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Play - lost in transition? Teacher beliefs about pedagogic continuity across the transition to formal schooling

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CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

"The traditional importance given to play as young children's natural way to learn has become less important today"

(Russo, 2012, p. 3)

Introduction

In order to contextualise the current study and to paint the background to the study, the literature is structured as follows. First, there is an exploration of what research and the literature provide on the topic of transitions and specifically transition into formal schooling. Second, there is discussion around the notion of school readiness and ready schools. Third, there is a clear description of early childhood education and formal schooling in Australia, specifically in New South Wales (NSW), with related pedagogies which are driven by specific curriculum and support documents and teachers' roles within those pedagogies. Fourth, the impact of teacher beliefs and perceptions on teaching practice are explored. Fifth, the construct of play and play-based pedagogy are examined including attention to the barriers to play, and last continuity and pedagogic continuity are addressed and considered in relation to the two key curriculum documents used across the transition process.

2.1   What is transition?

Transitions play a significant part throughout our lives and involve a process of change in state from one form, phase or place to another. In most Western cultures as children begin their passage in the educational process, transitions from one educational setting to another represent an intricate part in their experiences (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; McIntyre, Blacher, & Baker, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Many children today in Australia have experiences in prior-to school settings, such as preschools, before entering school. The transition

to school and the entry to Kindergarten (first year of formal schooling in NSW) signify an important event in the lives of children and their families (Ashton et al., 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2004, 2008; Fabian, 2012; Kagan, 2010; Margetts, 2002, 2009; Pianta, 2004; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Rosier & McDonald, 2011; Yeboah, 2002). This is not only a key experience for children but also for teachers in both preschool settings and Kindergarten (Dail & McGee, 2008; Department of Education & Early Childhood Development (DEECD), 2009; Dockett, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2007b; 2014; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Harrison, 2015; Henderson, 2014; O'Kane & Hayes, 2006; Petriwskyj, 2013).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), a transition has occurred when an individual's position in his or her ecological environment "is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both" (p. 26). The transition to school is defined as the process of movement from one phase, or context, of education to another (Broström, 2002; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Yeboah, 2002) and the period when children change their role in their community to become students in school (Dockett & Perry, 2012a; Griebel & Niesel, 2002). More recently, Dockett and Perry (2014) propose that "transition to school is taken to be a dynamic process of continuity and change as children move into the first year of school" (p. 2). In terms of when this occurs, Fabian and Dunlop (2002) suggest that the period of transition from prior-to-school settings to school commences at the preschool level (the year immediately before Kindergarten), followed by an initial settling-in stage, and continues until the child feels settled and established in the new school environment. Broström (2002) refers to this as supporting children to "feel *suitable* in school" (p. 52) such that they have a feeling of well-being and belonging. Dockett and Perry (2007b, 2012a) propose that this process commences long before children enter formal schooling and continues well after they have entered the Kindergarten year. Such definitions move beyond short orientation periods and induction events, characteristic of many transition programs, to transition being a lengthy process (DEECD, 2009; Educational Transitions & Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011; Fabian & Dunlop 2007; Johannson, 2007; Petriwskyj, 2010).

The transition to the first year of formal schooling is multidimensional and complex (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Snow, 2006), and involves a major change and period of adjustment in children's lives (Eckert, McIntyre, DiGennaro, Arbolino, Perry, & Begeny, 2008; Margetts, 2005, 2009; Peters, 2010). It is no doubt then that some researchers and educators report the existence of a *gap* (Dunlop, 2007; Fabian, 2002a*)* or *chasm* (Peters, 2014) between early childhood and school settings. Indeed, many others describe the disparities between these two sectors and the discontinuity that exists (Bennett, 2013; Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Boyle & Grieshaber, 2013; Henderson, 2012; Lickess, 2008) sometimes with irreconcilable differences (Moss, 2008). Children need to negotiate a range of differences that exist between these two environments in terms of structural changes, different pedagogical approaches and altered demands and expectations (Bennett, 2013; Dail & McGee, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2007b, 2012a; Huser, Dockett, & Perry, 2015; Kelman & Lauchlan, 2010; Skouteris, Watson, & Lum, 2012). These bring a mixture of excitement, anxiety and in some instances, substantial challenges (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo, & Cavanagh, 2011; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2012). Some children will be more successful than others at meeting these challenges (Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) & Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2012a). Hence, continuity between the prior-to school and school settings is essential to consider in the transition process (Noel, 2011; CCCH, 2008; Skouteris et al., 2012) to avoid "learning shocks" (Fabian, 2013, p. 48).

There is increasing evidence that how each child responds to school impacts on future educational and socio-behavioural experiences and progress (Dockett & Perry, 2003, 2007b; Duncan et al., 2007; Eckert, McIntyre, DiGennaro, Arbolino, Perry, & Begeny, 2008; Peters, 2010; Sayers, West, Lorains, Laidlaw, Moore, & Robinson, 2012). Easing the transition to ensure success warrants the need for collaborative communication, with careful planning and consideration, particularly between teachers in the two sectors of education (Collie, Willis, Paine, & Windsor, 2007; Hopps, 2004; Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000; McGann & Clark, 2007; O'Kane, 2015, 2016; Sanders, White, Burge, Sharp, Eames, McEune, & Grayson, 2005). A positive start has the potential to not only assist children's future academic and

social competence (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2010; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003), but also ensure that families and children feel valued and comfortable in school (Dockett & Perry, 2003, 2004, 2008; McGann & Clark, 2007).

2.1.1   Transition to formal schooling research

The research base covering this topic spans the last 50 years and transitions have been studied from a multitude of perspectives. Earlier transition research tended to conceptualise transition as a 'one point' event such as the first day of formal schooling. More recent research since the 1990s has shifted to encompass studies that view transitions as a multi-year and multi-layered process (Petriwskyj, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2005).

