without specific language impairment (SLI) on literacy outcomes. In a large scale quasi-experimental design study, 34 children (5 years old) received an intensive phase of PA instruction over a 10-week period which was delivered by their teachers in the classroom setting, whilst 95 children continued to receive their usual literacy program which focused on phonics instruction and did not specifically target PA. Before delivering the intervention, teachers received an instruction manual, met with the researcher and were supported through coaching to deliver instruction aimed at targeting phoneme identification, analysis, blending, segmentation, onset-rime and print awareness. Thus, both cognitive and social learning opportunities helped teachers to develop their knowledge and skills relevant to literacy intervention (Borko, 2004). Results showed that children who attended the PA program presented with improved literacy outcomes when compared to students who had received their regular literacy lessons. Furthermore, children with SLI demonstrated significant progress in PA skills, word decoding abilities, reading and spelling. Whilst results seem promising, it is important to note that only 7 children (out of a total of 34) who received the intervention in either Group A or B presented with SLI on standardized testing measures. Factors related to generalisability and scalability are questionable due to the intensity of the instruction provided and whether findings

were attributed to the amount of training that teachers received, specific elements of the actual intervention program or a mix of both (Wilcox, Gray and Reiser 2020).

A recent review of the EYFS curriculum places greater focus on the need to embed early language, vocabulary and literacy development across all seven areas of learning (DFE 2021). Teachers must also place a greater emphasis on developing stronger links between comprehension, reading and writing skills whilst ensuring accessibility and equity for all children (Early Years Alliance 2021). Specific programs like Teaching Early Literacy and Language (TELL) focus on creating explicit literacy and language opportunities that are carefully embedded in whole-class teaching and smaller group activities across the curriculum. TELL aims to systematically target literacy skills by enabling children to develop and build on their knowledge throughout the academic year (Wilcox, Gray and Reiser 2020). An RCT study was conducted on quite a large scale with 289 preschool participants from different settings recruited. Pre and post early literacy assessments indicate that TELL was effective in improving early literacy and oral language skills for children with S&L impairment although it is not clear how specific groups responded. The teachers were randomly assigned to deliver the TELL intervention or instructed to continue with their regular literacy approach and received ongoing individual and group-based support, coaching, modelling and training at intervals throughout the 34-week intervention phase. Although the children underwent brief assessments throughout the year to help teachers plan differentiation and instruction, the formal testing measures were conducted by researchers blinded to the aims and conditions of the study which helps to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

### **2.7.2 Pedagogical features that prove significant in PA Instruction**

Children need to be able to hear sounds in words and sentences clearly during PA instruction. Children with S&L difficulties are typically screened to ensure that their hearing is within normal limits. Teachers must identify and refer children with suspected hearing difficulties to specialist services because one of the most common childhood ailments causing temporary hearing loss peaks between 2-5 years of age and is known as otitis media (glue ear). It has been reported that 80 % of children will encounter glue ear before the age of 10 (ENT UK 2013).

Appropriate modelling is one of the most salient features of PA training because children will learn to repeat the teacher's model. Therefore, it is important that phonemes, digraphs and trigraphs are articulated correctly and this can prove challenging for teachers who lack sufficient knowledge about PA (Philips, Clancy-Menchetti and Lonigan 2008). During classroom observations, McGee and Ukrainetz (2009) found that teachers failed to provide appropriate levels of support for kindergarten students during PA instruction. Consequently, the researchers developed three specific levels of scaffolding which teachers were able to employ during instruction and as a result over 75% of students were able to isolate more initial sounds. Scaffolding also involves the use of cueing to support auditory PA instruction such as clapping out syllables and using physical gestures to demonstrate long/short sounds, when blending, and segmenting which is particularly important for children with limited communication skills. Cole (2006) found that primary cues prove more efficient when it comes to supporting decoding skills which reinforces that teachers need to be able to scaffold instruction to meet the needs of both fluent and novice readers.



### **2.7.3 Phonics**

In the context of this study, it is important to understand the difference between phonological awareness (which comprises phonemic awareness) and phonics instruction, as these terms are sometimes confused and used interchangeably in the literature and practice (Cheeseman et al. 2009; Bottari 2020). It is widely accepted that establishing strong PA skills supports later phonics instruction. The National Reading Panel (2000) reviewed over fifty studies that incorporated PA in literacy programs and concluded that reading outcomes are best achieved through phoneme manipulation which supports young students when learning to read.

Phonics programmes focus on teaching children to associate letters with specific sounds. Therefore, children need to acquire letter name knowledge so that they can recognise all 26 graphemes and relate these written representations to the 44 phonemes of the English language e.g. single phonemes (e.g. /b/, /p/, /m/) digraphs (e.g. /sh/, /ee/, oa) and trigraphs (/air/, /igh/, /ure/). Children learn alternative spellings for sounds that are the same e.g. ai,, a\_e, ay all make the same sound in words like rain, snake, and play but they are spelt differently. Central to phonics instruction is the idea that children explicitly learn how to decode words through systematic, structured and multi-sensory learning experiences (Institute for Multisensory Education 2020). Interestingly, however, a recent systematic review of twelve studies, Bowers (2020) argues that there is limited empirical evidence to prove that systematic phonics instruction is more effective than whole language and alternative approaches, highlighting the need for further research.

Policy changes in the UK have made phonics instruction compulsory in all government-funded schools with children undergoing a phonics screening between the ages of 5-6 years old (Rose 2006). Thus, preschoolers who develop strong PA foundational skills will be better prepared for formal literacy instruction in year one.

#### **2.7.4 Teachers' Perspectives**

A recent qualitative study conducted by Verissimo et al. (2021) explored the perspectives of early educators regarding the importance of PA in the prevention of learning disabilities. The term 'learning disabilities' is quite broad and not specifically defined throughout the paper. 10 teachers who worked in preschool and primary school settings participated in the study however, it is unclear whether all teachers taught at the same school and followed the same curriculum; these details are significant considering that perspectives are likely to be influenced by such factors. The researchers adopted a semi-inductive logic and took steps to strengthen the data by transcribing the interviews and coding via NVIVO qualitative software. Coding was performed twice, and a comparison was made to ensure consistency throughout the analysis (Verissimo et al. (2021). This approach is appropriate considering the small sample size in allowing themes and findings to emerge from the data (Thomas 2003). Results from semi-structured interviews (most conducted via Zoom due to COVID restrictions) showed that despite identifying gaps in PA development, primary teachers of 1st-grade children did not make PA activities a priority and tended to focus more on comprehension and fluency activities. However, both preschool and primary school educators recognised the importance of PA in early literacy development and pre-academic skills. Preschool teachers reported that they motivated young children by engaging them in play-based PA activities through games, rhymes, songs, and stories whilst providing opportunities for children to explore texts, read words and develop reading

comprehension. Some teachers implemented a specific PA stimulation program using technological resources. Similarly, other studies have found that play-based interventions and appropriate resources can motivate and enhance PA in students, reducing difficulties with reading (Cotonhoto, Rosetti and Missawa 2019). Analysis of teacher narratives also emphasised the significance of collaborative practice and teamwork between professionals to determine the best PA instruction which foster the most effective outcomes for children. In qualitative research, Guba (1981) states that credibility, confirmability and fittingness help to ensure 'trustworthiness' within the naturalistic paradigm. Notably, the conclusions of this pilot study are based on a small sample size which will be integrated as part of a larger in-depth study.

