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**Child-led learning beyond the Early Years Foundation Stage:
Year 3 pupils' perspectives on the 'Learning Zone'.**

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Abstract

This case study focuses on the use of the 'Learning Zone' in Key Stage 1 of a particular school, and pupils' perspectives on whether or not this should be continued into higher years. It explores the ideas of play, independence and choice in this context, and the potential benefits of these beyond the Early Years, by which time it is phased out in many schools. Ethics and methodology are also considered. Using both questionnaires and interviews, it is shown that pupils vary widely in their opinions, with extremes on both sides. This highlights the importance of consulting as many pupils as possible with regards to proposed changes within the school. Finally, a review of implications for future practice is given.

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Introduction

It is necessary at the beginning of this study to introduce and explain the term 'learning zone' (LZ). In the school in which the research for this study took place (School X), key stage 1 (KS1) is arranged into three, mixed-age, year 1/2 classes. Each class is split, without reference to age or ability, into two groups. Every morning before play, one group will remain with the class teacher and participate in adult-led activities, often phonics or mathematics. The other group will spend that time in the LZ. The groups swap round after play.

The LZ comprises of several tables indoors in a large, designated corridor, an adjoining outdoor decking area, and a wooden gazebo-like space with tables located in the playground. Each of these areas is further divided into specific activities. For example, there is an area each for writing, reading, design and technology (DT), art, construction, role-play, allotments, sand, and computers. The available activities are usually based around the topic of learning being covered in class. While the children are allowed to choose in which activity they want to participate on any given day, it is expected that each child should have a go at each activity at least once, before the topic changes. Children work for the most part independently or with their peers, under the supervision of several teaching assistants.

Due to the degree of choice and independence the children have to structure their learning. These activities could be referred to as child-led, as the "children have indicated [what] they want to do" (Lindon & Rouse, 2013:6). The LZ cannot be considered strictly child-led, as the topic of learning, chosen by adults, is already embedded within the activities. Therefore the element led by the individual children is more to do with *how* they want to learn that day. However, if teacher/child-led was thought of as a continuum rather than as discrete categories, the LZ would be child-led to a greater extent than those formal, structured lessons more common beyond the Early Years

Foundation Stage (EYFS), or 5 years and up. It is in this sense that child-led will be used in the rest of this essay.

Since the introduction of the LZ only a few years ago, School X have attributed the increased achievement levels and evidence of higher levels of “self-reliance and learning skills... readiness to learn and greater development of social and emotional skills” amongst subsequent cohorts in KS1 to the presence and use of the LZ (School X Governing Body, 2013a:3, 2013b). As a result of this, there is currently talk of extending the LZ to be used in years 3 and 4. However, the school has yet to find out the thoughts of those this decision actually affects – the pupils. In order to give children an active role in influencing how *their* school is run, it is vital to engage with the ‘pupil voice’, by asking and valuing the opinions of children (Jackson, 2004). The possibility of expansion of the LZ highlights the importance and relevance of this essay, which aims to investigate the pupils’ perspectives on the subject. In particular, the main research questions to be addressed are:

To what extent do Year 3 pupils think the child-led learning in which they engaged in KS1 (in the learning zone) should be continued into KS2?

To what extent do Year 3 pupils think that the learning zone is helpful for their learning, when compared to teacher-led, more formal and structured lessons?

Literature review

It is not immediately apparent which domain of study and theory the LZ directly lends itself to. For the purposes of this study, the focuses will be on play, freedom/independence, and choice, as each of these elements play a clear role for the children participating in the LZ experience, and may be areas that they can consciously appreciate. An extension of this might have included consideration of learning outside the classroom, different learning styles (visual, auidial and kinaesthetic), and/or the benefits of learning through practical experience.

Play

Often, play has a very significant role in child-led activities, as it is something in which children naturally enjoy taking part, and are thus likely to choose as an activity. However, School X explicitly reinforces that the LZ is for learning, and *not* play, as though the two are not connected.

Despite this, I argue that role-play, art, construction and sand activities could all be considered as some kind of play, and that this should be recognised and valued rather than played down.

Research has shown many benefits of play for young children, including the development of social, academic, and creative skills. This creative aspect is increasingly significant with regards to the need for original thinking in modern, high-end jobs, especially as more creative curriculum areas such as music and art frequently receive less attention in school than more academic subjects. Play is also crucial for children's mental health, particularly for those children with difficult life circumstances, emotional problems or developmental delays (Singer, 2006). One possible reason for these benefits, specifically concerning role-play, is that it provides children with a meaningful context in which to practice adult roles (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). From a Vygotskian perspective, it is in role-play that children work out the rules of social interaction (Singer, 2006) – a vital part of development – and interact with those more knowledgeable peers and adults to appropriate the cultural tools they need to develop (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Furthermore, role-play gives rise to a valuable language-rich environment, which has been shown to have considerable positive effects on the vocabulary acquisition of young children when compared to a teacher-driven approach (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013).

The benefits of play are clearly recognised in the EYFS statutory framework (DfE, 2012). Indeed, it explicitly refers to “playing and exploring”, “active learning” and “creating and thinking critically” as the three main characteristics of effective teaching and learning for this age range (DfE, 2012:7). Each of these can be achieved through the child-led approach, and play. Despite this recognition, it is expected that “the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1” (DfE, 2012:7). This suggests that as soon as children reach the ages of 5 or 6, they no longer need or benefit from play. Even though this is almost certainly not the case, it is unfortunately borne out in the National Curriculum for KS1 and 2, where play is only mentioned in the context of sports in PE, and once referencing mirror games when investigating light in Year 3 science (DfE, 2013).

In an environment of increasing demands on schools and teachers for attainment and accountability, time made for play has been considerably reduced (Singer, 2006). This could explain the lack of outward confidence of School X in the benefits of play; despite the fact it does seem to be resulting in increasing attainment at this point. Although the link is not necessarily causal, this is strongly

backed up by research. Some experts go so far as to say: “learning and playing cannot be separated” (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013:515).