The transition process is currently a hotly debated topic in both the international (Alatalo et al., 2016; Broström, 2005, 2013; Einarsdottir, 2006; Fisher, 2011; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014) and Australasian context (Dockett & Perry, 2007b, 2013; Huser, Dockett, & Perry, 2015; Margetts, 2005; Mirkhil, 2010; Mortlock, Plowman, & Glasgow, 2011; Sayers et al., 2012). The existence of extensive Australian research studies, policy briefs, topical papers and several literature reviews reflect the increasing interest in the topic of transition to formal schooling across the country. National government initiatives, such as the *Best Start Kindergarten Initiative* (NSW Department of Education & Communities (DEC), 2009), and the many diverse transition programs, statements and policies that have been developed at state or school level also reveal the growing attention in this area (Binstadt, 2010; Hirst et al., 2011; Sayers et al., 2012).

Numerous international transition studies have examined the links among specific types of prior-to-school experiences and children's degree of success after they enter school (Ashton et al., 2008; Collie, Willis, Paine, & Windsor, 2007; Margetts, 2002). An extensive amount of this literature deals with collaborative partnerships and home-school links (Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews, & Keinhuis, 2010; Hopps, 2014; McGann & Clark, 2007; Petrakos & Lehrer, 2011; Pianta & Craft-Sayre, 2003; Shields, 2009) and many studies deal with school readiness concerns (Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008; Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daughterty, Howes, & Karoly,

2009; Noel, 2010; Stipek, 2002; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). Other recent literature, rather than evaluating whether a child is school ready, considers the notion of 'ready schools', including the impact of pedagogical changes on school success in the early years of school (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2006; Broström, 2002; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008; Noel, 2011; Petriwskyj, 2005; Sayers et al., 2012). Findings from the current study contribute to this area of research.

The significance of successful transitions for children has been well documented (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; Niesel & Griebel, 2007; Petriwskyj et al., 2005) and the literature is replete with content analysis of effective transition activities and the nature of successful transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2004, 2008; Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Margetts, 1997; McGann & Clark, 2007; Noel, 2011; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Research exploring transitions which considers the multiple variables that relate to the stakeholders has been undertaken in countries such as Australia (Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2003, 2004; Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2010; Margetts, 1997, 2002, 2005, 2007; Petriwskyj, 2010, 2013; Petriwskyj et al., 2005), United States of America (Dail & McGee, 2008; Laverick, 2008; Miller, 2015; Pianta, 2004, 2007; Ramey & Ramey, 2004), Europe (Broström, 2002, 2005; Carida, 2011; Einarsdottir, 2003, 2006), the United Kingdom (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002, 2007; Lam & Pollard, 2006), and Asia (Chan, 2010; Li, Mak, Chan, Chu, Lee, Lam, 2012; Yeo & Clarke, 2005).

For the purposes of the current study, a successful transition has occurred if the child has adjusted emotionally, physically, psychologically and intellectually (Yeboah, 2002), as this has been shown to be predictive of future academic achievement (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Department of Education & Training, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2003; Margetts, 2007; Peters, 2010; Ramey & Ramey, 2004). Children's transition and adjustment to school, and subsequent progress, is influenced by various interdependent factors. These include factors associated with: the home; language and culture; children's personal characteristics; and pedagogical approaches and the school (Margetts, 2002, 2007).

Much transition research has been large scale quantitative research (Boethel, 2004; Nelson, 2004; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005; Silvers, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005) that addresses policy issues rather than investigating issues related to improving the transition process as enacted by key participants such as teachers. Recently in Australia, two such significant large scale studies were developed to measure process and impact indicators of the transition to formal schooling: the *2009 Australian Early Development Index*, now known as the *Australian Early Development Census* and the *2012 Outcomes and Indicators of a Positive Start to School*: *Development of Framework and Tools* research project (Sayers et al., 2012). While such research provides a greater understanding of how to measure outcomes and indicators of positive transitions, they present little in the way of useful data for those who enact the transition process.

Such studies cannot accurately document and describe key processes of continuity and discontinuity in children's transitions to formal schooling. There is limited research available that offers evidence about the use of effective pedagogies to support the development of seamless transitions and what key contributors find most valuable to ensure continuity of learning and teaching. This is particularly important in light of children considered at risk because of certain factors such as socio-economic status (Arndt, Rothe, Urban, & Werning, 2013; Miller, 2015; Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Schulting et al., 2005) or English as an Additional Language (Centre for Equity & Innovation in Early Childhood, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2005a, 2014; Hirst et al., 2011). These children have been found to be less prepared for school if they do not experience a high quality transition process (Fantuzzo, Rouse, McDermott, Sekino, Childs, & Weiss, 2005; Hair, Halle, Terry-Humen, Lavelle, & Calkins, 2006). As a result, different transition objectives, that include the use of familiar play-based learning experiences, may be required to improve diminish the disparities children encounter.

There is also a growing body of research that addresses children's views and the inclusion of their voice within the transition process (Dockett & Perry, 2003, 2005a, Perry & Dockett, 2011; Einarsdottir, 2007; Griebel & Niesel, 2000; Potter &

Briggs, 2003; Wong, Wang, & Cheng, 2011; Yeo & Clarke, 2005). This research points to a focus on children's views about the significance of play in their learning environment and the desire to participate in play-based experiences in the early years of formal schooling (Di Santo & Berman, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2012b; Fisher, 2009; Li et al., 2012; Mirkhil, 2010; Mortlock, Plowman, & Glasgow, 2011; Sanders et al., 2005; White & Sharp, 2007). Children described school as a relatively joyless environment where serious learning occurred with little or no play. One of the earliest findings of the *Starting School Research Project* by Australian researchers, Dockett and Perry (1999, 2005b), was that what mattered to children in the transition to formal schooling was different from what was important for the adult stakeholders. Children noted that school was a place to learn and that this learning was viewed as teacher-directed and not as a process of active manipulation of materials or ideas (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Children, like many adults, have been sold the line that play is something pleasurable but unrelated to learning.

