What are practitioners attitudes towards ‘weapon play’ and the impact these have on the way that children are allowed to play? By Stephanie Long

‘When you try to ignore it, it doesn’t go away and when you try to oppress it, it comes out in sneaky ways.’ (Katch, 2010)
This action research was carried out on a small scale and took part in a private sessional pre-school. The purpose of this research was to find an answer to the question: **What are practitioners attitudes towards ‘weapon play’ and the impact these have on the way that children are allowed to play?**

It is hoped this study will provide the researcher, and other practitioners, with an insight into the impact that practitioners views can have on the way children choose to play. Although there has been much research around the topic of weapon play, and also how adults can play a huge role in children’s learning and development, the subject of whether practitioner’s views and beliefs can impact on how children choose to play appears to be under researched.

Weapon play is a very popular choice of play for children in the Early Years (Bryce-Clegg, 2013), and in particular within the setting where this research will be conducted. The setting is a small sessional pre-school, located in a village. The setting holds a Weapon Play Policy which states that the pre-school is committed to promoting and encouraging all aspects of children’s play and development. The policy outlines the outdoor ethos of the setting and states that children are able to use sticks, and other objects, for pretend weapons such as guns and swords. However, it does emphasise that this type of role play activity will always be ‘conducted in a controlled, safe environment with adult supervision at all times’.

Regardless of the policy which is in place, practitioners in the setting appear to have diverse attitudes towards weapon play which causes the children to have inconsistent boundaries. This highlights that there is a large amount of confusion around the topic of weapon play and practitioners appear to be unsure as to whether they should be encouraging this type of play or disregarding it.

Research of literature around the subject of weapon play has highlighted three main factors which impact on children and their choice of play, particularly weapon play and superhero play. These are media, gender and practitioner’s responses when children play in this way. It is important to acknowledge that weapon play, also known as ‘war play’ or ‘superhero’ play, is a big part of a significant number of children’s choice of play (Bryce-Clegg, 2013).

**Exploring ‘Weapon Play’**

There are many different interpretations of weapon and superhero play. Pellegrini and Smith (1998) refer to weapon play as also being ‘rough and tumble’ play, including the physical motions of running, climbing, chasing and play fighting. Reed and Brown (2000) further define rough-and-tumble play and suggest it also includes fleeing, wrestling, falling and open-handed slaps. Whereas Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006) argue that when children play with toy weapons they are often re-enacting scenes from programmes they have seen on television, which contain fighting and war-like games. Popper (2013) explains that the title ‘war, weapon and superhero play’ puts together many different types of play and they are often
explained within the same category. However, it is important to acknowledge that these types of play be looked at and analysed separately as each type of play has its own characteristics (ibid). Weapon and superhero play can take the form of very physical rough-and-tumble play as well as including children acting out imaginative role play scenarios. Observations on young children have underlined the fact that they are creative in constructing weapons from various different resources available, for example interconnecting building blocks or recyclable objects. Popper (2013) defines this as children moving around or chasing each other with Lego guns which may not involve any reference to superhero characters or scenarios. In contrast Holland (2003) uses the term war, weapon and superhero play collectively as an overall category.

There are many arguments for and against weapon play which tends to spark off disagreements between teachers and caregivers about the policies they should adopt within their classrooms or settings, in relation to this type of play (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006). Due to the varied and diverse research around this subject, many practitioners who work with children or in childcare settings are uncertain whether they should support weapon play or stop it from taking place.

Research and case studies have shown that many practitioners and teachers often feel uncomfortable when they find themselves dealing with problems, such as conflicts between children, linked to children’s fascination with weapon play (Richards, 2006). Practitioners suggest that when children are participating in this type of play many of them are not able to distinguish between pretending to hurt another child, and actually hurting another child (Popper, 2013). When children, engaged in socio-dramatic play, hurt someone else, they often resist taking responsibility for it (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006). In discussing weapon and superhero play, Grieshaber and McArdle (2010, p.61) suggest settings often ban such play because it could be too risky ‘in that play could get out of control and children might get hurt’. Popper (2013) suggests that ground rules should be firmly put in place, by settings, to ensure the safety and security of children whilst allowing them to develop their play in ways that are of significant importance to them. Research by Holland (2003) suggests that weapon play is associated with aggressive behaviour which is why adults, such as practitioners and parents, tend to discourage the children from engaging in play of this kind and adopt a zero-tolerance approach (Cherney and London, 2006).