Freedom/independence

Independence, in the sense of showing initiative, a disposition to learn, and the ability to think for themselves, is considered a highly desirable and valued trait for children to develop (Hendy & Whitebread, 2000). There is evidence to suggest that it is in conditions of relative freedom that children could obtain their most memorable learning experiences (O'Connor, 2012). However, modern childhood is much more controlled and supervised than in the past (O'Connor, 2012), and dependence on teachers actually increases in the first few years of school (Hendy & Whitebread, 2000). The LZ aims to avoid this and promote a readiness to learn in its KS1 pupils. This section discusses the extent to which adults are necessary for the development of independence, and other skills.

It could be argued that any adult ‘interference’ in the learning process is in fact unnecessary. According to the Montessori approach, children’s development will happen naturally, and so the only concern of the adult is to ensure that the child has both the freedom, and the stimulating, hands-on environment they need to progress (Montessori, 1917). This method has been shown to have positive effects for some children, particularly in learning to read and write, and has gained some following since the late 1950s (Shute, 2002). It is distinct from play, as the children are strictly *working* with the specific Montessori apparatus, which have been designed in such a way that children must self-correct until they reach the one possible solution available (Kilpatrick, 1914). While Montessori believed that education could only really occur through self-correction, which necessitated these very specific apparatus, critics of the concept argue that this in fact limits the creativity and independence of the participating children, as it is too structured (Kilpatrick, 1914).

In contrast, the type of learning through play described by Van Oers and Duijkers (2013), Singer (2006), and Lindon and Rouse (2013) makes clear the importance of the role of the adult in the participation of play. Following the Developmental Education model (Van Oers and Duijkers, 2013), adults can scaffold learning for the children, so that they are able to achieve more than they could do independently. As the child becomes more confident, the scaffolding is reduced, until it is no longer needed. This is called the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), which

requires a knowledgeable peer or adult. Although an adult is involved, scaffolding learning can still take place in child-led activities. The educator must recognise moments at which a teaching opportunity arises naturally from the child-initiated activities, and respond appropriately (Lindon & Rouse, 2013). This means that the children engaging in these activities retain a sense of independence, and responsibility for their own learning.

The LZ has some characteristics of the Montessori method, as the environment is set up by adults, and then the children are free to choose what they would like to do. However, the adults present do sometimes scaffold activities and have expectations that the children will complete certain tasks. In this way, the LZ helps to foster a higher degree of independence than purely teacher-led activities, but accepts that adults do have a role in progressing this learning further. On the other hand, it is possible that the adults play more of a managerial role. For example, a study by Nelson, Johnson and Marchand-Martella (1996) found that, for children with behavioural disorders, direct instruction led to more on-task behaviour than either cooperative or independent learning.

Choice

Many teachers have the opinion that offering choice to children leads to a multitude of potential benefits (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). In particular, choice is seen to increase interest, engagement and learning, and supports the development of other skills such as self-regulation (Patall, Cooper & Wynn, 2010). The theory behind this is the self-determination theory of motivation, which teaches that when the human needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness are met, an individual is more likely to be intrinsically motivated. That means that they value the activity because it relates to their interests and values, as opposed to being persuaded by extrinsic pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2000). People who are intrinsically motivated “have more interest, excitement, and confidence, which in turn is manifest both as enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity and as heightened vitality, self-esteem, and general well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000:69). One of the critical contributing factors to autonomy (one of the three needs) is choice. Clearly, if this highly enviable state can be achieved by providing children with choice, it is an extremely worthwhile practice.

However, research into the subject has had inconsistent results, some finding that choice can be motivating and others the complete opposite (Katz & Assor, 2007). It appears that there are several aspects of choice that must be considered in order for the benefits to occur. Referring back to the

three aspects of self-determination, choice must also be considered in the context autonomy, competence and relatedness. In other words, to be motivating, options provided must be relevant to the pupils' interests and goals, must not be too numerous or complex, and must be in line with the values of the individual child's culture (Katz & Assor, 2007:429). For example, Iyengar & Lepper (1999) found that although Anglo-American pupils gained motivation when they made their own choices, Asian-American pupils showed more intrinsic motivation when choices were made for them by "trusted authority figures or peers" (p.349). This may be due to a stronger collectivist orientation in Asian culture, which can be threatened if choice is not congruent with belonging to that group, thus not conforming to the need for relatedness (Katz & Assor, 2007). In addition, the need for autonomy is compromised to some extent when the options offered to the children are teacher-determined. In a study by Reeve, Nix and Hamm (2003), in these circumstances there is an increase in the perception of choice, but this does not result in the desired increases in intrinsic motivation. In order to alleviate this, teachers could acknowledge negative feelings, provide a rationale for unappealing choices, and ask pupils their opinion on what they want to do (Reeve, Nix & Hamm, 2003:389).

In the LZ, the choice seems to fall under that described by Reeve, Nix and Hamm (2003), in that the options are preconceived by an adult. This limits the positive effects of choice. It may be valuable then to allow the children some degree of input into the design of activities, thus augmenting their sense of autonomy, with the aim of increasingly promoting intrinsic motivation for learning.

Research design and methodology

This research was carried out in a village primary school in the United Kingdom. It is smaller than average but growing: KS2 is one form entry, whereas KS1 is currently at one and a half form entry, with the intention of expanding to two in the next year. The participants for the investigation were the year 3 class, as they were the only year group to have had experience of both the LZ and teacher-led, traditional learning, and were therefore in a position to be able to compare the two. A mixed-method approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data was adopted, in an attempt to improve the accuracy of my findings. That is, if the results of one form of research corroborate with the other, they are more likely to be reliable (Denscombe, 2010). Also, due to the age and ability of the participants of the research, the risk of misunderstandings related to the

questionnaire was higher, so follow-up interviews would help to give a fuller, more accurate picture of the pupils' perspectives.