Alshaboul (2018) comments that learning English involves many complexities for Arab EFL students due to difficulties with prelexical word recognition processes and grammatical structure. This is important to note within the context of this current study due to the multi-cultural and multi-lingual backgrounds of expatriates living in the UAE. Many teachers are working with children who are learning English as an additional language and some students may also present with SLCN as they struggle to meet developmental norms in their native language. Venkatagiri and Levis (2009) assert that EFL students must learn to identify sounds, substitute, segment and blend sounds to become successful readers. Alshaboul (2018) explored the perspectives of Jordanian undergraduate English language teachers about PA and reading development. 158 participants completed a checklist of preschool literacy practices which involved a 5-Likert rating scale. Questionnaires revealed that teachers recognised that PA was important but lacked knowledge and strategies about how to implement the most effective interventions which prove crucial for early literacy development. It is concerning that teachers have limited basic skills to successfully teach blending, segmenting and

phoneme identification. The researcher concludes that there is a need for undergraduate EFL teachers to undergo explicit PA training within the broader context of developing early literacy skills.

Globally, teachers are challenged to improve literacy outcomes for all students (Gillon and McFarlane 2017). They are expected to be equipped with a range of infallible strategies to support every learner, including children with more complex literacy needs. In a survey conducted by Daniel and Reynolds (2007) teachers and SLTs agreed that working on PA skills such as sound/letter correspondences, blending and segmentation proved significant in supporting emergent literacy development. However, over 50% of SLTs stated that they did not deliver PA interventions within early educational classrooms or collaborate with teachers.

Political, cultural and financial issues ultimately influence PD opportunities for preschool teachers which consequently impact teaching practices and literacy outcomes for children (Duke and Block 2012). The National Assessment of Education Progress (2019) found that 66% of children in 4<sup>th</sup> grade was not reading proficiently at grade level. Thus, it is critical to examine the level and quality of training, knowledge and skills of childhood educators and their ability to implement evidence-based instruction in the classroom.

A study conducted by McKinnon (2017) highlighted that preschool teachers spent over half of the time allocated for reading instruction working on phonics and PA, and whilst these skills prove significant in determining future reading success, should not be the sole focus in the classroom. Therefore, it is important to consider the suggestions presented in this research paper when determining the most effective PA instruction within the preschool classroom. Recent changes to the EYFS framework highlight the need for teachers to embed activities that will enhance language and

literacy skills throughout all aspects of the curriculum. The researcher argues that educators are not adequately delivering comprehensive literacy programs which integrate PA, vocabulary development, text awareness, fluency and reading comprehension. However, there is a lack of significant detail about the search methods and criteria applied for articles referred to in the review which questions potential bias. It is important to remember that when judging the quality of research, it is crucial to closely examine trustworthiness and strategies that can help to ensure rigour throughout the study (Seale 1999).

Considering the wider context, research suggests that teachers' constructions of early language and literacy development may influence decisions about literacy programs, instruction and teaching practices in the classroom. Fang (1996) comments that the decisions teachers make are grounded in their beliefs and perceptions about how children develop literacy skills and how they can best support them according to their level of ability. In a randomised control trial conducted by Wilcox et al. (2020), 47% of preschool teachers who were assigned to deliver their 'regular curriculum' reported that they did not follow a specific curriculum for developing early literacy and language skills. This is quite shocking and questions the quality of literacy instruction in preschools.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Walker (2015) explored preschool teachers' constructions of early reading intervention and highlighted that the teachers involved in the study approached reading instruction differently. Purposeful sampling recruited 6 participants and whilst this is appropriate based on the phenomenon being studied, it is a small study. Although the teachers followed similar learning objectives, they lead lessons based on what they thought was best for individual children. Results highlighted that the perspectives of teachers about the reading process varied and were based

on how they constructed knowledge about effective practices from practical, professional and personal experience. The researcher states that the professional experiences and qualifications of teachers involved in the study varied. She also states that there were cultural and religious differences between the participants. However, the study only focuses on the perspectives of 6 teachers recruited from 4 childcare centres. There is also a significant lack of detail regarding the background of participants and the curriculums that were followed in each setting. This is particularly important as one of the aims of the study was to explore the influence of culture and politics on teachers' constructions of reading development in the preschool classroom. Although peer debriefing and inductive analysis help to increase the credibility of data, the researcher acknowledges that the themes presented represent her perspective. Therefore, the themes identified may not be transferrable (Walker 2015).

Collaborative practise between teachers and SLTs has been proven to enhance outcomes for children with SLCN, promoting generalisation between educational, communication and functional learning goals (Ehren 2000). Working in partnership in the physical classroom environment may involve the therapist providing intervention for children with S&L needs whilst the teacher instructs the rest of the students. The therapist may also lead and teach aspects of the curriculum relevant to his/her expertise such as vocabulary development, phonics and PA. Team teaching promotes opportunities for shared goal planning, training and coaching (Archibald 2017; Suleman et al. 2014). However, as Gallagher et al. (2019) states this is not always easy to achieve due to various barriers and as a result, many preschool children fail to receive adequate and timely S&L support in school that specifically meets their needs. Similarly, teachers are also challenged in their teaching practice when it comes to supporting learners with additional needs. Research highlights teachers and therapists recognise the

value of working together and welcome opportunities that can enhance their learning, knowledge and practice. Therefore, this study endeavours to provide teachers with an opportunity to work alongside a fellow teacher and qualified SLT within their normal teaching environment. The study not only intends to explore teacher perspectives about the importance of PA for children with S&L needs but aims to empower teachers through training so that they can enhance their knowledge and skills to deliver the most effective PA interventions within their classrooms, improving early language and literacy outcomes for all children.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This qualitative study aims to explore how teachers perceive the effectiveness of PA instruction for preschool children with S&L difficulties. Chapter three describes the methods and steps followed by the researcher and outlines the research questions, design, sampling methods and research instruments used for data collection and analysis purposes. The chapter also describes how the researcher worked to ensure validity and reliability in line with ethical standards throughout the duration of the research study.

#### **3.2 Research Questions**

The researcher mindfully crafted and refined research questions based on the context of participants working in preschool settings in Dubai, UAE. Zinsser (1989) highlights that writing and re-writing questions for research proves to be a powerful tool which leads to greater clarity, discovery and purpose because the process encourages researchers to wrestle with important questions which help to shape and direct good qualitative research.

1. What do preschool teachers in Dubai understand about PA development and instruction?
2. How do preschool teachers in Dubai assess PA?



3. What PA programs, activities and strategies do teachers deliver to effectively support PA development for children, including children presenting with speech and/or language difficulties?
4. How do teachers working in Dubai perceive PA training and collaborative practice with speech and language therapists?

### **3.3 Research Paradigm**

A research paradigm provides an insight into the ontological, epistemological and methodological questions considered by the researcher in determining how best to explore the research questions for the chosen study (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017). Teachers and educators maintain various beliefs and schools of thought in terms of their own worldviews and perspectives about various subject matters which informs their understanding, interpretation and application of research data (Mackenzie and Knipe 2006). Therefore, an interpretivist, inductive approach was chosen to drive the data analysis process from the experiences of participants and the interest of the researcher. Within the interpretivist discipline, knowledge is socially constructed and based on multiple realities as opposed to deriving data from more objective and empirical evidence (Azungh 2018). Neuman (2000) comments that interpretivists strive to understand the meaning of human behaviour through interpretation rather than making generalisations or predictions. Thus, semi-structured interviews were chosen as an appropriate instrument to gather data for thematic analysis.