However, Bryce-Clegg (2013) supports the idea of weapon play and suggests it holds lots of benefits for children. He states play fighting ‘helps children to experience safe danger, assess risk and take appropriate action’ and through this type of play children learn all about cause and effect and the correlation between them (ibid, p55-6). Jones (2002) supports the idea that superhero and weapon play also holds benefits for children and suggests it helps to develop their self-confidence and social skills. Holland (2003) also views war, weapon and superhero play as a form of imaginative play. However, practitioners do not value this type of play as
being imaginative (ibid). When discussing superhero play, Freud’s idea of psychoanalysis is often referred to (Pound, 2011). This theory is drawn upon in order to explain why children have a need to engage in imaginative role play and have experiences of stories in which good is pitted against evil. This type of play, and experiences within these kinds of stories, provide children with the chance to explore their anxieties and fears in a social situation (Brown, 2008). Bettelheim (1978) supports this idea and suggests fairy tales deal with universal fears and therefore play in this way is also a vital part of young children’s emotional development. Boyd (1997, p.25) also agrees with this idea and argued that ‘superhero play offers a sense of power to children in a world dominated by adults’ and through superhero play children can work through their fears about their safety.

The Media

In a Children’s Society report, Layard and Dunn (2009) conclude that watching violence on film or TV can lead to increased physical aggression during children’s play and watching this type of action on the television has a huge impact on the way in which children choose to play (Popper, 2013)). Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006) believe weapon and superhero play has changed dramatically because children are being increasingly exposed to guns, fighting and aggression on the television, in the news, in films and on computer games. Bauer and Dettore (1997) also suggest children in today’s society are exposed to more aggression and graphic violence than they ever have been before and discuss television and computer games are a significant part of this exposure. According to Hausmann (2007), sixty per cent of television programmes available to children contain some violence and about forty per cent of those contain heavy violence. In America, Anderson (2010) and other psychologists published a review on violence in the media and concluded that ‘the evidence strongly suggests that exposure to violence on television and video games is a casual risk factor for increased aggressive behaviour, aggressive cognition and aggressive affect and for decreased empathy and prosocial behaviour.’ Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006, p.4) also support the idea that children copy the behaviours they see on television and in computer games and believe ‘play has become mostly imitative’. Commentators suggest that play with violence often imitates TV scripts (ibid). They explain that the characters children model in their play are increasingly of the ‘militaristic type’, taken directly from what they see on the television and in the games they play on the computer.

Children in recent years are also being exposed to ‘toys of violence’ which are marketed through the television (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006). Goldstein (1994) supported this idea and emphasised that when children watch certain TV programmes, they are being encouraged to purchase the associated toy products and imitate the associated themes through their play. Boyd (1997) also suggests the media impacts on children’s understanding of fantasy and reality, particularly in connection with superhero toys. Due to the aggressive forms of behaviour children display during this type of play, early years environments have banned play with
superhero and media-related toys (Howe and Parsons, 2013). However, Holland (2003) expands on this idea and suggests banning such toys will not stop children playing violent games and when the guns and swords are taken away they will simply make weapons out of twigs and construction toys.

**Gender**

Any discussion which arises around the idea of war, weapon and superhero play often turns into a discussion about the topic of gender. This is because the majority of children seen making weapons and taking an interest in this type of play are boys (Holland, 2003).

Brown (2008) suggests children learn about gender and develop their gender differences through the interactions they have and through what they experience when positioning themselves within society and where they are positioned by others. Gender differences come from children trying to figure out exactly what it means for them to be male or female and by the age of 18 months most children have discovered what their gender label is (Popper, 2013). Brown (2008) discusses once this has happened, children then look at what is going on in the world around them in order to discover what it means to be a boy or a girl. They get this information from many sources including their families, childcare settings and the media (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006). The idea of children learning about gender differences from their experience is discussed within the nature versus nurture debate (Holland, 2003) which supports Brown’s idea of how children develop their gender differences. However, when discussing the nature versus nurture debate, McCormick and Pressley (2007, p.4) disagree with this and state ‘today, most developmental psychologists do not believe that development is primarily due to either nature (determined by biology) or nurture (determined by experience)’. This suggests there is clear understanding that development is due both to nature and nurture and that children will develop based on the genes they inherit as well as their environmental influences. This is represented in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1996) which considers the impact sociological, genetic and environmental influences have on the views which individuals construct of the world.