For all children, the transition to school marks a change in their identity and status – the shift from a child to a pupil. With this new identity, children need to negotiate all the intricacies of a school's culture, particularly the way in which teaching and learning is conducted (Fabian, 2007). There is a significant shift from a play-based pedagogy in prior-to-school settings to a more structured, cognitive learning environment in formal schooling (CCCH, 2008; Dockett, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development (OECD), 2006; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). In order to cope and adapt, many children require significant support to accept this new context. The success of children's transition most often depends on pedagogic continuity and the different pedagogies between the two contexts is a known barrier to seamless transitions (Ackesjö, 2013b; Dockett & Perry, 2007a; Dunlop, 2003; Fisher, 2011; Harrison, 2015; Neuman, 2005; O'Kane, 2016; Sanders et al., 2005; Walker, 2007; Yelland, Lee, O'Rourke, & Harrison, 2008).

2.1.2 *The transition to school in Australia*

Historically, Australian schools and ECEC services have not been well integrated and so have not been able to provide cohesive support for families and

their children (CCCH, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2007b). There have been many state and community-led efforts of transition to school related programs that have involved collaboration with educators, families and community members (Binstadt, 2010; Dockett & Perry, 2008; Hirst et al., 2011; Sayers et al., 2012). Most transition programs are developed at the school level. The fairly recent 2011 *Transition to School: Position Statement* by the Educational Transitions and Change Research Group from Charles Sturt University NSW was developed as an aspirational document to guide policy and practice at all levels. It aimed to promote an increased recognition of the significance of the transition to formal schooling based on research evidence. In NSW, the Department of Education website offers access to several 'transition to school' support documents including the *Transition to School Planning and Implementation Matrix*, the *Transition to School Action Plan*, the *School A-Z Organiser*, plus additional links to transition and research information. In 2014, the NSW Minister for Education announced the release of the *NSW Transition to School Statement* (New South Wales Government, Department of Education & Communities (NSW DEC), 2014.) This statement was designed as a tool to support children and ease their transition from early childhood education to formal schooling. Early childhood services complete this in collaboration with families to provide teachers in primary schools with information about a child's interests, strengths and capabilities, and approaches to learning. This information is provided on a voluntary basis by both the child's early childhood educator and family members and then forwarded to the intended school to assist in planning and preparation for the child's transition. Up until this time, a formal transition reporting system in NSW did not exist and the sharing of information about a child's learning and development between school and early childhood services was on an ad hoc basis.

Research from Australia indicates that when children transition to formal schooling, 10-21 per cent experience difficulties in adjusting (Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews, & Kienhuis, 2010). Furthermore, almost 24 per cent are vulnerable in no less than one of the following areas: social competence, language/communication and cognitive skills, physical well-being, emotional maturity and general

knowledge (Centre for Community Child & the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2009). There are four specific groups of Australian children that find the transition to formal schooling more challenging: those with English as an Additional Language; those who are financially disadvantaged; Indigenous children; and children who have a disability (Anderson, 2010; Bentley-Williams & Butterfield, 1996; Peters, 2010; Sanagavarapu & Perry, 2005; Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards, & Hayes, 2008). The greater the discontinuity between the two sectors, the more difficult the transition process will be (Margetts, 2002). The use of different curriculum frameworks in the different sectors can be an impeding factor in supporting pedagogical continuity.

2.1.3   *Pedagogical challenges to children during transition*

A significant factor highlighted in the research is that a change in pedagogy, more than the change of place or expectation, contributes to some children finding the transition to formal school so challenging; it is detrimental to their well-being (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000; Margetts, 2005; OECD, 2006; Peters, 2010). Pedagogic continuity and a strong understanding between the two sectors is important in successful transitions (Ashton et al., 2008; Broström, 2005, 2013; Cassidy, 2005; Harrison, 2015; Li, Rao, & Tse, 2011; Neuman, 2002; O'Kane, 2016; Yelland et al., 2008). This new emphasis in the literature influenced the specific focus on the current study.

Recently, there have been a number of emerging studies (Boyle & Grieshaber, 2013; Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Devlin, 2012; Harrison, 2015; Hunkin, 2014; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Sandberg & Heden, 2011; Smith, 2015; Smith & Maher, 2016 in press; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013) that have addressed the notion of promoting pedagogic continuity through the use of play-based learning and teaching in the school context and these have clearly demonstrated the positive impact this approach has on students' learning, achievement and importantly, their adjustment to school. This obviously makes sense for as Connor (2012) explains "children do not 'magically' become different kinds of learners as they move from prior-to-school settings into the first year of school" (p. 27). Consistent with this

perspective, Broström (2013) argues for "play as a pivot for successful transition" (p. 37) and suggests the idea of play as a transition bridge, recognising both children's agency and the active role of the teacher in the process so that play fosters the establishment of a learning motive in the new setting. Similarly, Bredekamp (2010) and O'Kane (2016) propose the use of play as a transitory activity, as a means to align the two environments, so that children's learning experiences can be extended from one context to the next. In such studies, the implementation of a play-based approach in the early years of school acknowledges children's prior learning experiences, promotes building on their learning strengths, and reduces the focus on concerns such as teaching to the test or school readiness disquiet and anxieties.

2.2 Notion of school readiness

Although there have long been concerns about school readiness, research interest has increased since the 1990s and it has now become a central issue in current research on transitions (DiBello & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008; McGettigan & Gray, 2012; Petriwskyj et al., 2005; Scott-Little, Kagan, Frelow, 2006). This is particularly evident in the studies from the USA and Australia more than from other countries (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2004, 2009; Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2010; Farrar, Goldfeld, & Moore, 2007; Gill, Winters, & Friedman, 2006; Graue, 2006; Le, Kirby, Barney, Setodji, & Gershwin, 2006; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Noel, 2010; Snow, 2006; Sorin & Markotsis, 2008). However, tension has arisen around concerns that a narrow focus on children's readiness to start school means they are being measured against a deficit model; an inappropriate one-size-fits-all approach (Whitebread & Bingham, 2011). As noted in Dockett and Perry's (2013) review of Australian and international research about starting school, Australian research is still dominated by a readiness focus, resulting in the development of a range of measures of readiness for example, the *Australian Early Development Index* and the *Best Start Kindergarten Assessment*. Over the last two decades, Australian transition research has centred on binary constructions of children as being either 'ready' or 'unready' for formal schooling (Petriwskyj &

Grieshaber, 2011) even though as Dockett and Perry (2009) remark – a child's readiness for school "is but one element of a successful start to school" (p. 20). Such conceptualisations of the transition process continue to emphasise children's preparation as either developmental or academic readiness and is in conflict with the play-based pedagogies of the contemporary national early childhood framework – the *Early Years Learning Framework* (discussed later in 2.4.1.3). More contemporary transition literature (Brooker, 2008; Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2009; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Graue, 2006; Gill, Winters, & Friedman, 2006; Lam & Pollard, 2006) discusses the concept of 'ready schools' signalling a gradual swing away from the 'ready' child toward a new understanding of transition as a partnership with an equal sharing of responsibility among parties.