### **3.4 Research Design**

A qualitative, exploratory design was chosen for this study and fosters a naturalistic approach to gain a deeper level of understanding of the phenomena by collecting data that is based on the realities of human experiences that are context-specific (Cleland 2017). Within qualitative approaches, ‘how’ and ‘why’ research questions prove significant in seeking to explore the perspectives of individuals or groups through a process of discovery (Agee 2009).

### **3.5 Sampling**

As this study is qualitative and exploratory, the researcher applied principles of purposeful sampling by recruiting educators who had knowledge and experience within the phenomenon of interest. It is important to employ appropriate sampling methods to maximise validity and efficiency (Morse and Niehaus 2009). Preschool teachers working in private early educational settings in Dubai, UAE, were invited to take part. Participants were encouraged to ask questions about the research before providing their consent and were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. A total of 40 female preschool teachers were recruited and received a booklet which outlined the nature and aims of the study as well as an overview of the training content. The researcher is a qualified SLT working as a teacher in one of the settings. Sampling and data collection methods are appropriate considering the aims of this study in terms of convenience, covid restrictions, time management and resources (Polgar 2008).

#### **Demographic Information**

<b>Nursery Settings</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Preschool 1	23
Preschool 2	6

Preschool 3	2
Preschool 4	2
Preschool 5	1
Preschool 6	1
‘Nursery’ name not stated	5

<b>Age</b>		<b>Qualifications</b>		<b>Experience</b>	
31- 40	<b>22</b>	Masters	<b>6</b>	0-3	<b>13</b>
20-30	<b>12</b>	Postgraduate Degree	<b>10</b>	4-8	<b>12</b>
41-50	<b>4</b>	Undergraduate Degree	<b>10</b>	9-15	<b>12</b>
51 and above	<b>2</b>	Diploma	<b>14</b>	Over 15	<b>3</b>

**Table 2**

### **3.6 Procedures and Instrumentation**

The Survey of teacher Phonemic Awareness Knowledge and Skills (PhAKS) was adapted and administered via an online format to initially gauge an insight into teachers’ knowledge of PA and instruction. Check and Schutt (2012) assert that surveys provide opportunities to collect information from a specific sample of participants by reviewing their responses to questions posed. The survey was presented using an online format that consisted of 21 questions which provided an insight into the teachers’ understanding of PA instruction to help the researcher to identify training needs and to develop appropriate training content, resources and materials.

Teachers received 4 short training videos, lesson plans and suggested activities (via email) which were aimed at developing PA in the preschool classroom. Research has shown that young children can make significant progress in developing PA skills through explicit teaching methods (Ehri et al. 2001). Therefore, it is crucial to identify children with PA deficits in the early years and to implement appropriate intervention and provision to reduce risk factors associated with poor PA development (Moore, Evans and Dowson 2005). Although the resources provided were inclusive for all children, the researcher highlighted specific strategies to support children with S&L difficulties. Teachers were encouraged to implement the activities during small group lessons within their regular preschool classroom during daily circle time sessions for 30 minutes. Tasks, activities and strategies focused on developing phoneme awareness, syllable and rhyme awareness, attention and listening skills and also vocabulary development. The researcher suggested activities to extend and embed learning via continuous provision in consideration of the updated EYFS learning goals (Dubiel 2020). Participants were encouraged to contact the researcher at any stage with questions or suggestions and were also invited to attend a zoom meeting during the intervention phase. Participants working in the same preschool setting as the researcher received additional support and coaching.

### **Overview of training content**

Week 1: Rhyme Awareness

Week 2: Syllable Awareness

Week 3: Phoneme Awareness

Week 4: Identifying and supporting children with S&L difficulties to develop PA skills in early literacy education.

The intervention phase highlighted best practices and provided teachers with strategies to implement in the preschool setting. Suggested activities incorporated constructivist play-based learning as well as direct instruction (grounded in behavioural approaches recognised by Skinner), to encourage children to develop PA skills through varied play experiences and small group learning, whilst encouraging critical thinking. Research shows that preschool children can develop rhyme and syllable awareness through both playful and concrete learning opportunities and experiences (Bode and Content 2011). Phillips, Menchetti and Lonigan (2008) assert that children benefit from instructional methods that are brief and consistent.

### **3.6.1 Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were deemed appropriate in consideration of the exploratory nature of this research. Drever (1995) comments that interviews are commonly used in educational research that are small in scale. Furthermore, Cohen and Crabtree (2006) assert that semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their views freely which can lead to more reliable and comparable data for interpretation. Therefore, semi-structured interviews helped to define the focus of questioning by providing opportunities for the researcher to delve deeper and get a better understanding of teacher perspectives of PA instruction for children with S&L difficulties.

20% of the sample of teachers recruited in the study were selected for interview purposes conducted in person, via Zoom or over the phone. The researcher followed a general structure and prepared questions in advance of the interviews.

Questions were open-ended and relevant to the topic and the researcher also accepted topical trajectories as semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility and provide scope for further exploration (Drever 1995). “In qualitative studies, then, the ongoing process of questioning is an integral part of understanding the unfolding lives and perspectives of others” (Agee 2009, P432).

Questions included:

- What is your understanding of phonological awareness development in preschool children aged 3-5 years old?
- What programs, activities and strategies do you implement in the preschool classroom to support phonological awareness development? Tell me about a typical lesson.
- What training and professional development opportunities have supported your teaching practice within the area of phonological awareness development?
- What training and professional development opportunities have supported your teaching practice within the area of speech, language and communication impairment?
- How do you specifically support the development of phonological awareness in children with speech, language and/or communication difficulties?

- How do you assess phonological awareness skills and evaluate learning outcomes for all learners?
- What do you believe are the benefits of phonological awareness training for children with speech, language and communication difficulties in particular?
- What is your experience of collaborative practice alongside speech and language therapists within the preschool classroom?

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed and field notes were kept by the researcher.

### **3.6.2 Questionnaires**

Open-ended questionnaires were collected from a further 10 % of participants to enhance the data collection process. Covid restrictions, as well as time constraints, impacted feasibility in terms of scheduling semi-structured interviews overall. Therefore, as the researcher wanted to gain rich data from the participants, questionnaires proved cost-effective and convenient in terms of practicality as participants were able to answer questions freely and in their own time (Zull 2016).

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was chosen as an appropriate analytic method for this study and involved a process of reading, coding, interpreting and analysing data to identify patterns and themes. Evans and Lewis

(2018) comment that representing data is indeed a ‘craft’ requiring careful consideration and attention to ensure rigour throughout the analysis process and to enhance trustworthiness in terms of the findings presented. Braun and Clarke (2006) comment on the element of flexibility that theoretical analysis offers researchers and the opportunities to explore and present rich, detailed, and meaningful data.

Firstly, the researcher immersed herself in the data by thoroughly reading transcripts several times. Due to the sample size and nature of the study, the researcher then manually coded information that proved relevant, beginning the process of exploration by keeping an open mind to extract meaning from the data presented. Although some researchers consider manual analysis to be a daunting task and may give preference to more technological approaches, manual analysis encourages more meaningful interaction through the slower nature of the process involved (Maher et al. 2018). Technological approaches may prove more worthwhile when analysing a larger quantity of interviews (Basit 2003; Bezeley 2007).