Much debate has taken place to discover why more boys participate in weapon play and superhero play than girls. Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006, p.29) suggest the reason for this is because boys tend to be encouraged ‘to play in a more independent and aggressive, less nurturing way than girls’ by the role models they see in their environments, such as their parents and carers. Toys, which they are given to play with, also factor. Bryce-Clegg (2013) agrees with this and argues that girls tend to express their feelings in the opposite way to boys. It is explained girls express their feelings through language and relationships whereas boys do this through their physical play. There has been much research into the reasons behind
this and discussions why this might be. Bryce-Clegg (2013) explains the reason is all down to social stereotyping which boys and girls experience from the moment they are born. For example, girls are generally encouraged to take on a different role to boys, where they are not aggressive in their physical behaviour (ibid).

Biddulph (2010) puts forward a scientific argument in order to explain gender differentiated development of behaviour and explains hormones also have a substantial influence on the play which children choose to engage in. The role of testosterone can be linked to displays of aggression in young boys (ibid). At approximately three to four years old boys will experience a testosterone surge which accounts for the increase in aggressive behaviour many will display at that age. This would explain why it is typically boys that are seen engaging in weapon/superhero play.

**Practitioner’s Responses**

Hucker and Tassoni (2005) discuss the responses that practitioners within early years settings have towards weapon and superhero play. They state that generally many adults believe children should be discouraged from engaging in play in this way and should not be encouraged to play with toy guns and other weapons. The reason for this is because adults believe this type of play is linked to children showing signs of aggressive behaviour and puts hurting others at the forefront of their play. Teachers in schools and childcare may view weapon play as disruptive, threatening, noisy and chaotic and have observed children who normally would not display such behaviours demonstrate these traits when engaging in this type of play (Bauer and Dettore, 1997). According to Hucker and Tassoni (2005), as a result of the practitioners responding to play in this way and having these views towards weapon play, many children in nurseries and pre-schools are not allowed to play with toy weapons and are discouraged from playing ‘warlike games’.

Bauer and Dettore (1997) also discuss adult’s views of superhero play and believe adults struggle with the issue of children’s aggressive play. They are often in debate as to whether children should be permitted to play in such ways or whether it should be banned. Bauer and Dettore (1997) also suggest some adults view superhero/weapon play as ‘meaningless, bizarre, aggressive and frightening’ and they sometimes oppose it because of its ‘violent conduct’ (p.18). Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1995, as cited in Bauer and Dettore, 1997, p.18) imply parents and practitioners argue ‘aggressive play should not be permitted because of the inappropriate concepts and attitudes children may learn’. However, although many practitioners oppose weapon play there is a conflicting view. Kuykendall (1995) proposes some adults believe weapon play helps children to resolve issues of control and reduce anxiety as well as being a means of addressing developmental issues. Stopping children from playing in their preferred manor can also have a negative impact on them and result in undesirable behaviours. This could include behaviours such as hiding their interests from adults and having a fear of discussing
topics with them, learning to mislead adults and feelings of guilt for engaging in play which is not allowed (ibid).