Testable 'school readiness skills', especially in relation to literacy and numeracy, have become an increased focus for policy makers (Early et al., 2010; Whitebread & Bingham, 2011). Such policies overlook the contexts that shape children's learning opportunities and expect all children to achieve a uniform level of readiness at the same time (Gill et al., 2006). In Australia this is further compounded with the introduction of the *Best Start Kindergarten Assessment* through which teachers assess children's early reading, writing and number skills in the early weeks of school. This perspective unduly transfers pressure onto the individual, saddling the weight of readiness on the child. Difficulties in children's adjustment may be perceived by teachers as lack of readiness rather than the need for pedagogical change. It is not surprising that parents of children in ECEC services voice a preference, or an expectation, for formal, school-like activities to assist their children's preparation for school entry (Graue, 2010; Mortlock, Plowman & Glasgow, 2011; O'Gorman, 2008; Wong, Wang, & Cheng, 2011).

Adding to this is what Moss (2013) explains as the indisputable hierarchical relationship between ECEC and formal schooling. Thus, primary schooling becomes the "unquestioned dominant partner" (Moss, 2008, p. 227) or the "frame of reference" (Moss, 2013, p. 9) for prior-to-school services which take on a more

subordinate role in preparing children to achieve well in formal schooling. What is created then, Moss (2013) asserts, is a 'school readiness' relationship, one in which it is assumed that the lesser level of ECEC serves the needs of the higher level of formal schooling. So, as a result, it is not only expectations and values but also pedagogical opinions and methods that "cascade down the system, from top to bottom" (Moss, 2013, p. 9).

2.3   Early childhood and school education and the Australian context

2.3.1   Early childhood education in the Australian context

The term early childhood is defined variously in different political and cultural contexts and differences exist in the age range that encompasses the term 'early childhood'. According to the definition offered in General Comment 7 to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it denotes the period under eight years age (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). In the current study, early childhood is taken to mean the period from birth to compulsory formal school education and is recognised as a separate stage of education, whilst references to early years education includes children in the phases of school up to Year 2 when children are eight years old.

In Australia, ECEC services operate under a very fragmented system with all three levels of government involved, as well as the private sector and community groups (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). On a national basis, there is significant variation between jurisdictions with no overall system design. ECEC services in NSW cater to children under the age of six and include a variety of settings such as long day care, family day care, mobile preschools and preschools. These services are licensed and regulated through the NSW Department of Education (DoE) [formerly the Department of Education & Communities] on behalf of Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). The ECEC service in focus for the current study is preschools in NSW.

2.3.1.1 Quality in ECEC services and the Australian context

ECEC plays an important role in the development of many children's lives in today's society (CCCH, 2006; Stephen, 2006). There is compelling research evidence to suggest that the quality of early childhood experiences within prior-to-school contexts significantly impacts, both in short and long term gains, on the early years for children (Britto, Yoshikawa, & Boller, 2011; Logan & Sumsion, 2010; Logue & Harvey, 2009; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004, 2007; OECD, 2011; Stephen, 2006). This is further substantiated by data from longitudinal studies in the United States of America such as the *High/Scope Perry Preschool* study (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997) and in the United Kingdom such as the *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* project (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). In particular, the *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* project has offered evidence that the provision of high quality preschool programmes can help lessen the effects of social disadvantage and afford children a more positive start to school.

International research suggests that one of the most important determinants of quality is ECEC staff qualifications (CCCH, 2014; Early, Bryant, Pianta, Clifford, Burchinal, Ritchie, Howes, & Barbarin, 2006; Early, Maxwell, Burchinal, Alva, Bender, & Bryant et al., 2007; OECD, 2006, 2011). Programs that provide high-quality education and care, delivered by qualified educators are a key contributor to sound early childhood outcomes (Harrison, Goldfeld, Metcalfe, & Moore, 2012; Tayler, 2010; Tayler, Cleveland, Ishimine, Cloney, & Thorpe, 2013). There appears to be broad agreement that quality ECEC services can influence children's transitions positively and improve readiness for school (Boethel, 2004). Participation in ECEC programs, such as high-quality preschools, may be particularly essential for vulnerable children and may help reduce the negative developmental effects of disadvantage (OECD, 2006; Sammons, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford & Woodhead, 2009; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010). While positive effects of quality preschool education have been established by research evidence, these gains have been found to decrease within a few years of entering school (Jolly &

Orbach, 2008; Kauerz, 2006). A pertinent question to ask is how teachers in both settings can support the positive effects of quality ECEC across the transition process.

Historically, in Australia as in many other countries, there has been a significant gap between the quality of ECEC services and the quality of service provided within the school system (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). This has been reflective of the dominant outlook that older children's education is more important than young children's learning (Ryan & Goffin, 2008), and that school-aged children are away from their families for longer periods of time. Contemporary knowledge and research evidence of young children's development and learning, together with families' employment circumstances have changed such notions.