Throughout the coding process, the researcher considered her own potential bias and followed an inductive approach, staying close to the data by physically writing notes, using sticky notes and highlighting information to visually map the data. Thus, this encouraged the researcher to adopt a structured and organised method for the handling of analysis (King 2004; Glesne 2011). Mattimore et al. (2021) comment that such methods provide greater opportunities for the researcher to become emerged in the data analysis process compared to technological approaches. Thus, the researcher paid attention to statements and ideas that were repeated by several participants, statements that were interesting and surprising, information that was explicitly stated as being important to the participant



and statements that reflected theories or concepts about the topic being explored. The researcher thought carefully about the codes that proved most significant, whilst reflecting on the research questions. Morse et al. (2002) discuss the significance of verification strategies which involve an iterative process of checking and making modifications in the quest to ensure reliability and validity. Thus, the researcher was mindful of the organic nature of the processes involved in qualitative data analysis and worked to recode data by combining codes together to construct, develop and redefine categories and themes (Braun and Clarke 2006).

**Example of Codes:**

Gaps in student teacher training courses

Lack of professional development opportunities

Teacher perceptions

Lack of confidence within the area of early literacy

Effectiveness of PA training alongside SLT

The above examples of codes were grouped and themed ‘Professional Development’. The researcher then worked to identify connections and links between themes to make sense of the data and included both analytic narrative and data extracts from participants to draw conclusions and present findings for discussion. The researcher ensured that she provided rich and detailed descriptions to enhance validity and credibility of the interpretation of participant perspectives (Creswell 1998, cited in Glesne 2011).

### **3.8 Validity and Reliability**

The researcher is a preschool teacher and qualified SLT with 14 years of experience working across the early education sector. During the past 4 years, she has been working in Dubai alongside some of the participants involved in the study and has been able to offer ongoing support, advice and coaching to inform their teaching practices. The researcher maintains a strong understanding of culture and diversity as an expatriate teacher in the UAE. Furthermore, she has a solid understanding of the British curriculum as well as KHDA and MOE policies and procedures. Prolonged engagement and observation within the field proves significant in terms of validity and trustworthiness as a qualitative researcher (Creswell 1998, cited in Glesne 2011).

Polit and Beck (2014) comment that bias relates to the distortion of findings attributed to influencing factors. The researcher acknowledged potential influencing factors and was responsive during the sampling process by deciding to extend the recruitment criteria to invite teachers outside of her own school setting to participate in the study. The sampling of teachers was appropriate in relation to the research topic and phenomenon being studied as participants were qualified to teach young children in early educational settings.

Similarly, the issue of research bias was considered carefully by the researcher at all stages. By keeping a journal, making notes and through peer discussions, the researcher actively reflected on monitored her own possible biases. Furthermore, throughout the interview process, the researcher avoided leading and closed questioning and ensured that data was collected and analysed concurrently. She also reflected on subjectivity throughout the research process. Smith and Noble (2014) comment that researchers can enhance the transparency of potential sources of bias by

accounting for their own experiences and ideas by striving to minimise potential sources of bias and by providing clear rationale and appropriate research design.

The researcher refined data collection methods in response to covid restrictions. In attempt to obtain an adequate sample of data for analysis, the researcher distributed questionnaires in addition to conducting semi-structured interviews and also encouraged participants to review scripts and conclusions to ensure that the researcher presented an accurate representation of views, ideas and perspectives. Triangulation helps to ensure validity by obtaining data through multiple sources or methods to develop a greater understanding of the phenomena being studied Carter et al. (2014).

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

Researchers maintain the responsibility to protect all participants from potential harm as a result of their participation in the study (Sanjari et al. 2014). Therefore, ethical approval for this study from the Research Ethics Committee at The British University in Dubai where the research was deemed to be ‘low risk’ in terms of ethical standards. The researcher ensured autonomy and equity by obtaining adequate consent and respecting participants' privacy. A high level of confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The email addresses of participants were not disclosed at any point when weekly training content and resources were sent by the researcher. Interview transcripts and field notes were handled by the researcher solely and only initials appeared on documents with data being stored in a secure, locked and organised drawer. Furthermore, the researcher adhered to the COVID 19 restrictions and protocols when required and made training and support available online.

### **3.10 Summary**

In conclusion, the chapter details the research design, research questions and methods implemented by the researcher to explore the research topic. Forty participants were recruited to participate in the study and completed an online survey aimed at gaining an insight into their understanding of PA instruction within the early educational sector. Following a training phase, 30% of participants completed a semi-structured interview process or questionnaire. Thematic analysis was applied to analyse the data and explore teacher perspectives of PA training for children with S&L difficulties. The chapter also describes how the researcher ensured trustworthiness and ethical conduct throughout the duration of the study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Chapter four describes the themes and subthemes that emerged during the data analysis process. The researcher outlines the significance of themes when exploring what preschool teachers understand about PA development. This chapter also presents findings relevant to assessment methods, types of PA instruction delivered by teachers, provision for children with S&L difficulties and teacher perspectives about collaborative practices. Furthermore, the researcher describes connections between the themes and discusses how she interpreted the findings by reflecting on ideas, theories and concepts to answer the research questions.

#### **4.2 Thematic Findings**

The table below outlines the five themes and fifteen subthemes which emerged during the data analysis process. The findings highlight how the themes and subthemes interconnect and how patterns reflect the perspectives of teachers about PA instruction for preschool children with S&L impairments.

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Early Intervention	Social and emotional development Appropriate support and intervention for Language and literacy development
Quality of PA Instruction	Skills, knowledge Assessment Provision and resources
Context	Inclusivity Cultural influences Preschool setting
Professional Development	Gaps in student teacher training courses Lack of professional development opportunities Teacher perceptions Lack of confidence within the area of early literacy Effectiveness of PA training alongside SLT
Collaboration	Inter-professional expertise      Parental Involvement

***Table 3***

### **4.3 Research Question 1: What do preschool teachers in Dubai understand about PA development and instruction?**

The quality of PA instruction is ultimately dependent on the skills and knowledge of teachers and their ability to differentiate resources and lesson plans to effectively meet the learning needs of all children in the preschool classroom.

Teachers in this study were required to complete a survey when they were initially recruited.

The sole purpose of the PhAKS survey was to support the researcher in developing the training content for the intervention phase based on identified learning needs of participants. However, the responses from the survey are indeed useful as they provide insight into the teachers' lack of understanding about PA development and instruction. Findings showed that only seven out of forty teachers stated that they had training in PA instruction. Just half of the participants were able to define phonemic awareness as the ability to manipulate individual sounds in spoken language. Furthermore, only ten teachers were able to identify that when teaching phonemic awareness, pupils should initially be taught to identify sounds shared in words. Less than half of the participants were able to identify how to explicitly teach phonemic awareness. Finally, all participants indicated training needs within the area of PA and S&L development and recognised the value of collaborative practice alongside experts in the field. Therefore, survey responses suggest that teachers working in Dubai are not best equipped with the tools and strategies to effectively support young children to develop strong literacy skills through appropriate PA instruction and provision.

Teacher narratives from semi-structured interviews and questionnaires support findings from the survey. Teachers reflected on gaps in knowledge and identified their own learning needs, expressing a desire to undergo further PD training to improve their teaching practices within the area of PA instruction and SEN.

#### **4.3.1 Professional Development**

PD was a theme that strongly emerged during the data analysis phase and resonated throughout all transcripts. Firstly, teachers expressed that they lacked adequate skills and knowledge relevant to PA instruction.

TD: “I can’t say that I do too much related to phonological awareness. I mean, of course we talk about how letters make words and words make sentences... but very basic and I can’t say that I do it consciously.”