It is suggested that instead of banning superhero and weapon play ‘practitioners should set clear but realistic boundaries and enforce these constantly’ (Harding-Swale, 2006, p.21). According to Harding-Swale (2006) some examples of these boundaries might include rules such as this type of play can only take place outside and children are not allowed to actually touch each other during their play. When setting boundaries for children with regard to weapon play, many early years settings adopt different policies and rules based on the view it holds of the benefits for children or whether they feel it has a negative impact on them. When rules are established for children’s play they can either be ‘explicit’ or ‘implicit’ (Brieshaber and McArdle, 2010). It is understood explicit rules are stated regularly by adults and are often common knowledge to all practitioners and children within the setting. However, implicit rules are assumed to be related to socially acceptable behaviour and are assumed to be shared and understood by all. The weapon play policy in place within the setting where this study took place puts an explicit rule in place in regard to weapon play. It is a policy which all practitioners have access to and are aware of and are expected to follow in everyday practice. However, Moyles (2006) identifies that some practitioners have a resistance to adhere to such guidelines because of their own personal beliefs. This idea is supported by Dweck (2007) who claims when an individual maintains a fixed mind-set, this can determine their willingness to adhere to such policies and guidelines.

The main findings of the study

The main findings of this study suggest there is a large amount of confusion around the topic of weapon play and the boundaries which should be set within the setting. As highlighted by the literature, this subject is often a topic of debate between practitioners. This is reflected in another one of the main findings of the study which suggests practitioners encourage or discourage children to play in this way based on their own beliefs rather than their sound knowledge of the subject. The findings suggest that boundaries based around weapon play within early years settings are inconsistent, regardless of the policy in place within the setting where this study was carried out.

The need for staff training on the subject of weapon play, and superhero play, is also evident from the data collection which highlights that practitioner knowledge of weapon play is limited. They would, therefore, benefit from learning more about the subject in order to make judgements based on knowledge rather than on their own personal opinions and beliefs.
Exploring Weapon Play

The data supports the idea that weapon play is a big part of a significant number of children’s choice of play (Bryce-Clegg, 2013). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that children need consistent boundaries based on this type of play otherwise this may cause confusion. The results show 100% (n=8) of the participants said they had observed children participate in weapon play within the setting.

As one of the aims of this questionnaire was to gain an understanding of the knowledge practitioners currently have of weapon and superhero play, an open question was asked to discover what their idea of this type of play was. Coding the qualitative data collected from the responses it was clear to see similar ideas were emerging. The table below demonstrates the answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging Themes</th>
<th>Number of People</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dressing-Up and Acting</td>
<td>⬤⬤⬤⬤⬤</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Weapons</td>
<td>⬤⬤⬤⬤⬤</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting and Wrestling</td>
<td>⬤⬤⬤⬤⬤</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative Play</td>
<td>⬤⬤⬤⬤</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Play</td>
<td>⬤</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows that all the practitioners (n=8) understood weapon play as being play which involves fighting and wrestling. This is supported by Reed and Brown (2000) and Pellegrini and Smith (1998). Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006) also support this idea and argue that, during this type of play, children will re-enact scenes from programmes they have observed on the television, such as fighting and war-like games. It is clear to see from the table that all of the participants also suggested weapon play is when children build weapons out of construction materials and then use these within their play, for example children building a gun and then pretending to shoot others. Literature is supported by this idea where Popper (2013, p46) defines weapon play as ‘children moving around or chasing each other with Lego guns. Interestingly, only 5 of the 8 practitioners who participated in this study mentioned imaginative play when thinking about the idea of weapon play. However, Holland (2003) recognises that practitioners do not value this as being a form of imaginative play, which is reflected in the data collated.

The Media
Participants were asked how they thought children learned about weapon play and where they get their ideas about this type of play from. This question was an open question and did not have any suggestions for answers. Therefore, it allowed the participants to include their own ideas about how they think children learn to play in this way. It also enabled the participants to offer more than one idea or concept. By using a coding system to analyse the answers, five main ideas were presented that arose throughout the answers that were given. This is shown in the pie chart below, which represents that there are many factors practitioners feel could impact on the way children choose to play.

How do you think children learn about the ideas they present during weapon play?