The discourse of 'quality' has become a central focus in recent early years educational literature and many researchers, governments and early childhood providers have addressed the issue of quality care and education for young children (Britto et al., 2011; Ishimine, 2011). This interest was heightened in Australia with the election of the Rudd Government in 2007 and politicians took particular interest ECEC with the ensuing formation of the Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care (OECECC). This signalled that Australia's Commonwealth Government recognised the worth of investing in ECEC and committed to a series of reforms to steer quality improvement. A central concern was in creating and maintaining high quality childcare and this was promoted in the development of a new National Quality Agenda in 2009. As part of this agenda, a new National Quality Framework for ECEC was introduced in 2012. Key features included the new National Law and Regulations; Australia's first national framework: the *Early Years Learning Framework*, (see 2.10) which guides curriculum and pedagogy in all early childhood settings; the National Quality Standard; an assessment and quality rating process; and an independent national authority; the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). ACECQA's role is to guide and oversee the administration of the National Quality Framework to ensure consistent implementation across all states and territories.

This was very timely as the OECD's *Education at a Glance 2008* (OECD, 2008) informed that Australia's percentage of national income spent on pre-primary education (children three years and older) was among the lowest in the developed world. In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), all Australian State and Territories, in partnership with the Commonwealth Government made a commitment through the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education that;

> by 2013 every child will have access to a preschool program in the 12 months prior to full-time schooling. The preschool program is to be delivered by a four year university qualified early childhood teacher, in accordance with a national early years learning framework, for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year (COAG, 2008, p. 5).

Such an initiative reflects that these governments valued the importance of children's early development to outcomes later in life and were paying closer attention to the quality and availability of ECEC services. At the very least, it is heartening to note politicians situating ECEC within a 'professional' discourse (Woodrow, 2011).

Furthermore, from the 18 July 2016, all early childhood teachers in NSW working in long day care and preschools must be accredited by the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards. This signifies that early childhood teachers will be accredited alongside their peers in schools, recognising that they are university trained professionals upholding high standards in teaching practice and who make important contributions to young children's education.

Central to the discussion of quality is quality pedagogy. Research into the quality of pedagogy both in Australia and internationally (Hattie, 2003; Sammons, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, & Elliot, 2002; Stephen, 2010), particularly at the preschool level such as the *Effective Provision of Preschool Education* (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004) study in the United Kingdom, and *E4Kids – Effective Early Educational Experiences* project (Tayler, Cloney, & Niklas, 2014) in Australia,

highlight the importance of quality interactions in child-centred, play-focused environments. These learning environments embrace responsive teaching where adults and children are jointly involved in co-construction of knowledge and sustained shared thinking, in the context of play, within experiences that encompass high challenge episodes (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Sustained shared thinking was described as "any episode in which two or more individuals 'worked together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative… and it had to be shown to develop and extend thinking" (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010, p. 157). This perspective presupposes that children's mere participation in play is not sufficiently adequate to create learning. Thus, having a higher percentage of qualified early childhood teachers in early years education who have a distinct focus on curriculum and pedagogy with appropriate specific pedagogic and curriculum knowledge contributes to quality programs for young children. As Wood (2013) explains, "good quality play requires high levels of pedagogical skills and organisation" (p. 14). Such quality learning environments facilitate and smooth the transition to school (Elliott, 2006; Harrison, 2015) by providing pedagogic continuity.

2.3.1.2 Preschools in New South Wales, Australia

Preschools in Australia are those services that provide early education and care between the ages of three and five years, and include community-based, school-based, private sector, and not-for-profit preschools. Preschool attendance is not compulsory but governments aim to promote attendance (Dowling & O'Malley, 2009). NSW suffers from the lowest hourly participation rates with only 66 per cent of children attending the federal government's recommended 15 hours per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015) and they are most expensive preschools in Australia. Preschools have programmed play-based approaches with a university qualified teacher (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015) and learning through play is one of the most commonly used practices in early childhood services, such as preschools, in Australia (Barblett, 2010). According to The National Law, a 'preschool program' is defined as "an early childhood program delivered by a

qualified early childhood teacher to children in the year that is 2 years before grade 1 of school" (ACECQA, n.d., p. 1).

Preschools may be stand-alone services or attached to schools. These services are usually run by a parent committee or sponsored by a church, community organisation or local government. Children may attend any numbers of days and the programs operate usually between 9am-3pm, or they may attend sessionally in morning and/or afternoon sessions (NSW DEC, 2012a). In most instances preschools follow the school terms and are closed during school holidays. Staff working in these services can be university trained early childhood teachers, diploma or certificate trained staff. In NSW, qualified teachers are mandated for preschools with more than 30 children.

The Department of Education and Communities (DEC) has approximately 100 preschools that are attached to primary schools (NSW DEC, 2012b). These preschools are managed by the school, the school council, or a parent committee, and the DEC employs an early childhood trained teacher and a teacher's aide in each of the preschool rooms. Generally, these preschools operate during school hours. Most are located in low SES areas and priority is given to disadvantaged children. The majority of children attend part-time and are four years old.

In Australia, during the 1980s a dominance of the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Bredekamp, 1987) discourse emerged, later revised to include culturally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), and again in 2009 (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The original guidelines were strongly based on developmental theory in line with Piaget's cognitive constructivist perspective. This heavily influenced Australia's ECEC such that a large proportion of educators have as their basis the work of Piaget and Bredekamp situated in the framework of active hands-on pedagogy (Fleer, Tonyan, Mantilla, & Rivalland, 2009; Grieshaber, 2008; Kilderry, 2015; Ryan & Goffin, 2008). A central tenet of this outlook is a focus on the organisation of the environment and provision of learning experiences, with a noticeable absence of attention to teachers (Grieshaber, 2008) who tend to be viewed as facilitators or observers (Logue & Harvey, 2009; McArdle & McWilliam, 2005). As

a consequence, add McArdle and McWilliam (2005), the developmental discourse shaped the description of pedagogical work to resist the use of the word 'teaching'. Thus, many early childhood play-based programmes such as those in preschools featured child-centred, age-appropriate ideology grounded in individual children's interests together with documenting and analysing observations in accordance with developmental domains – and still do so today (Fleer et al., 2009; Kilderry, 2015; Leggett & Ford, 2013; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Wood,1997). Hence, teaching is informed by children's developmental needs (Graue, 2008); learning is predominantly through self-discovery play, minimising teacher-directed practice; and the curriculum is matched to children's individual emerging abilities. Grieshaber (2008) has also noted that as a consequence of the dominance of the developmental perspective in ECEC, there has been a lack of research about teaching. The current study contributes to the research base on teachers and teaching.