TJ: Phonological awareness helps reading skills but I don’t really know how to teach it properly because I get confused about the difference between it and phonics. I know they are closely related. I mostly teach phonics in the preschool class. I focus on teaching the letters of the alphabet and show the children the letters so that they can make the sound and match to the letters.

Secondly, teachers commented on having limited knowledge and ability to support preschool children with S&L difficulties relevant to PA development and across the wider curriculum.



TB: “This is where I feel like teachers would need to have more training. I think especially in preschools and nurseries... teachers definitely need to have more awareness on speech and language...definitely.”

Thirdly, teacher narratives report gaps in knowledge about PA and S&L development attributed to a lack of learning opportunities, support, and practical experience during initial teacher training courses.

TE: “The teacher training is underdeveloped because people focus on the letters and not really syllable awareness and how words are joined together in different groups or syllables.”

TA: “I think there’s a little bit of a gap that most teachers face when they are in the classroom and actually working. It’s not something that there’s an adequate level of training on. Of course,...there’s training on the surface level...but not as in-depth as necessary to support those students.”

Findings from this research are consistent with other studies and reinforce the need for changes to be made within initial teacher training courses so that teachers feel confident and equipped to deliver effective PA instruction for all students. A study conducted by Wilson, McNeil and Gillon (2015) found that student teachers and student SLTs reported minimal opportunities and experience of interprofessional collaboration and consequently had limited understanding of each other’s expertise within the area of literacy development. Therefore, Gaps in initial teacher training courses must be addressed and should review both module content and practical opportunities for teachers to work alongside SLTs.

To remedy the lack of knowledge for practising teachers, PD opportunities should address gaps in knowledge and skills so that teachers can deliver effective PA instruction based on up-to-date evidence. Guskey and Yoon (2009) assert that PD opportunities provide teachers with active learning experiences to adopt best practices within the uniqueness of their classroom environments.

### **4.3.2 Early Intervention**

Teachers in the study demonstrated a strong understanding of the significance of early assessment and intervention programs for young children presenting with delayed development within the areas of S&L and PA.

TI: Children who cannot speak or be understood need appropriate support and intervention at an early age so that they can communicate effectively, reach their full potential and learn and grow.

TL: “In early educational settings...teachers have a responsibility to identify children who are struggling. I mean...children who need extra provision so that they can learn better. We are often the first people to see it and that can cause some stress when informing parents ...but early assessment and intervention especially from outside agencies... is so important because it helps teachers to adapt planning and to think about how they can try to meet the needs of the child and it helps parents. It is important to make sure that children get the help that they need... before they go to primary school... because if they don’t... they will just continue to struggle to learn and face greater challenges on all levels.”

Teachers also recognised the impact of S&L difficulties on social and emotional development. Research shows the association between language impairment in preschoolers and behavioural difficulties due to frustrations reflective of their inability to communicate which can impact peer relationships and self-esteem (Kaiser and Roberts 2011). Thus, early intervention helps to address a child's individual needs and provides opportunities for them to learn strategies so that can communicate effectively with others.

TE: "Well obviously, they'd have support for speech... and they'd feel more confident in the classroom. And they'll be able to write more... and then obviously they're going to make more progress and their self-esteem is going to increase... and then they're going to be able to communicate more with their peers and across other subjects like in maths and science as well."

The findings show that teachers acknowledge the impact of poor PA skills and S&L development across the curriculum. Teachers understand that early intervention proves significant in terms of social and emotional development so that children can communicate effectively and establish relationships with peers and teachers. However, despite their awareness of the importance of early interventions, teachers lack experience, skills and knowledge when it comes to devising appropriate plans and programs for children who are struggling in the classroom.

It is well documented throughout the literature that difficulties with PA are strongly correlated with reading impairments (Gillon and McFarlane 2017). This is concerning as young children with S&L impairments who present with PA deficits are at risk of experiencing long term challenges related to literacy and language development which impacts all aspects of learning and academic attainment

(Catts et. al. 2017). Findings are consistent with previous studies in the literature and strengthen the research which suggests that preschool teachers are not adequately equipped to deliver effective PA programs within the broader context of early literacy development to meet the needs of all students (Uysal et al. 2019; Justice et al. 2008).

#### **4.4 Research Question 2: How do preschool teachers in Dubai assess PA?**

Comprehensive assessments help teachers to identify specific areas of difficulty for a child with poor PA and literacy difficulties. Ongoing formal and informal assessment and screening measures help to inform intervention and guide teachers as they devise individualised learning objectives for struggling readers.

TI: I don't use any formal assessment. However, I record, take videos, make notes and observe. I also use the EYFS learning goals to support observations. Again, I chat with other teachers and professionals involved with the child and also parents. I try to get children to assess their learning using a traffic lights system.

TB: "I would probably do it as a group assessment in the lesson and just observe them."

Findings convey that teachers are not effectively assessing PA skills in the preschool classroom. Just one teacher conveyed that they assessed all elements of PA on an ongoing basis throughout the academic year and utilised a screening tool.

TH: As per the EYFS curriculum, I complete observations and look at the expected learning goals for language and communication as well as literacy development. I make notes and complete informal

screening and reviews throughout the academic year. I focus on attention and listening, alliteration, rhyme ability, syllable awareness and phonemic awareness. This helps me to plan and set objectives as well as evaluate progress.

Narratives also revealed that teachers lacked confidence when assessing PA skills and in determining effective PA programs and strategies to support early literacy development within the preschool classroom.

TD: “Um...phonological awareness...well...I can’t say that I have specific lessons for it...so I don’t know if I’m really assessing it”

TA: “Look at their reading, speaking and writing...you know...to sort of ascertain their level of understanding through observations and the monitor progress.”

For children with S&L difficulties, individualised educational plans help to ensure that teachers set specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound learning goals and targets. Termly assessment proves crucial in monitoring and evaluating progress. However, the majority of teacher narratives reveal that teachers in this study did not explicitly or comprehensively assess all areas of PA in the preschool classroom.

It is quite alarming to discover that none of the teachers implemented a formal measure of assessment. Narratives convey that only one teacher explicitly assessed all elements of PA development through her own screening tool and the rest admitted that they conducted observations to monitor progress.

Standardised tools facilitate differential diagnosis so that children receive appropriate support based on evidence-based practice; both in the therapy setting and within the school environment. Adams (1990) comments that assessing PA skills during early education proves significant in determining the skills that preschool children utilise when learning to read.

Therefore, assessment is crucial to identify children at risk of reading failure, obtain baseline measures, and design appropriate learning goals and plans to support children's individual needs. Furthermore, timely, ongoing and appropriate assessment measures help teachers to monitor and evaluate progress which informs their teaching practice. Teachers need to be aware of comprehensive PA assessment measures, considering all levels of PA development including rhyming and alliteration, sentence segmentation, syllable segmentation and blending, onset and rime blending and segmentation as well as more complex activities which involve phonemic awareness. Current practices revealed in the study question the effectiveness and appropriateness of PA assessment in determining provision within the broader context of early literacy and language development in the preschool setting. The findings are troubling because research highlights that many young children will continue to struggle with reading and writing skills as they progress from preschool to school settings due to persistent language difficulties if they do not catch up with their peers (Sharma et al. 2009). Early literacy and language interventions prove crucial in addressing the specific needs of young children and should be informed by comprehensive ongoing assessment and review.

### **4.5 Research Question 3: What PA programs, activities and strategies do teachers deliver to effectively support PA development for children, including children presenting with speech and/or language difficulties?**

Teacher narratives reflect their efforts to differentiate lessons for children requiring additional support. Strategies included grouping children in terms of their ability and reading level in the classroom as well as pull out and push in sessions, and individualised support from the teacher or classroom assistant.