Additionally, this research falls under the category of a case study, in that it focuses on one particular phenomenon in depth. This is the most relevant research type, as the LZ is particular to School X, and the opportunity to carry out research in this area was relatively unique. One issue with case studies, however, is the degree to which the findings can be applied to other situations – generalisation can be limited (Denscombe, 2010). It should therefore be taken into consideration that the perspectives of *these particular* participants on *this particular* LZ are unlikely to be identical to other children's views on slightly different constructs. However, as LZs are currently rare, this research will serve as a valuable starting point in finding how this phenomenon is interpreted by the children using it.

Questionnaire

In order to obtain quantitative data, the children participated in a questionnaire (Appendix 1). This method provided an overview of findings for the whole class, including those who may have been less comfortable and thus unwilling to participate in an interview (MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck & Myers, 2003). It included a series of questions from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS) (Midgley et al., 2000), which measures the pupils' personal goal orientation. Care was taken in the creation of this questionnaire to avoid as far as possible the wording pitfalls outlined by Bell (2010), such as ambiguity and double questions. To ensure clear presentation, the questionnaire was word-processed, and included clear instructions at the start.

The participants for the questionnaire were 25 out of a total of 30 children in the year 3 class, as these were the children who were willing to take part, and whose parents/carers had returned the consent form. Furthermore, these are the only children who have had experience both in the LZ, and of singularly teacher-led activities, and so were therefore in the best position to evaluate and compare the two different kinds of learning. Due to their young age, an emoticon-based Likert scale was used for the majority of the questionnaire, in an attempt to maximise understanding. In addition, it was decided that the questionnaire would yield the best results if it was read aloud to the class as a whole, thus including a wider sample that included those children who struggled with reading, and further reducing the risk of misunderstanding to make the results more representative of the pupils' perspectives.

Guided interview

In order to build a clearer picture of the perspectives of the children, four were selected for the guided interview (see, 'PALS' section below). The interview used a framework of topics and questions but allowed the interviewee freedom to talk more broadly about related subjects that they found significant, in their own time (Bell, 2010). This was more appropriate than a more structured interview, which may have limited the extent to which interviewees felt they could deviate from specific questions, and may have been more intimidating for the children, thereby reducing their inclination to participate fully. These interviews were one-on-one, in the hope that the participants were more likely to voice their honest opinions without peer pressure, however this then introduces the risk of the observer effect – participants acting differently due to the knowledge that they are being observed (Denscombe, 2010). This will hopefully have been mediated by the fact that the interviews took place in the eighth week of my being in the class, at which point I had built a good relationship with the children. The interviews were recorded and transcribed (where possible). Then, to identify common themes, I physically cut the printed out transcripts into relevant sections and grouped them accordingly.

Ethics

I fully recognise that my research must meet impeccable ethical standards to ensure that no aspect of the research has or will have a detrimental effect on anybody involved. In order to achieve this, the guidelines laid out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) have been followed, as has the ethics checklist created for this purpose by the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education.

To ensure voluntary informed consent, a letter was sent home to parents/carers requesting their written approval for their child to participate in the questionnaire, the interview or both aspects of the study. The letter included an explanation of the purpose of the research, and an invitation to get in touch with any questions or queries. Once this consent was received, the purpose and nature of the research was explained to the children, who were then given the option of participating. This was with the understanding that they were free to withdraw at any time, and to choose not to answer particular questions if they did not want to. Participation was in no way obligatory, at either the questionnaire or the interview stage.

To ensure privacy, confidentiality and anonymity, all participants in the study, including the school, have either had their name removed or have been given a pseudonym. The audio recordings of the interviews were only listened to by me, and will be deleted after their use solely for this research, and by the end of the academic 2013/14 year. Both the parents and children were made aware of this.

The proposed research was carefully reviewed prior to carrying it out to ensure that no harm, either physical or psychological could come to the participants. To minimise disruption to learning, children were removed from the class only with the child, the parent and the teaching adult's permission, during foundation subjects, and for a short amount of time. As interviews were one-to-one, they were always carried out in a public space, and steps were taken to help put the interviewee at ease, to reduce the risk of any anxiety. Throughout the research, I aware of my responsibility to value the children's ideas and opinions, and be sensitive to situations where children might not know how to respond. I made it clear that this was not a problem at any stage of the research process.

Findings

Results of the questionnaire

The questionnaire played a key role towards addressing my first research question:

To what extent do Year 3 pupils think the child-led learning in which they engaged in KS1 (in the Learning Zone) should be continued into KS2?

Table 1 shows the average class response to questions asking whether they think the LZ should be used in ascending KS2 year groups, followed by whether they thought it was helpful for their learning, or, in contrast, they thought the teacher was more helpful for their learning (labelled as 'LZhelpful' and 'teacherhelpful' respectively in the following tables and graphs). In this scale, 1 is the lowest, representing 'strongly disagree', and 5 is the highest, representing 'strongly agree'. This data is then represented in Figure 1. In the shorthand used, 'Y3' means 'year 3'. The standard deviations are also shown to indicate the spread of responses in relation to the mean.

	LZ in Y3	LZ in Y4	LZ in Y5	LZ in Y6	LZ helpful	Teacher helpful
Mean class response	4.36	2.64	2.56	2.52	4.08	3.50
Standard deviation	0.95	1.50	1.58	1.78	0.93	1.64

Table 1 – Average class response to ‘I think the learning zone should be used in year 3.’ etc.