![Pie chart showing distribution of responses]

The chart shows 25% (n=2) of the participants suggested that children may learn about the ideas they present during weapon play through stories that they have read to them or the pictures they have looked at within story books. 75% (n=6) suggested that weapon play, and superhero play, may be learned through watching older siblings play in this way while 62.5% (n=5) mentioned they believe children will watch and copy their peers within the setting. 25% (n=2) of the practitioners believe that children learn about weapons and fighting through computer games and then imitate this during their play whilst 87.5% (n=7) said the same about television and films. This reinforces the fact that the majority of the participants believe most of what children learn about weapon, superheroes and fighting is what they have witnessed through playing computer games or watching the television. This supports current literature which states that watching violence and action on film or television has a huge impact on the way in which children choose to play (Hucker and Tassoni, 2005). Current literature also suggests weapon and superhero play has become a more popular choice of play because children are being increasingly exposed to guns, fighting and aggression on the television, in the news, in films and on computer games (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006).
Gender

The majority of children observed making weapons and taking an interest in weapon and superhero play are boys (Holland, 2003). This is supported by the data collated from the questionnaires which shows that none of the participants reported seeing only girls participating in weapon play. 75% (n=6) commented that they just witness boys, whereas the remaining 25% (n=2) stated they see both genders participating.

When asked who they usually see participating in weapon play, practitioners were also asked why they think this might be. There were a wide range of answers received in relation to this question. Participants appeared to all have very different ideas of why boys tend to participate in weapon play more than girls. One of the practitioners commented that they believe this is because ‘boys need to burn more energy than girls and therefore need to play in a way which allows them to do this’. Another of the practitioners suggested ‘boys are more exposed to this behaviour through the television programmes they watch whereas girls’ television programmes tend not to display this kind of behaviour’. It was interesting to note that none of the practitioners mentioned that boy’s behaviour could have anything to do with their testosterone levels. Another participant did suggest ‘boys are encouraged to play in this way by the male role models in their lives, such as their dads, whereas girls are not encouraged to play fight and wrestle’. This idea is supported by Bryce-Clegg (2013) who explains this as social stereotyping, where girls are encouraged to take on a different role to boys.

Practitioner Responses

The aim of the questionnaire was to gather practitioner’s ideas and opinions based around weapon play and to determine what knowledge they currently have of the subject. Questions were asked to discover what the practitioner’s beliefs were as to whether children should be allowed to participate in weapon play and the reasons why they hold these beliefs. Hucker and Tassoni (2005) state that generally, in response to practitioner attitudes, many adults believe children should be discouraged from engaging in this type of play and should not be encouraged to play with toy guns and other weapons. However, Kuykendall (1995) contradicts this idea and proposes that some practitioners do actually believe that weapon play benefits children by allowing them to resolve issues of control, without adult assistance, and reduce anxiety, as well as being a means of addressing developmental issues Bauer and Dettore, 1997). The data collected from the questionnaires shows that there are diverse opinions as to whether this type of play should be allowed or not, supporting both the pieces of literature discussed. Data collection shows 50% (n=4) suggest this type of play should be encouraged within the early years of children’s development and 37.5% (n=3) commented that they believe it should be discouraged.
The bar chart above does show 12.5% (n=1) of the participants did not answer the question which could indicate that either the question was not clear or that the researcher should have put a ‘neither’ or ‘both’ selection as the participants may not have agreed with either suggestion.

Practitioners were also asked how they respond to weapon play when they see children within the setting playing in this way. This was displayed as an open question and did not have the answers for the participants to choose from. By coding the answers which were given, it was clear to see that there were four different answers that appeared to be reoccurring. Firstly, the practitioners said they would intervene and halt the play, suggesting that the children go and find something else to play with. Secondly, others said they would ignore it altogether and allow the children to continue, but ensure that they are closely watching them to prevent any overly-aggressive actions which could jeopardise the safety of the children. Thirdly, the practitioners suggested that they would distract the children and encourage them to play with something else without making their dissatisfaction look too obvious. Lastly, one practitioner commented that they would intervene in the play but, instead of stopping it, they would join in to ensure the safety of the children and prevent any aggressive behaviour. The practitioner also noted that, if any aggressive tendencies were displayed by the children, they would talk to the children to explain why we shouldn’t hurt each other, linking it to the Personal, Social and Emotional Development area of the Early Years Foundation Stage (2014).