TH: I try my best but time pressures impact on the option to take children for 1.1 literacy support. Small groups are more effective as I can group children according to their abilities and level. It gives me more opportunities to work to specifically target specific goals to help meet their needs.

TA: “In terms of differentiation in the classroom...grouping students of mixed ability. Students really benefit from 1.1 and being with the teacher to give that extra level of support.”

TI - I think pull out sessions are most effective because I can work on activities that the child needs. Some children might need more support to understand the task. Some children have language difficulties and need to work on more basic vocabulary when targeting phonological awareness skills. I am mindful of my own language and try to repeat, emphasise, give more time, reduce distractions and use visuals as support. I also involve the parents and set home challenges to support learning at

home. Some children need more support from the classroom assistant and it is important to explain activities for them to carry out with children correctly.

Teachers reflected on the activities that they devised to promote PA development in the preschool classroom. Only two teachers from the sample expressed that they followed an explicit approach toward PA intervention in the preschool classroom addressing all areas of PA development inclusive of attention and listening, rhyme, syllable and phonemic awareness. Research shows that PA instruction is most effective through systematic and explicit teaching methods which carefully consider duration, intensity, the learning environment, resources, as well as group interventions versus 1:1 support sessions (Ziolkowski and Goldstein 2008).

TI: We follow a plan and focus on phonological awareness during our morning muster and circle time sessions specifically and we also provide lots of opportunities to develop these skills during continuous provision. During lessons we focus on:

Rhyme – the children match rhyming words, find words that do not rhyme and love to play rhyme bingo games. Syllables – the children clap out beats in their names, days of the week, target vocab. Alliteration – the children learn silly tongue twister's Phonemic awareness – the children complete activities that focus on sounds that they hear. They like to play spy games and we also use elkotin boxes for blending and segmenting.

TC: "We play a lot of games such as bingo... I Spy... feed animals first and last sounds... go on sound hunts around the classroom and outside to look for objects beginning with a particular sound.



Sound boxes we have as well...then we have lots of practice with blending and segmenting with two sounds and CVC words. We would have lots of stories, and rhyme sacks”.

Teachers acknowledged the importance of visuals and objects for children with SLCN who may have difficulties with receptive or expressive language skills. Such strategies facilitate understanding and make learning more accessible to meet the needs of the child.

TC: “I use more objects, pictures, more tools, more storytime or rhyme time. If they had no communication...visuals are important and visual routine cards as well as communication boards.”

TB: “If they are having trouble to communicate... maybe sing along with their favourite songs with objects as well... looking at pictures and helping them to start to identify them.”

Teachers reflected on strategies and activities that they implemented to support PA development in their classrooms. However, the duration, intensity and level of PA training varied greatly and reflected the teachers’ preferences and knowledge relevant to early literacy development. Some teachers did not specifically target PA and instead taught grapheme-letter correspondences as part of phonics programs.

TK: I show the letters and get the child to match letters to the sound. I sing phonics songs and play lots of games in the classroom to encourage the children to find the letters.

Teachers motivated children to participate in circle time sessions and tended to work indirectly on PA skills through songs, rhymes and stories. What is most alarming is that only half of the teachers mentioned that they addressed phonemic awareness including phoneme manipulation as well as blending and segmentation. This is consistent with recent findings from the literature which convey that teachers are failing to teach the most basic skills which prove crucial for early literacy development (Alshaboul 2018).

For children with S&L impairments, teachers identified the need to differentiate resources to meet the needs of children. Strategies included providing group and individual support, utilising the classroom assistant, using visuals to support understanding, and seeking support when it was available from SLTs. However, as narratives reveal, teachers lacked knowledge about evidenced-based PA instruction and best practices for supporting children with S&L needs. This questions the effectiveness of provision and support being implemented in preschools in Dubai.

#### **4.6 Research Question 4: How do teachers working in Dubai perceive PA training and collaborative practice with speech and language therapists?**

##### **4.6.1 Context**

One of the themes that emerged from the data relates to the context in which preschool teachers were working in educational settings in Dubai, UAE. All participants involved in the study were expatriate teachers having undergone initial teacher training abroad.

TH: The problem is that there does not seem to be enough support for teachers to work with speech and language therapists in the UAE in particular. In the UK, I feel that teachers have more opportunities to access professional development courses and pick up the phone to make referrals within the NHS (National Health Service).’

Narratives reveal influencing factors and provide insight into barriers that are relevant to inclusive education within the wider context of supporting children with additional needs, including children with poor PA, literacy skills and S&L development.

TA: “Of course, in Dubai, it’s something that’s perhaps slightly different than in the UK...dealing with things like additional support is something that is a little bit sensitive.”

TE: (Referring to opportunities for collaboration with an SLT)  
“The context I’m working in...it’s not done in all honesty, it’s not really funded or recognised, in my opinion in the Middle East.”

Considering the findings, schools and policymakers play a significant role when it comes to ensuring equity and equality in private educational settings across the emirate. Teachers referred to best practices and reflected on their experiences of working in UK settings which reinforces the need for private preschool settings in Dubai to make greater advances within the area of inclusive education to improve services and provision for children with additional educational needs. In recent years, governing bodies have provided guidelines for schools to help establish a more inclusive education for all learners. However, teacher narratives reflect greater efforts must be taken to ensure that policy

is being put into practice across the early education sector. In reality, many children who have S&L difficulties have no choice but to attend SLT services outside of their school environment which requires parents to pay for additional support as their needs are not being effectively met in preschool settings. Teachers report a lack of support concerning SEN education across the wider context and this impacts assessment, intervention and outcomes for children with additional needs and therefore increases the risk of ongoing issues beyond their preschool years. Research shows that schools that implement inclusive educational policies by putting systems and practices in place have improved levels of student attainment and better outcomes overall (Willms 2010).

#### **4.6.2 Collaboration**

Teachers recognise the value of sharing expertise in enabling them to provide appropriate provision for children with poorly developed phonological awareness skills. They identified training needs within the area of PA and S&L development expressing a desire to avail of professional development opportunities to improve their teaching practice having found the PA training delivered in the study to prove beneficial.

TB: “I would love to learn more so if there was an opportunity for training, I would definitely take it because there’s not enough training or experience provided for supporting children with speech and language delays. I feel especially in the preschool that I work in, they don’t give enough training.”

Furthermore, teachers also expressed the need for teachers, SLTs and parents to work together and to communicate effectively in planning assessments and individualised educational plans for children requiring additional support within the area of S&L and literacy development. Glover et al. (2015)

assert that children with S&L difficulties are best supported when approaches combine the skills of SLTs and teachers in partnership with parents.

TA: “ I really do believe that it’s very important for parents to be kept in the loop and to provide them with additional support so that they have a clear awareness of things that they can be doing at home.”

TI: I love working with other professionals and have a lot of experience as I used to work in a special needs centre. Therefore, I was able to learn specific skills and strategies that I can apply in the classroom now. I have a good understanding of how to identify and support children from observations, teaching and working alongside speech therapists. I have attended lots of professional development sessions over the past 15 years and I am always grateful and willing to learn from others. I work alongside another teacher who is a speech and language therapist. She has provided lots of useful training over the years, support and advice and as a result, I am able to implement more effective programs and lessons.