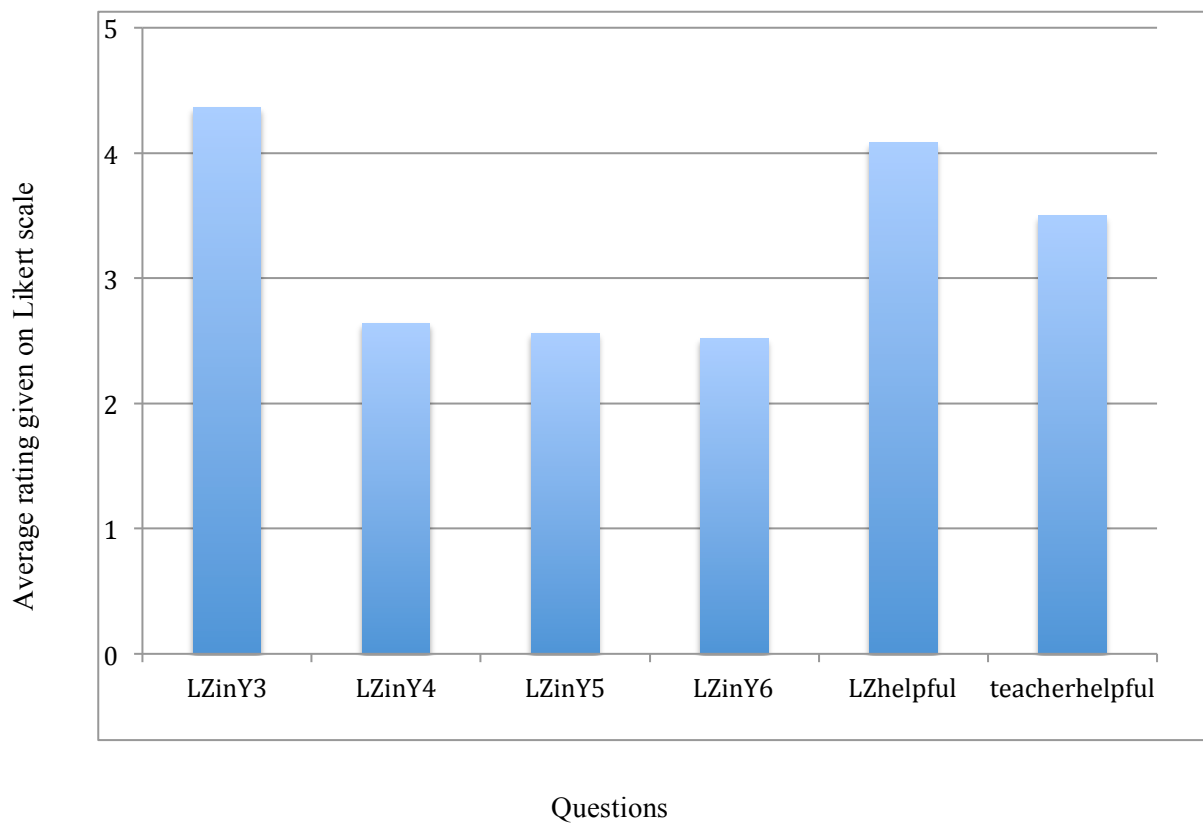


Figure 1 – Averages of how strongly children felt that the learning zone should be continued in KS2, and how helpful either the learning zone or teacher-led sessions are for their learning.

Interestingly, support for continuing the LZ in year 3 is significantly higher than for any other year group. This suggests that the majority of the class either agree, or strongly agree that this should be the case. On the other hand, responses to the LZ in years 4, 5 and 6 are very similar to each other, although slightly descending as the year group increases, and somewhere between unsure and disagree. This descent may indicate that children feel the LZ is less appropriate as age increases, although this cannot be confirmed using quantitative data. At this point, it is important to consider the standard deviations, which increase going up the year groups, and there is a substantial jump after year 3. This suggests that, rather than the majority of the class being more or less unsure, there was more of a difference in opinions. In this situation, means are not the most accurate representation of the data. Instead, the proportion of pupils that agreed (those who responded with either a 4 or a 5) against the proportion that disagreed (those who responded with either a 1 or a 2) gives more of an insight. As some children answered with 3 – unsure – there is less than the total 25 in each category. This data is represented in Figure 2.

This reveals that, as the standard deviation suggests, with the exception of year 3, the children's opinions are divided over the continuation of the LZ into higher years. Although the majority do disagree, there are still 7 or 8 children, or approximately one third of the class, who agree that the LZ should be used all the way up to year 6. Closer inspection of the raw data from the questionnaire shows that these are the same children, and that most of them have selected 'strongly agree'. This shows a stark contrast with the rest of the class, and highlights the fact that children vary greatly in their preferred way of learning.