However, in keeping with a general world-wide educational trend, Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Australia was re-examined and its dominant perspective was challenged by scholars during the mid-1990s (Clyde, 1995; Cross, 1995; Dockett, 2011; Fleer, 1996). This marked a shift in theoretical directions and constructs with the growing interest in socio-cultural theory, which drew on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996), and a focus on mediation processes of adults and peers who scaffold children's learning and development. Indeed, it was Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) who introduced the notion of scaffolding as they believed that learning transpires in one-on-one interactions with a more knowledgeable person who provides exactly the support needed for learning to progress forward. Later, Bruner (1996) supplemented his ideas to highlight the significance of intersubjectivity, or the joint attention between the expert and novice. Thus, the introduction of socio-cultural theory, together with the principles of Reggio Emilia, marked a paradigm shift in the early childhood landscape in Australia (Edwards, 2007; Fleer et al., 2009) and brought new understandings of how play is framed and used for learning as well as new conceptions of the adult's role. This amended perspective has been further realised

with the introduction of a key component of the National Quality Framework – the *Early Years Learning Framework*.

2.3.1.3 The Australian early childhood curriculum framework

Over the last 15 years, there has been a proliferation of curriculum and learning frameworks for ECEC both internationally and in Australia (Sumsion, Barnes, Cheeseman, Harrison, & Stonehouse, 2009). In 2009, Australia's first national early childhood curriculum framework, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* (*EYLF*) was developed collaboratively by the Australian and State and Territories Governments. It is the first national curriculum statement for Australia's ECEC staff working with children from birth to five years (Connor, 2010; Leggett & Ford, 2013). The *EYLF* may complement, supplement or replace previously existing frameworks within the individual states and territories. The key intent was to scaffold the delivery of nationally consistent and quality ECEC services across the country (Early Childhood Australia, 2011). This purpose of the document aimed to provide ECEC services with a reference point for guiding curriculum and pedagogy, assisting them to achieve the five broad learning outcomes. It also describes principles and practices considered crucial to support and enrich young children's learning, as well as their transition to formal schooling. The framework is centred on play-based pedagogies, intentional teaching, reflective practice and strong relationships with children and families (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009).

When examining the framework more closely, there are two principles that relate directly to teachers involved in the transition process: *Partnerships* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12) and *Ongoing learning and reflective practice* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 13). Both these principles occupy an important role in encouraging educators to develop a culture of collegiality and reciprocal partnerships between the two contexts, and to also engage in critical thinking and reflection about beliefs and practices within processes such as the transition to school which can "motivate them to explore new ideas and approaches" (DEEWR, 2010, p. 4). Furthermore, three of the eight

pedagogical practices that are significant for teachers concerned with the transition to school are *Learning through play* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15), *Intentional teaching* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15), and *Continuity of learning and transitions* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16). As learning through play is the dominant praxis used in the early childhood sector, it is vital that teachers who facilitate and implement transitions understand these key practices as espoused in this document. The *EYLF* defines play-based learning as "a context through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 46). Such a definition strengthens the notion that play is both nationally and internationally esteemed for its impact on the learning and development of young children (Connor, 2010). The role of the educator is a key component of this definition. Teachers need to be knowledgeable and active in children's play and ought to find the balance between child-initiated, child-led and teacher supported learning highlighting that "early childhood educators take on many roles in play with children and use a range of strategies to support learning. They engage in sustained shared conversations with children to extend their thinking" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15).

As a result, the notion of learning through play is being replaced with teaching through play which encompasses a more active role for the teacher, based on concepts such as scaffolding, guided-participation, intentional teaching and co-construction. The term 'intentional teacher' was adopted by the *EYLF* in order to re-define the role of the educator (DEEWR, 2009). Teachers' intentional planning and teaching is fundamental to support and extend learning through play for young children (Epstein, 2014; Gronlund & Stewart, 2011). According to the *EYLF*, a play-based learning approach therefore does not involve adults acting as 'supervisors' to leave children to play on their own. Intentional teaching in the *EYLF* "involves educators being deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and action. Intentional teaching is the opposite of teaching by rote or continuing with traditions simply because things have 'always' been done that way" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). Hence, this denotes a shift away from the more traditional passive role of the educator to one of being intentional (Epstein, 2014; Grieshaber, 2008, 2010; Leggett

& Ford, 2013; McArdle & McWilliam, 2005). However, while the notion of intentional teaching has mobilised interest (Kilderry, 2015), due to a scarcity of context-based research in Australia, what this means for early childhood teachers is not yet clear. The current study contributes to teachers' interpretations and constructions of this new terminology with the potential to strengthen educators' professional identity.

Traditionally, in early childhood education, play-based learning and teacher-directed learning have been considered as a pedagogical binary (Thomas, Warren, & de Vries, 2010). The inclusion of play-based learning together with intentional teaching is a specific focus in this document and moves away from positioning the two as oppositional. Such a national framework that elucidates the value of play and teachers' role in supporting it contributes to the validation of the work of early childhood educators as highly-skilled professionals. However, it appears that this newly introduced term has created some debate and uncertainty as educators grapple with navigating and enacting its interpretation in their daily practice (Leggett & Ford, 2013) and express unwillingness for embracing intentional pedagogies (Kilderry, 2012, 2015). Intentional pedagogies, explains Kilderry (2015), "have been contentious in ECEC, particularly as they can conjure up 'school-like' pedagogies and practices" (p. 21). The challenge it seems is how to find a balance between intentional teaching and child-initiated learning. Leggett and Ford (2013) argue that "more consideration is required in understanding intentionality" (p. 48) so that educators can seek strategies that foster children's innate motivation for independent learning. The present study contributes to the research base on teachers' understandings about their role in play-based pedagogy.

