

**PLAY – LOST IN TRANSITION?  
TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT PEDAGOGIC CONTINUITY  
ACROSS THE TRANSITION TO FORMAL SCHOOLING**

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by  
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## STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Linda Bellen, declare that the work contained in this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Education, University of Notre Dame Australia is wholly my own work. To the best of my knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signed

Linda Bellen

## DEDICATION

*To my beloved late father,*

*a truly amazing man who taught me the value of life-long learning*

*and who so rejoiced in the beginning of my thesis odyssey but sadly did not see the end.*

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## ABSTRACT

In the current educational climate of teacher accountability, high-stakes assessment and outcomes-based learning, play as a valued pedagogy is being questioned more than ever. In Australia, the recent push-down effect of an academic curriculum has resulted in the 'schoolification' of prior-to-school settings, with less emphasis on play-based pedagogy. Traditionally, in early childhood education, the dominant pedagogy is play-based and is used to support and facilitate children's learning, while in schools learning is more formalised, directed and structured with the presence of a mandated curriculum. This ideological divide in pedagogical approaches between the two contexts is first evident as children begin the transition toward their first year of school. Some emerging research proposes that a major contributing factor in children's difficulties in adjustment and subsequent success in school is the discontinuity in pedagogy between the two contexts. Few studies have focused on teachers' experiences of using play-based pedagogy in the Australian context within the transition to formal schooling. Using a qualitative case study approach, this study explored how teachers' educational beliefs about play-based pedagogy contribute to their constructs of pedagogic continuity across the transition process. It also investigated how the different pedagogies and curriculum documents that exist in prior-to-school and school settings contribute to teachers' constructs of continuity in teaching and learning, and determined their pedagogic practice within the transition to formal schooling. Bronfenbrenner's (1995, 2001) bio-ecological model was utilised as the theoretical framework in the design of this study, and in interpretation of the data. Findings revealed that while educators in both settings championed the importance of play, their beliefs of its value as a 'pedagogical priority' were more evident among the prior-to-school participants. Furthermore, although the notion of pedagogic continuity is unclear to educators, they emphasise that the differences between prior-to-school and school are too extreme, increasing calls for stronger communication channels between the two settings. Moreover, pressure from 'top-down' pedagogy feeds a focus on child readiness notions and the play/work divide, pushing play to the sidelines. Barriers to the use of play-based pedagogy in the transition phase included a number of internal and external factors. These findings highlight a dilemma - that locating a place for play within the learning environment, beyond prior-to-school settings, is problematic.

**Key words:** play, pedagogy, transition, early years, teacher beliefs, Kindergarten, continuity

## PUBLICATIONS

### PUBLISHED PEER REVIEWED PAPER (Appendix 1)

Maher, M., & Bellen, L. (2015). Smoothing children's transition into formal schooling: Lessons learned from an early literacy initiative in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, Australia. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 43(1), 9-17.

### CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

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Presentation of thesis proposal
- Nov, 2015      NSW Institute of Educational Research conference, Sydney  
Presentation of initial research findings of PhD study
- Oct, 2016      Early Childhood Australia (ECA) biennial conference, Darwin  
Presentation of PhD thesis research findings  
**Title:** Play – Lost in Transition? Teacher beliefs about pedagogic continuity across the transition to formal schooling

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