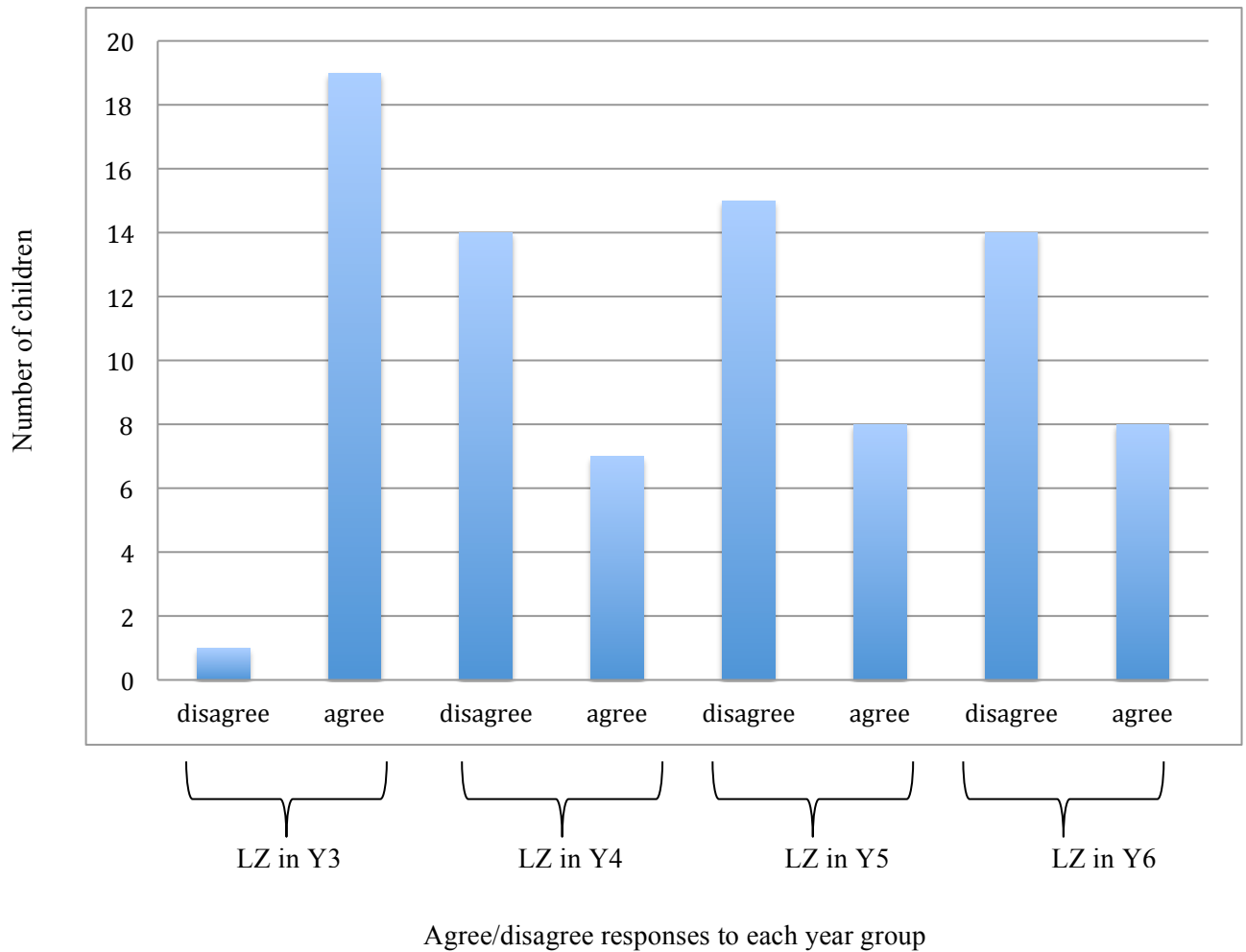


Figure 2 – The proportion of children who agreed or disagreed about where the learning zone should be used

The questionnaire also gave an overview considering my second research question:

To what extent do Year 3 pupils think that the learning zone is helpful for their learning, when compared to teacher-led, more formal and structured lessons?

Table 1 and Figure 1 show a similar case to the one described above. According to the means, the children agreed that the LZ was helpful for their learning, with teacher-led activities coming in somewhere between unsure and agree. However, there is a large standard deviation for the extent to which the direct teaching is helpful. Therefore it is more helpful to consider proportions of responses. This is shown in Figures 3 and 4.

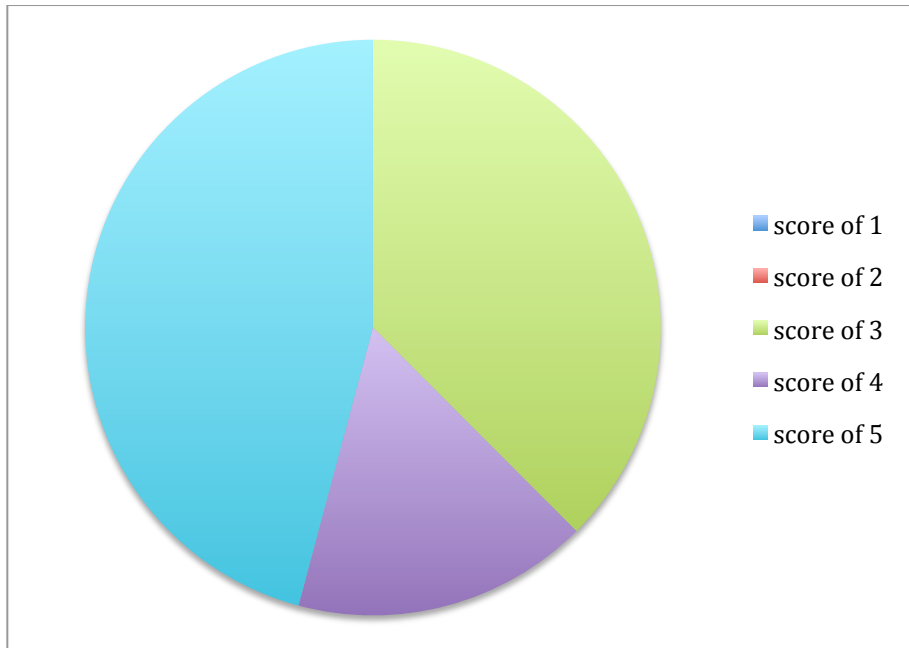


Figure 3 – How scores were awarded for ‘I think the learning zone was helpful for my learning.’