In relation to the transition to formal schooling, the *EYLF* discusses the importance of continuity of learning in children's transitions and on building on young children's earlier experiences. A key aspect in this section is the recommendation for collaboration between educators in both sectors to share information on children's prior learning (DEEWR, 2009). What is not addressed however, is the role effective pedagogies, such as play-based approaches, can

contribute to supporting the continuity of learning and teaching across the transition process.

2.4. The first year of formal school in NSW – Kindergarten

Within Australia, there are different age criteria and different terminology used for starting school among the states and territories, thus no universal term exists for the educational setting immediately prior to the start of formal schooling. In Australia, the school year begins toward the end of January, and the first year of entry is called Kindergarten in NSW and ACT where children attend five full days. In other jurisdictions, it is referred to as Prep (QLD/VIC/TAS) or Reception year (SA), Transition (NT) and Pre-Primary (WA) (Dockett & Perry, 1999; ACARA, 2012) as depicted in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1   Terminologies for first year of school in Australia

Australian state or territory	Term for first year of school
New South Wales (NSW)	Kindergarten
Australian Capital Territory (ACT)	Kindergarten
Victoria (VIC)	Preparatory (Prep) or Foundation
Tasmania (TAS)	Preparatory (Prep)
Queensland (QLD)	Preparatory (Prep)
South Australia (SA)	Reception
Northern Territory (NT)	Transition
Western Australia (WA)	Pre-primary

Eligibility to start Kindergarten in NSW is based on children who turn 5 years of age by July 31 in that school year, with one intake at the beginning of the year. Most children commence formal schooling between four and a half and five and a half years of age. All children must be enrolled in primary school by age 6 according to the NSW Education Act (NSW Government, 1990). Thus, children

commencing their first year of formal school can vary in age from 4 years and 6 months to 6 years. Government schools in NSW operate through the NSW Department of Education (DoE). In most cases, teachers in Kindergarten hold primary teaching qualifications, however a minority hold early childhood degrees.

In Australia, there is an ideological divide in pedagogical approaches between the two educational sectors when children transition to their first year of formal schooling (Boyle & Petriwskyj, 2014; Dockett & Perry, 2012a; Henderson, 2012; Petriwskyj et al., 2005). As two services have developed independently of one another, transition marks the delineation between a responsive and a directive approach to education (Wood, 2010b) or a change from play-based approaches to a more academic focus. A responsive approach stems from the view that children's learning depends on the active involvement in preschool life, which involves play and learning. The directive approach differs in that the aim is children's acquisition of the knowledge, values and beliefs of society (Wood, 2010b). Furthermore, in terms of teacher education training, the focus on pedagogical approaches and developmental knowledge is different between early childhood and primary courses, and so impacts on learning and teaching not being viewed as a continuum when children commence school (Lord & McFarland, 2010). The transition to school not only marks a shift to a more formal, structured education context (CCCH, 2008) but also a change in curriculum documents (Petriwskyj, O'Gorman, & Turunen, 2013).

2.4.1   Kindergarten and Primary school curriculum in NSW

In 2011, the first phase of the new national *Australian Curriculum* for the school sector was implemented. The development of this curriculum is guided by the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, adopted by the council of state and territory education ministers in December 2008 (ACARA, 2012). It has a four-dimensional design that comprises: Curriculum content (eight key learning areas and subjects), General capabilities (seven), Cross-Curriculum priorities (three) and Achievement Standards. The *Australian Curriculum* refers to the Kindergarten year as the Foundation year to describe the year prior to Year 1.

This document was written with the supposition that curriculum content for the Foundation year will be taught to all Australian children in the year preceding Year 1. It does not however advocate formalised learning (ECA, 2011) and emphasises that teachers can choose how to introduce concepts. A cogent question posed by Holliday (2013) then asks "so, where does the impetus for more formal learning come from?" (p. 9) and additionally the current study also questions the impetus for more formal teaching practices. There is a need to interrogate whether the pedagogy of Australian early years classrooms is best suited to effective and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for children in this phase of education. Currently, teachers in schools are not obliged to acknowledge or implement the *EYLF* in any way. As Petriwskyj (2013) notes, the Foundation year content in schools represents the "potential shift from a holistic to an academically oriented curriculum" (p. 20). The enactment of this formal, content-oriented curriculum, together with NSW Syllabuses that assist teachers to implement it, has given rise to whole-class teaching practices and employing direct instruction techniques in numerous early years' school classrooms (Jay, Knaus, & Hesterman, 2014). As Weimer (2013) states, many classrooms are still functioning as teacher-directed learning environments, enacting the curriculum via more formal didactic pedagogies (Luke, 2010). It would appear that the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* has been misinterpreted by some as the introduction of a set of formal instructional approaches. Lickess (2008) draws attention to how school teachers may consider that 'formal' school is dissimilar to prior-to-school settings and so these variances justify the exclusion of child-centred teaching and learning practices such as play. Thus, here a distinction between the curriculum (what is taught) and the pedagogy (how it is taught) has not been formed (discussed further in 2.7.1.1).

Furthermore, with an emphasis on children's literacy and numeracy development and a predominance of teacher-directed instruction in the belief that the focus on academic learning is effective in preparing children to attain expected outcomes and perform well on standardised assessments, play has taken a backseat in early years classrooms. Also, promoting the prominence of achievement on standardised tests, in 2008, an annual National Assessment Program in Literacy and

Numeracy (NAPLAN) was implemented with the aim of improving learning outcomes for Australian children. School children in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 sit a series of tests that aim to measure their basic skills in literacy and numeracy. These have proven to be a divisive issue in Australian education. Some argue that they provide accountability and transparency; others maintain they exert a push-down effect into lower years with a focus on teacher-centred pedagogies and an increase on time spent on decontextualised literacy and numeracy activities (Dulfer, Rice, & Polesel, 2012; Fleer, 2011b; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2012).   Hence, it is important to explore the relationship between influencing contextual factors and teacher beliefs and as pedagogical decision-making is not solely based on one or the other but is a synthesis of the two. The current study contributes to this area of research.