All teachers acknowledged the value of SLT input and expressed a willingness to engage in collaborative practice to extend their learning whilst working alongside professionals trained in specific areas of language, speech, and literacy development. Teachers expressed that they found the training during the intervention phase to be beneficial in developing their understanding of PA so they could better support children with S&L impairment.

TD: “I guess my training has come from you and what you have shown me...talking with you, picking your brain. The little bits and pieces...I used that little assessment chart that you gave me to figure

out what sounds a child's making and that sort of thing...I referred that family to speech therapy ...because they are the experts and I don't have the expertise.'

TH: 'The online training was brilliant. It helped me to understand that phonological awareness and phonics instruction are not the same things. In the preschool, phonological awareness is more important as children need to learn all of the basic skills before formal instruction.'

Findings are consistent with studies which show that collaborative practice between SLTs and teachers leads to improved outcomes for children (Ehren 2000). It should be noted that teachers working in the same preschool as the researcher had a greater advantage as she was more accessible and able to coach and scaffold their learning throughout the intervention phase when needed. The researcher did not monitor the level or degree of engagement of teachers during the intervention stage which is a limitation of the study and should be addressed in future research. Nevertheless, teacher narratives reinforce the value of SLT input and collaborative practice in improving their teaching practices so that they can better support PA development to effectively teach all students. However, as teacher narratives reveal, there are limited opportunities for teachers to engage in PD opportunities or to work collaboratively with SLTs in preschool settings in Dubai.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The final chapter provides a summary of the exploratory research conducted and highlights the researcher's key findings and interpretations. Furthermore, the researcher offers suggestions for improving PA instruction for preschool children with S&L difficulties so that teachers are better equipped with the knowledge, skills and resources to effectively meet the needs of all learners and ultimately lay solid foundations for literacy success in preschool classrooms in Dubai.

#### **5.1 Study Summary and Conclusions**

This qualitative study aimed to explore how preschool teachers perceive the effectiveness of PA training for children with S&L difficulties by obtaining narratives from semi-structured interviews. The circumstances in which this research was carried out presented some challenges due to the spread of COVID 19 and subsequent school restrictions. However, the researcher was responsive and provided comprehensive online PA training during the intervention phase which was accessible to all participants. Where semi-structured interviews could not be carried out, the researcher adhered to precautions and proceeded to collect data via open-ended questionnaires to ensure an adequate sample for thematic analysis.

The researcher identified five major themes that influence the effectiveness of PA instruction for preschool children with S&L difficulties in Dubai. Findings are consistent with relevant studies already published in the literature. Whilst teachers acknowledge the importance of PA instruction and early intervention for children, they lack an appropriate level of knowledge and skills to

effectively assess PA development and provide appropriate intervention due to gaps attributed to their initial teacher training. Teachers expressed that opportunities for PD are not prioritised enough in the UAE compared to the UK as they had little or no additional training provided within their preschool settings in Dubai. Similarly, teachers highlighted the need for greater levels of support and provision for children with SEN in Dubai and emphasised the importance of parental involvement. Furthermore, preschool teachers lack confidence, knowledge and additional support from experts in the field to be able to effectively implement provisions for children with S&L difficulties due to limited experience and opportunities for collaborative practice. Findings show that teachers valued the training during the intervention phase and found the activities and the SLTs advice to be beneficial. They expressed their desire and willingness to work in partnership with SLTs to enhance their teaching practice to improve literacy outcomes for young children with S&L difficulties.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

Teachers expressed that they lacked skills and knowledge within the areas of PA and S&L development. The findings emphasise the urgent need for preschool teachers to undergo further training to improve their teaching practices based on evidence-based methods. Furthermore, preschool teachers in the study recognised the significance of PA training in early education as a strong predictor of literacy success. They expressed a desire to engage in PD opportunities in collaboration with SLTs so that they become better equipped with the tools and skills to effectively meet the needs of all children. PD opportunities will help to address gaps in knowledge and skills so that teachers are better skilled to effectively support children with S&L deficits within the wider context of early literacy development.



Survey responses and narratives revealed that preschool teachers in this study presented with variant levels of experience and qualifications ranging from diplomas, right through to master level accreditation. Most teachers did not implement appropriate assessment methods or explicit PA interventions and lacked confidence and skills to be able to support children with S&L impairments. Therefore, the findings highlight that initial teacher training courses should be reviewed to ensure that teachers maintain appropriate knowledge, skills and greater confidence in their teaching practices. Employers should consider credentials carefully when recruiting preschool teachers in Dubai to ensure the appropriateness of their placement within preschool settings based on experiences and specific training courses related to early childhood development and curriculums.

Findings highlight influencing factors and challenges faced by teachers working to support children with SEN within the UAE compared to the UK context. Teachers expressed that there is a lack of support with little opportunities to work collaboratively with SLTs in preschools, impacting on provision for children with S&L impairments. Therefore, preschool teachers and schools must continually strive to break down barriers related to the stigma associated with SEN within the broader context of preschool classrooms in Dubai and in doing so, strongly advocate for inclusivity, equity and equality. Similarly, educational and regulatory bodies as well as stakeholders and policymakers in Dubai, maintain a responsibility to ensure that schools and teachers implement best practice measures to improve the quality of provision for the most vulnerable children in early educational settings.

Findings convey that preschool teachers in the study recognised the importance of early identification and assessment of children in preschool who are struggling with language and literacy development.

They also acknowledged the need to work in partnership with parents which is extremely important as children may need additional support from SLTs and health professionals outside of the school settings. Therefore, there must be greater communication and collaboration between teachers, parents and therapists to ensure that children with S&L difficulties are best supported.

### **5.3 Limitations**

Participants were provided with training videos, lesson plans, and activities targeting PA development during a four-week training phase. Due to COVID restrictions, this information was sent via email weekly. Although participants were encouraged to watch the videos and implement the lesson plans in their classrooms, the researcher did not monitor their actual level of engagement and/or delivery of the activities. Teacher observations and in house training in all the preschool settings would strengthen the study by providing opportunities to scaffold and coach teachers about the most effective and best practice measures for developing PA skills for children with S&L difficulties to improve literacy outcomes for children.

### **5.4 Epilogue**

Readers are leaders! Preschool teachers must nurture young children by teaching basic skills to help them learn, construct ideas, communicate effectively and make sense of the world. Circle time sessions which aim to develop PA skills through explicit teaching methods provide greater scope for teachers to target early literacy skills whilst encouraging young children to use their imagination and explore books and texts. Furthermore, fun and age-appropriate play-based activities which reinforce PA concepts through continuous provision lay the foundations for young children to develop strategies and skills so that they can become confident, fluent and stronger readers. Therefore, this

study is valuable because it reveals that teachers do not feel that they are able to effectively provide PA instruction for children with S&L difficulties due to limited experiences and knowledge. Thus, action must be taken to upskill and empower preschool teachers so that they can better support all preschool children to achieve greater literacy success.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1: Participant Consent Letter**

Dear Participant,

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study aimed at exploring teachers' perceptions of phonological awareness training for children in early educational settings. The survey should take 10-15 minutes to complete and is based on a multiple-choice format where you will select one answer for each question. There is space to provide 'other' information due to the nature of some questions presented. Should you take part in the study, you will have the opportunity to observe four short training videos (over a period of 4 weeks) provided by the researcher who is a fully qualified speech and language therapist. These videos are aimed at developing phonological awareness skills in the preschool classroom. You will also have access to sample lesson plans which will outline strategies and activities that can be implemented to support phonological awareness development during literacy lessons and within continuous provision. A follow-up questionnaire will be carried out and a sample of participants will be selected to complete a short interview to explore the impact of the intervention phase on phonological awareness skills in young children with speech and/or language difficulties in particular.