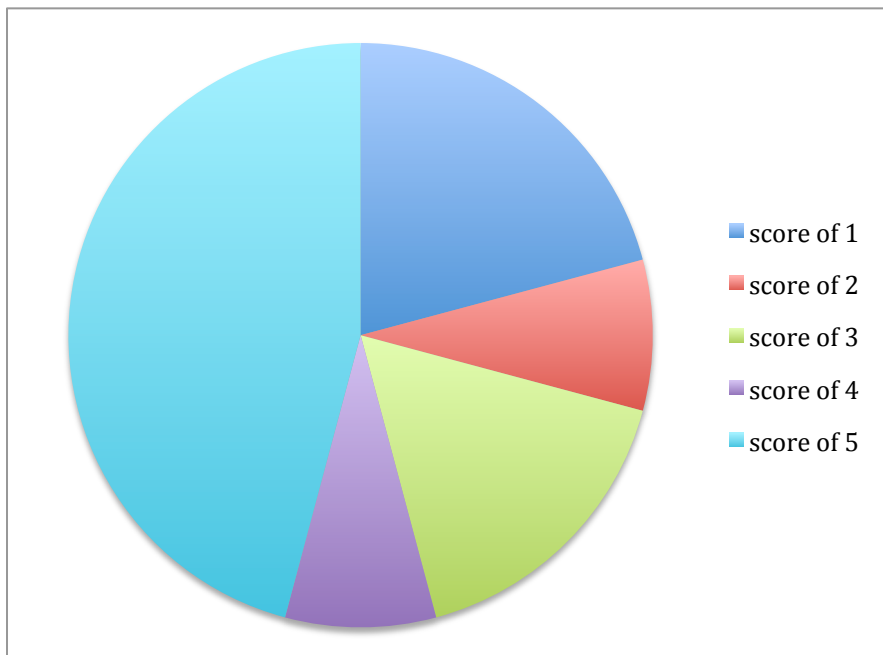


Figure 4 – How scores were awarded for ‘I think that having more time with the teacher, instead of in the Learning Zone, is helpful for my learning.’

Figure 3 shows that although the majority of children did agree that the LZ was helpful, just over a third were unsure. Therefore the opinions were not as unanimous as it appeared when just looking at Figure 1. The opinions are more strongly divided when it comes to teacher-led lessons, and fewer children are unsure. Here, 46% of children strongly agreed that this was *more helpful than the LZ* for their learning. It is unclear whether the children misunderstood the intended contrasting nature of the questions, or if they thought that both the LZ *and* teacher-led were equally helpful for their learning. In an attempt to find out more, the differences between scores awarded were found to identify a preference, as shown in Figure 5. This ascertains that in fact there is a trend towards finding the LZ more helpful for learning. In addition, all those children who had scored the LZ versus the teacher equally had all scored 5 for both. It is possible then, that these children believe they learnt a lot from both situations.

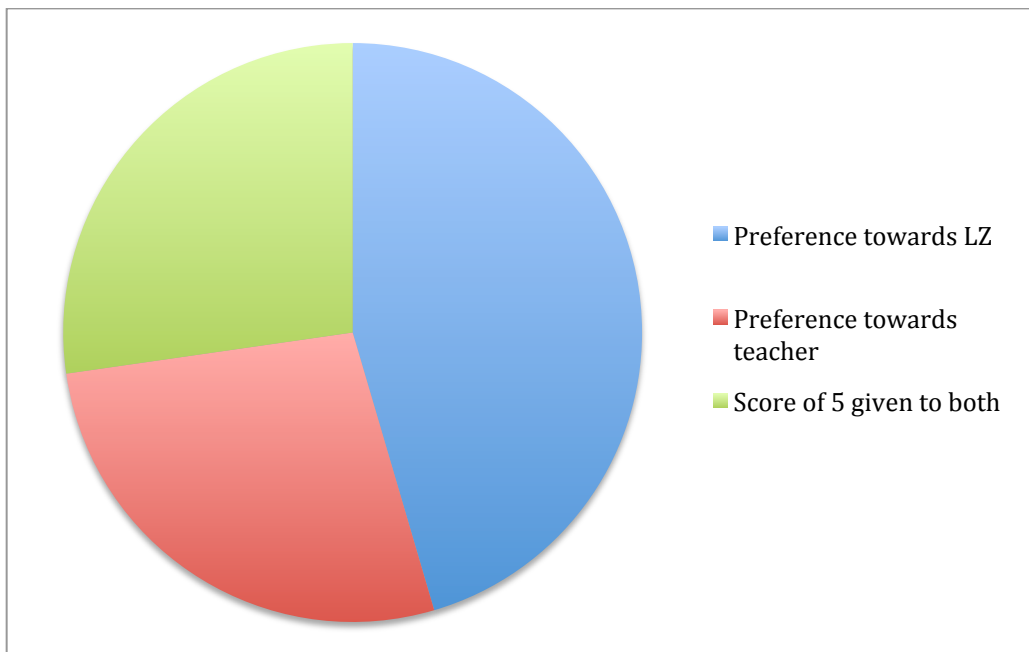


Figure 5 – Differences in scores given to either LZ or teacher-led to identify a preference

Overall, these results have shown that almost the entire class think that the LZ should be used in year 3, and most children think that it should not be used in higher years. However, a significant proportion has the opposite view. Secondly, most children thought that the LZ was helpful for their learning, and some think more helpful than teacher-led lessons. Although these findings do go some way towards responding to my research questions, the guided interviews would provide more explicit evidence to either back up or go against these preliminary findings.

Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS)

The purpose of PALS is to give some information about the individuals included in the research, and to see if there are any patterns within the sample. It consists of 9 questions used to calculate goal orientation, for which there are three categories. Firstly, there is mastery goal orientated, which is considered to be adaptive, and is where they see learning as intrinsically worthwhile (Midgeley et al., 2000). Performance-approach goal orientated is where they want to show what they know, and can be either adaptive or maladaptive (Midgeley et al., 2000). Finally, there is performance-avoidance goal orientation, which is where they would do anything to avoid looking stupid, and is often associated with maladaptive patterns of learning (Midgeley et al., 2000). Table 2 shows the sum of answers given in response to questions representing each goal orientation. As the maximum mark for one question is 5, the maximum overall is 15. Therefore, if a child has a score of over 10, he or she is considered to have that orientation. These scores are in bold. Some children's scores may indicate a mix of orientations. The highest score for each child is coloured in red, to make clear their strongest orientation.

This group is interesting in that the majority (92%) have identified themselves as mastery orientated. 52% are performance-avoidance, and 48% are performance-approach. A large proportion has scored highly in two or more of the orientations, so overall the group is relatively similar.