The pie chart below shows 37.5% (n=3) of practitioners would intervene and stop the play if they see children, involved in weapon play, displaying signs of aggressive behaviour, whilst 25% (n=2) would distract the children to stop the play. However, 12.5% (n=1) said they would ignore this type of play and allow the children to proceed, while 25% (n=2) said they would intervene but only to ensure the safety of the children and not necessarily stop the play. These results show that it is a small number of practitioners who would allow children to engage in weapon play and that the majority would stop them from playing in this way. Kuykendall (1995) suggests that stopping children from playing in their desired manner can have a negative impact on them and can result in them displaying unwanted behaviours such as suppressing their interests from adults, having a fear of discussing topics with them.
and also learning to mislead adults because of their feelings of guilt at wishing to play in a way which is deemed unacceptable (Bauer and Dettore, 1997).

**Question 2B: How do you respond to this type of play?**

![Response Pie Chart]

- **Intervene & stop the play**: 37.5%
- **Ignore it**: 25%
- **Distract the children**: 25%
- **Intervene & ensure safety**: 12.5%

In order to gain an insight into practitioners' beliefs, the participants were asked ‘Do you think it is good/bad for children to play in this way, and why? The response to this question showed 62.5% (n=5) thought it was bad for children to participate in weapon play and 37.5% (n=3) felt that it was good. The descriptive responses as to why the participants thought this were very varied. 2 out of 3 practitioners who felt that it is acceptable for children to play in this way suggested that it allows children to express themselves and be imaginative and creative within their play. The other practitioner who commented that it was good for children stated that this was because it helps them to develop socially with their peers. This is supported by literature which illustrates that weapon, and superhero, play holds benefits for children because it helps them to develop their self-confidence, identity, and social skills (Jones, 2002). 4 out of the 5 practitioners who felt that weapon play was bad for children said that this was due to the fact that often when children engage in this type of play they tend to display aggressive behaviours and would hurt their peers without realising what they had done.

Research has shown that when children engage in weapon play it often results in conflicts between them and they are not able to distinguish between pretending to hurt another child and actually inflicting bodily harm (Levin and Carlsson-Paige, 2006). This indicates that it could be the reason why practitioners are reluctant to allow children to participate in weapon play. When a child does hurt another child they often resist taking responsibility for their actions because they are only ‘playing’. Hucker and Tassoni (2005) support this idea when discussing practitioner’s responses towards weapon play within settings. They state that, generally, many adults believe this type of play is linked to children showing signs of aggressive behaviour and feel that, during this type of play, children will place hurting others as the focus of their play. The one practitioner who felt that weapon play was bad for children indicated that this was because they felt it gave children the go-ahead from
adults that weapons and fighting is acceptable and that it will lead them to believe that this is what it is actually like in the real world.

The results from the question ‘Are you aware that the setting has a ‘Weapon Play Policy?’ gathered responses which were expected. 75% (n=6) said yes, they were aware, and 25% (n=2) said that they were not aware that the setting had a weapon play policy in place. The 2 practitioners who were not aware of the policy were new staff members who, despite being given a complete set of the setting’s policies when they joined the pre-school, admitted they had not had enough time to read them all. Literature suggests that practitioners will be resistant to adhere to some policies and guidelines because they have strong beliefs on the subject and disagree with what the policy might state (Moyles, 2006). This is due to the fact that they have a fixed mind set (Dweck, 2007) which can determine their willingness to be open-minded on subjects they feel strongly about. This is reflected within the data collection where practitioners have stated that they stop children playing in this way and think weapon play has a negative impact on children, even though they are aware of the policy and the guidelines set out within this.

Although the data collection suggested more practitioners thought that weapon play was bad for children, and when they see children playing in this way they tend to intervene and stop the play or distract them and encourage them to play something else, children are still playing in this way. This indicates that, regardless of what the practitioner’s views are and whether they tell the children to stop engaging in weapon play, children are choosing to play in this way. As discussed in the introduction to this section of the study, the graph below shows that the majority of practitioners observe children engaging in weapon play almost on a daily basis within the setting.

**Question 2: Do you see children taking part in weapon play within the setting?**

![Bar chart showing responses to the question](image)

To conclude, the participants were asked whether they felt that practitioners knew enough about weapon play and whether they felt that they would benefit from further training into the subject. The results showed 87.5% (n=7) thought that practitioners
do not know enough and 75% (n=6) suggested that they would benefit from further training.