Please be assured that data collected from all participants will be treated with the strictest confidentiality and used for the purposes of this research study only. Although individually identifiable data will not be disclosed to any third parties, teacher responses and perspectives may be published anonymously as part of the data analysis conducted. Participation in this study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time without reason.

The researcher can be contacted at any stage should you have questions about the study or data protection measures.

Leah O'Neill

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British University in Dubai

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Dubai, UAE

Please provide your email address below:

Consent:

I consent to participate in this research study

I do not consent to participate in this research study

## **Appendix 2: Sample Lesson Plan**

### **Rhyme Awareness**

#### **Farm Animals**

##### **Aim**

To develop phonological awareness skills.

To develop children's speech, language and communication skills.

##### **Objectives**

- To improve attention and listening skills
- To practise good sitting
- To enhance turn-taking skills
- To develop rhyme awareness
- To develop social skills
- To enhance receptive language and vocabulary
- To enhance expressive language and vocabulary

##### **Resources**

Animal Puppets

Plastic animal toys and masks (Old Mac Donald) Feely Bag for props

Farm Books such as: Farmer Duck, Duck on a Truck Record form/IPAD for observation

## **Lesson Plan**

Sing topic themed nursery rhymes e.g. “Old Macdonald had a farm”.  
Use gestures, props and facial expressions.

Invite children to take turns choosing an animal from the feely bag. Talk about the animals. Talk about the noises they make and encourage children to copy the sounds.

Encourage receptive and expressive language and build on vocabulary skills throughout e.g. Put the duck on the truck, in the box, under etc. Where is duck hiding?

The duck says 'quack', swims in the pond, eats.... etc.

Emphasise sounds heard at the beginning, in the middle and end of words. Emphasise rhyming words: duck/truck.

Match props or pictures that rhyme (farm themed rhyme bingo, rhyme hunt, rhyme basket).

## **Step Up**

Ask child to select more than one animal at a time.

Use less common animals associated with the farm: goat, donkey, goose, mouse.

Clap out words (Syllables): barn/farm/underarm.

Can the children think of words that rhyme?

## **Assessment**

Observations

Did child meet objectives?

Teacher reflection of lesson/outcomes

## **Continuous Provision**

Counting animals

Small world play with farm animals

Role play - animal dress up

Mark making (colouring/painting farm animals)

Building a barn/farm

### **Appendix 3: Sample Training Video**

#### **Supporting preschoolers with speech and language difficulties.**

Link:

<https://my.visme.co/view/rxeyj480-week-4-supporting-children-with-speech-and-language-difficulties-in-the-early-years-classroom>

#### **Appendix 4: Interview Questions/Questionnaire**

- What is your understanding of phonological awareness development in preschool children aged 3-5 years old?
- What programs, activities and strategies do you implement in the preschool classroom to support phonological awareness development? Tell me about a typical lesson.
- What training and professional development opportunities have supported your teaching practice within the area of phonological awareness development?
- What training and professional development opportunities have supported your teaching practice within the area of speech, language and communication impairment?
- How do you specifically support the development of phonological awareness in children with speech, language and/or communication difficulties?
- How do you assess phonological awareness skills and evaluate learning outcomes for all learners?
- What do you believe are the benefits of phonological awareness training for children with speech, language and communication difficulties in particular?



- What is your experience of collaborative practice alongside speech and language therapists within the preschool classroom?

### **Appendix 5: Survey of Teacher PhAKS**

1. My age is in the following range of years:
  - a. 20-30
  - b. 31-40
  - c. 41-50
  - d. 51-60
  - e. 61 or more
2. My gender is
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
3. I have taught preschool for the following number of years:
  - a. 0-3
  - b. 4-8
  - c. 9-15
  - d. Over 15
4. My highest level of education is:
  - a. Diploma
  - b. Undergraduate Degree
  - c. Postgraduate Degree
  - d. Master's Degree

- e. Other
5. My most current degree is in:
- a. Education
  - b. Early Childhood Education
  - c. Special Education
  - d. Non-education field of study
6. I have had specific training in teaching the concepts of phonological awareness and phonics:
- a. Both phonological awareness and phonics
  - b. Only phonological awareness
  - c. Only phonics
  - d. No specific training in either

## Survey Questions

1. A phoneme is:
  - a. the smallest part of written language
  - b. the smallest part of spoken language
  - c. a word part that contains a vowel sound
  - d. I'm not sure
2. Phonemic awareness is:
  - a. the same thing as phonics
  - b. understanding the relationships between letters and the sounds they represent
  - c. the ability to identify and work with the individual sounds in spoken words
  - d. I'm not sure
3. Effective phonemic awareness instruction teaches children to:
  - a. convert letters or letter combinations into sounds.
  - b. notice, think about, and work with sounds in spoken language
  - c. discriminate one letter from the other letters in the alphabet
  - d. I'm not sure
4. The student's first lessons in phonemic awareness involve:
  - a. learning letter-sound relationships
  - b. matching spoken words with printed words
  - c. identifying sounds shared among words
  - d. I'm not sure
5. A student has broad phonological awareness and now needs explicit phonemic awareness instruction. What type of activity focuses on phonemic awareness skills?

- a. Color the pictures that begin with the letter *b*
  - b. Count the syllables in the word *hotdog*
  - c. Count the sounds in the word *cake*
  - d. I'm not sure
6. An example of explicit phonemic awareness instruction is:
- a. teaching letter-sound correspondences
  - b. choosing the words in a set of four words that has the "odd" sound
  - c. reading words in the same word family, e. g. *at, sat, mat, cat*
  - d. I'm not sure
7. Which activity explicitly links spelling with phonemic awareness?
- a. Make as many words as you can using only the letters *p, a, s, l*
  - b. Say a word, then name the letters out loud; write the word
  - c. Say a word, tap out the sounds in the word; write the letters for these sounds
  - d. I'm not sure
8. Which task requires more refined phonemic awareness?
- a. What is the first sound in *sled*?
  - b. What is the first sound in *shed*?
  - c. The tasks are the same.
  - d. I'm not sure
9. Phonological awareness instruction:
- a. is only meant for students at-risk for reading failure
  - b. potentially benefits most children in kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade
  - c. is not appropriate for older students (7+ years old) who have reading problems

- d. I'm not sure
10. Can the words *shoe*, *do*, *flew*, and *you* be used to illustrate oral rhyming?
- a. yes
  - b. no
  - c. only *you*, *do*, and *shoe*, but not *flew*
  - d. I'm not sure
11. An example of grouping words with a common vowel sound is:
- a. kin, fist, kind
  - b. paid, said, maid
  - c. son, blood, touch
  - d. I'm not sure
12. You are helping students break a word into its separate sounds. How many sounds are in the word *grape*?
- a. three
  - b. four
  - c. five
  - d. I'm not sure
13. How do you assess phonological awareness in the preschool classroom?
- a. observations
  - b. informal screening
  - c. standardised assessment
  - d. no specific tool

14. How are children with SLCN supported in terms of PA instruction?

- a. whole class
- b. small group instruction
- c. individual instruction
- d. no specific support for PA development

15. What professional development opportunities would prove most beneficial in delivering effective PA lessons for children with SLCN?

- a. collaborative practice with a speech and language therapist
- b. further training within the area of PA
- c. further training within the area of SLCN
- d. All of the above