For my sub-sample, or focus group that also participated in the interviews, children from a variety of orientations would have been an ideal selection, to see what effect this had on their opinions. However, my choice was restricted by a number of factors, including certain children already being involved in interviews. Also, it was important that the chosen children I had differing opinions on the LZ, in order to get a clearer picture of a range of points of view. As a compromise between these factors, 4 children described in Tables 3 and 4 were selected.

Pupil	Total Mastery	Total Performance avoid	Total performance approach
1	12	11	12
2	15	11	9
3	12	8	12
4	12	13	13
5	14	10	5
6	15	11	7
7	13	6	8
8	15	11	11
9	7	15	11
10	15	15	15
11	15	15	15
12	13	11	12
13	15	7	7
14	15	15	12
15	10	8	4
16	14	14	10
17	12	8	9
18	15	7	7
19	14	12	3
20	7	12	7
21	15	5	11
22	15	13	14
23	14	5	6
24	15	11	9
25	13	7	10

Table 2 – Goal orientations of the sample.

<i>Pupil</i>	Total mastery	Total performance avoid	Total performance approach
P1	12	11	12
P18	15	7	7
P20	7	12	7
P25	13	7	10

Table 3 – Focus children’s goal orientation.

<i>Pupil</i>	LZinY3	LZinY4	LZinY5	LZinY6	LZhelpful	teacherhelpful
P1	2	2	1	1	4	3
P18	5	1	1	1	5	3
P20	5	5	4	5	5	1
P25	3	2	2	1	3	5

Table 4 – Focus children’s opinions on the learning zone.

Results of the interviews

Despite following the exact same procedure with each audio recording, unfortunately the recording of P25's interview did not play. The notes taken during the interview are therefore the main source for her interview. This may result in slightly less accurate conclusions, as my notes are mainly her key ideas rather than direct quotes. Due to the capacity of this essay, only elements of the interviews that relate directly to the research questions will be discussed.

P1, P18 and P25 all talked about how they did not think the LZ was appropriate to be used in KS2 beyond year 3, despite the fact they thought the LZ was good for learning, and they sometimes believed they actually learned more in the LZ than in traditional teacher-led lessons in year 3. In fact, P25 thought that it should not even be used in year 2. In contrast, P20 still adamantly believed that it should be used throughout KS2. Reasoning for each opinion was varied. After a lot of thought, P20 explained that he thought the LZ helps because "*we can go to work when we're grown up*". So, having been given the choice of specific activities, he could choose to do more work on aspects that would be useful for his future job, which was writing at the time. Presumably, this would have been a good source of intrinsic motivation for P20, stemming from a sense of autonomy derived from being given an element of choice (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

On the other hand, P18 believed that in year 4 and up, children should be preparing for the local secondary school, and so "*going round doing fun activities... you're, like, going down to a lower level that you shouldn't really be doing*". Given the lack of value School X puts upon play beyond EYFS, P18 may feel that something "*really fun*" could not possibly be authentic learning. This is in contrast to the majority of literature on play (e.g. Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). P25 and P1 both said that the LZ was to help prepare the younger children for KS2, by learning either to "*go and get started straight away*" (P1), or to get ready for working on their own (P25). Both of these suggest that they felt a level of independence in the LZ. However, both children then go on to say that more help is given in class, with the teacher, and used this as a reason for teacher-led activities being more helpful for their learning: "*[in class] if you don't do anything right the teacher will notice and will come and help you*" (P1). This could be an example of growing dependence, similar to findings by Hendy and Whitebread (2000).

Another unexpected theme running throughout P1, P25, and to some extent P18's interviews was about the negative impact that poor behaviour had on the LZ, and how this meant that teacher-led

learning was better. For example in response to the question about what type of learning he preferred, P1 answered: “*year 3... because then you can’t like mess around, as much as the learning zone. And you can’t, like, do anything silly...*”. He also spoke about how the fact that work had to be done and completed in year 3, or the lack of choice, was a good way to learn. This relates back to Nelson, Johnson & Marchand-Martella’s findings (1996) that direct instruction resulted in more focussed learning. The off-task behaviour in the LZ could be a manifestation of the children’s lack of intrinsic motivation, thus indicating that the choice provided in the LZ has not been sufficient to fulfil their need for autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although it is likely that there would be a great many other factors also influencing this, allowing children to determine their own options to a greater extent may improve motivation (Reeve, Nix & Hamm, 2003).

When asked about how either the LZ or the teacher helped their learning, all children, especially P20, struggled to articulate their answer. P18 and P1 both went back to describing the activities, and P25 linked her answer to behaviour. It is possible that these children have yet to develop the meta-cognitive skills necessary to identify which factors have an effect on their learning.

Overall, the findings of the interviews do corroborate the findings of the questionnaire when it comes to the extension of the LZ into KS2. As previously found, the opinions are divided, with one child thinking it should be extended throughout and another actually thinking it should be reduced, but most children think that it should only be extended to include year 3. There is a possibility that this is because they are in year 3 and are noticing the loss of the LZ. If this were the case, there is a chance that when they got to year 4 and started learning without it, they may well then want it for year 4 as well. However, P18 did make clear that he would not want to go back to it after year 3. Importantly, these interviews have gone some way towards giving a qualitative explanation of *why* some children think what they do about the LZ, which could not have been inferred from the quantitative data alone (Bell, 2010).

Reflections on methodology

A key strength of my methodology is the use of a mixed method approach, based on both qualitative and quantitative data. As these two methods yielded similar results, the conclusions drawn from this research can be considered more accurate than if just one method had been used

(Denscombe, 2010). However, there are several limitations that reduce the degree to which these results may be representative.

Firstly, the sample used was largely opportunistic, and relatively small. This was because only those children who had returned permission slips and volunteered to participate were included. As various factors (as described under the 'PALS' subheading) led to a restricted choice of children for interviews, the likelihood of the sample being representative of the population is reduced, thus reducing the validity and transferability of my results.