**Limitations of the Study**

One of the limitations of the research would be the validity of the practitioner feedback within the questionnaires. The participants could have responded in the way they did because they may have felt they should be complying with the policy in place within the setting. This would have meant that the responses received may not have been a true reflection of the practitioner’s beliefs. The fact that the researcher was also the gatekeeper, and therefore an ‘insider’, could have impacted on the responses received from the data collection (Callan and Reed, 2011). As the gatekeeper, the researcher may be seen as an authoritative figure to the other practitioners. This may have made them feel that they needed to answer the questions in the way they thought the researcher would have responded. This could be explained by the fact that practitioners tend to look up to authoritative figures as role models and they may have observed the researcher responding to weapon play in a particular way. This could make them feel as if this is how they should respond too, despite their own feelings and beliefs.

Another limitation of the study is the sample size and sample method used to select the participants. To ensure the validity of the research, a larger sample size could have been used. For this study only 8 practitioners participated. Using a larger sample could have reflected a wider range of opinions and beliefs which may have influenced the main findings of the research.

An example of another method of data collection which could have been used for this research study, which was touched on through daily professional practice but not fully utilised for this study, would be specific observations on the children. This would have helped consolidate the conclusions drawn by this study as the researcher would have been able to use the observations to support the ideas represented in the data collated from the questionnaires.

**Conclusion**

McNiff and Whitehead (2006, as cited in Carter et al., 2011) suggest that ‘action research does not have a hypothesis at the start but then neither does it have a particular end point’, which they argue distinguishes it from other forms of research. This research study supports this idea in that it does not reach an end point nor a conclusion, and the research question has not been answered as such. Instead, the main findings of this study have, in fact, generated more questions for the researcher.

Overall, the data collection and the literature that was read for this study suggest that the themes highlighted throughout this research project are all factors which impact on children’s decisions to engage in weapon play, along with other contributing
factors. The findings suggest that, although practitioners tend to have a negative view of this type of play, children still choose to engage in weapon play as this is still seen on a daily basis within the setting. This suggests that, generally, practitioner’s attitudes do not impact on the way in which children choose to play and, when they are stopped from playing in this way, they continue to do so anyway. This generates the question as to whether children are trying to hide this type of play from certain adults and are they learning to mislead adults when they partake in constructing weapons to engage in weapon play. Further research into this topic, and a more longitudinal study, could help to answer these under researched questions. If the researcher is to continue academic studies, and commence a Master’s degree, they would be interested in widening their research to investigate the attitudes of practitioners in other countries, particularly in those countries with differing gun cultures.

Carrying out this research project has allowed the researcher to consolidate their understanding of weapon play and has given them a clear idea of how practitioners within the setting feel about this type of play and why they have these diverse attitudes and feelings. The findings of this study have enabled the researcher to produce clear recommendations for the setting where this study took place. Firstly, it is clear to see, from the collated data, that there is a need for staff training on the subject of weapon play. The results showed that practitioners felt that they would benefit from further training on the subject of weapon play which indicates that they have insufficient knowledge on the subject. Providing the practitioners with training could then allow them to have a different judgement of weapon play and may change the way in which they respond when they observe children playing in this way. By doing this, consistent boundaries could then be set and agreed between practitioners in regards to this type of play. As suggested, by literature, instead of banning weapon play ‘practitioners should set clear but realistic boundaries and enforce these constantly’ (Harding-Swale, 2006, p.21). Harding-Swale (2006) explains that when this type of play does get out of hand, and the boundaries are overstepped, practitioners should take this opportunity to explain to the children why their behaviour has been unacceptable and the impact their aggression and violence can have on their peers and others. It is also suggested that practitioners could remind children of what superheroes do, for example help other people instead of hurting them. Another recommendation for the setting is to ensure that all practitioners are aware of the policy in place within the setting and the reasons behind why this policy has been enforced. This could help all the practitioners to understand why the setting is supporting children to play in this way. As Katch (2010, as cited in Parry, 2010) suggests ‘when you try to ignore it, it doesn’t go away and when you try to oppress it, it comes out in sneaky ways’.