Due to my inexperience at interviewing, and the fact that it is a highly subjective technique (Bell, 2010), there is the possibility that observer bias (Denscombe, 2010) and the awareness of being recorded (Bell, 2010) had an effect on how the children answered questions. In particular, at some points it was as though they were saying more what they thought I wanted to hear than what they actually thought. This may have contributed to the theme that teacher-led is better because there is less messing around, as well as the assertion that the LZ was for learning rather than playing, as this is what they would have been taught by the school. Furthermore, it was sometimes difficult to encourage an answer particularly from P20, which may have led to a higher degree of leading questions.

Additionally, results drawn from a Likert scale are not always comparable, as although they indicate order, the intervals between each number may not be the same (Bell, 2010), both within and between individuals. Also, many children may have struggled to understand the questionnaire. This was evident particularly with regards to the PALS, and to the intended contradictory nature of the helpfulness of the LZ in comparison to the teacher. In retrospect, these questions were not unambiguous. It would have been useful to run a pilot questionnaire before administering the final copy, as this may have identified the ambiguity in the early stages (Bell, 2010). As a degree of misunderstanding was assumed with regard to some of the children, this led to those chosen for interviews being generally higher-attaining, which may have skewed my results in such a way as to make them even less representative of the population.

This research is a case study, which, due to the fact it focuses on one phenomenon, sometimes raises doubts about how far the findings can be generalised (Denscombe, 2010). In this case, the research concerns a phenomenon that is itself fairly rare, so the implications drawn from this research may not be as transferable to other schools. Having said this, it provides a starting point

from which other schools may want to develop their own version of a LZ, or even just certain elements, for example providing greater choice to children. The greatest relevance of this research is to School X specifically. If they do go ahead with the proposed extension of the LZ, it would be essential to seriously consider the pupil voice. Among many other, far-reaching benefits, this can also lead to “every child valuing learning and wanting to continue learning beyond school” (Jackson, 2004:7).

Personal Implications

This research has highlighted to me the importance of not assuming children’s perspectives, as their responses are often unpredictable. For example, I did not expect that so many children would disagree with the use of the LZ higher up in the school. The perspective of School X currently is that all children throughout the school would appreciate the LZ. Indeed this is the perspective of some children, but it could just be that those are the ones who are the most vocal with their opinions. This has shown me that it is necessary as far as possible to consult all children to get a truly representative account. The gathering of quantitative data using a questionnaire may be one of the most efficient ways to do this.

I have also learnt how increased levels of play, choice and independence have the potential to have a majorly positive effect on learning if certain provisos are met. Specifically from this research, it is clear that children must be explicitly taught how to make the most effective use of these privileges to prevent poor motivation and off-task behaviour. As a result, I will try and include more exploratory, independent activities and allow children more choice in the learning that they do in my future practice. This would not happen straight away, as it would require a lot of time to explicitly teach children methods for making appropriate choices before it became effective. It may be necessary to give lots of opportunities for self and peer assessment, for example, to help children develop a degree of meta-cognition, which this research has shown at least some children in year 3 struggle with. Nonetheless, I feel that if achieved it would be extremely worthwhile.

Finally, the striking differences of opinion regarding the LZ appear to me to be evidence of the variety of ways in which children prefer to learn. I intend to take this into consideration when planning in the future, by ensuring that I vary the way in which I teach as much as possible. This would hopefully lead to every child engaging in the most appropriate way of learning for them

individually, at least some of the time. I believe that this should not have an age limit, and would benefit any year group. Developing a good knowledge of and relationship with the individual children in my class is a clear prerequisite of this good practice.

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Appendix 1

Faculty of Education



**UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE**

What I think about learning in school

Name:

We are very interested in what you think about learning in school and would like you to answer some questions. This is **not** a test, there are no right or wrong answers, we just want to know **what you think**.

First, we would like to know a few things about you:

I am a: boy girl

My birthday is: -----

My favourite subject in school is: -----

Carefully, read the sentences below. Then draw a circle round the face which best describes **what you think most of the time**.

If you don't understand a sentence please ask your teacher to explain.

I enjoy coming to school.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



It's important to me that I don't look stupid in class.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



In class I want to learn as much as I can.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



I like to show other children that I am good at my work.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



I want to learn lots of new skills this year.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



In class I try to stop other children thinking I am not clever.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



It is important to me that I really understand my work.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



I like to show other children that class work is easy for me.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



I like to look clever compared with other children in my class.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



I try to avoid looking like I have trouble doing my work.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



I always work hard in school.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



No one cares if I do well at school.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



I am one of the best pupils in my class.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



I always get good grades when I try hard.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



What I learn at school is not important.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



I enjoy learning new things at school.

Not at all
true



Sometimes
true



Very
true



I think Year 3 is very different to Year 2.

Not at all
true

Sometimes
true

Very
true



What do you think is different?

What do you think learning means?

*(Tick the **three** answers that best show what you think)*

Listening to my teacher

Finishing all my work

Finding out new things

Investigating things for myself

Going to school

Changing the way I think

Thinking carefully about things

Talking to my friends about things

Reading lots of information

Being able to remember lots of facts

Understanding everything I am
taught in school

Always getting things correct

Other... *(please write your answer on the line below)*

.....

We would also like to find out what you think about the Learning Zone.

My favourite activities in the Learning Zone were: *(Please circle your favourite)*

Writing

Role-play

Reading

Allotments

D&T

Learning outside

Art

Other? _____

Construction

I think the Learning Zone should be used in Year 3.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Unsure

Agree

Strongly agree



I think the Learning Zone should be used in Year 4.

SD

D

Unsure

A

SA



I think the Learning Zone should be used in Year 5.

SD

D

Unsure

A

SA



I think the Learning Zone should be used in Year 6.

SD

D

Unsure

A

SA



I think the Learning Zone was helpful for my learning.

SD

D

Unsure

A

SA



I think that having more time with the teacher, instead of in the Learning Zone, is helpful for my learning.

SD

D

Unsure

A

SA



Thank you for your help