2.5   Teacher beliefs

Existing literature on teachers' beliefs suggests that the beliefs teachers hold deeply affect their classroom practice. As Li (2009) explains:

> If there are three clear messages throughout the literature on teachers' beliefs, they are, first and foremost, that teachers' beliefs have profound impact on classroom life; that the beliefs that impact students are layered, multi-dimensional, sometimes implicit, and difficult to change; and that teachers who fail to examine their beliefs may bring about unanticipated consequences in the classroom (p. 914).

A meta-analysis by Trivette, Dunst, Hamby, and Meter (2012) also established that the beliefs of early childhood teachers do affect their practices. Thus, if teachers' pedagogical beliefs have the possibility to affect teacher practices (Handal & Herrington, 2003; Hegde & Cassidy, 2009; Li, 2009), this can largely determine how they teach and what will be taught (Donaghue, 2003; Wood & Attfield, 2005), and therefore influence children's success in their first year of school. The educational practices teachers employ are influenced by a belief system that has formed over time through a combination of factors such as acquired professional training,

knowledge and personal experience (Cassidy & Lawrence, 2000; Kagan, 1992; Nimmo & Park, 2009; Pajares, 1992; Wen, Elicker, & McMullen, 2011). Teachers' beliefs are highlighted in the transition process and fundamental in the shaping of what they practice in the classroom, what is included or ignored, and thus the continuity of learning and teaching.

However, a clear definition for the term 'teachers' beliefs' does not exist and though many attempts have been made, little progress has been reached to date (Konig, 2012). Over 20 years ago, Pajares (1992) undertook the challenge of "cleaning up a messy construct" (p. 307) and stated that teachers' beliefs influence their perceptions and judgements which in turn affect their behaviour in the classroom. The beliefs teachers have about teaching and their roles in learning environments serve to influence and guide them in their practice (Donaghue, 2003). Understanding teachers' pedagogical beliefs can provide insights into how these beliefs affect their practices (Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Konig, 2012; Pajares, 1992) such as those implemented in the transition process, and how these beliefs affect and influence their perspectives on play as a medium for learning and teaching. Indeed, Kagan (1992) asserts that research about beliefs is crucial to educational practice. However, of note is that contextual factors such as teacher-child ratios, setting or school philosophy, supervisory support or lack thereof, parental expectations, professional preparation, and experience may constrain the freedom with which teachers feel able to implement or act on their beliefs (McMullen & Alat, 2002; Wen, Elicker, & McMullen, 2011; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002).

That there appears to be no consensus on what constitutes the term 'beliefs' in the literature is evident and there is confusion on the distinction between the constructs of beliefs and knowledge (Pajares, 1992). Knowledge differs from beliefs as beliefs have a stronger emotional and evaluative element (Nespor, 1987). Knowledge of a field or domain contrasts from feelings about that field. A further distinction is that while knowledge often changes, it has been noted that one's beliefs and values are difficult to alter and remain stable or static (Kagan, 1992;

Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). Additionally, knowledge, which is based on objective fact, can be judged or evaluated whereas beliefs cannot (Pajares, 1992).

Pajares (1992) explains that beliefs can be defined in a number of ways and that attention to teachers' beliefs should be a focus of educational research. Beliefs can be explained as values, judgements, attitudes, ideology, axioms, opinions, perceptions, conceptions, dispositions, preconceptions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, perspectives, conceptual systems, internal mental processes, action strategies, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy (Pajares, 1992). The problem that underpins many studies on teachers' beliefs, Munby (1982) explains, is an understanding of which beliefs influence decisions teachers make to guide their practice. The multidimensionality of beliefs warrants the need to think in terms of connections among beliefs and not in terms of beliefs as independent subsystems (Bunting, 1984). In order to understand the context-specific nature of beliefs, it is essential to include teachers' verbal expressions and behaviours in investigations of their beliefs (Pajares, 1992). Munby (1982, 1984) and Schunk (1991) both suggest that qualitative methods such as case studies are required to gain such insights.

Using Kagan's (1992) construct, a better understanding of the distinction between knowledge and beliefs can be gained by examining the relationship between them as "inextricably intertwined" (Kagan, 1992, p. 325) and by viewing beliefs as a form of knowledge. This she refers to as "personal knowledge" (Kagan, 1992, p. 65) and asserts that "most of a teacher's professional knowledge can be regarded more accurately as a belief" (Kagan, 1992, p. 73). Beliefs, she continues to explain, are context dependent and related to a particular situation or circumstance (Kagan, 1992). For the purposes of this study, beliefs will be defined as implicit theories which teachers hold that represent personal knowledge.

Research evidence suggests that teachers from both sectors have varying beliefs, expectations and practices in the transition process (LaParo, Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2003; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; O'Kane & Hayes, 2006, 2010; Petriwskyj, 2005). Some findings reveal either a contradiction between what teachers believe

about communication between the two sectors and what is actually practised (Hopps, 2004), others discuss obstacles to optimal communication or participation (LaParo et al., 2003; Noel, 2010, 2011). Several studies have found that prior-to-school educators tend to participate in transition programs more often than Kindergarten teachers, implement more transition activities and share more documentation (Peters, 2000; Peters, Hartley, Rogers, Smith, & Carr, 2009; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Other research has identified that teachers in both sectors consider communication between the sectors is a valuable and worthwhile practice but they maintain it does not happen enough (Hopps, 2004; Noel, 2011). Poor communication between teachers in both sectors has been found to be a barrier to effective transitions for children (Chan, 2010; Einarsdottir, Perry & Dockett, 2008; Hopps, 2004; Margetts, 1999). Hence, international researchers continue to push for greater levels of communication and coordination between the numerous stakeholders involved in the transition process (Educational Transitions & Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011; Fabian, 2013; Hopps, 2004, 2014; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Rantavuori & Karila, 2015).

Beliefs that teachers have about ECEC and school can influence their understanding of these systems and so how they view the transition process. A key finding in the Sanders et al. (2005) study on the transition to formal schooling was that teachers expressed the most problematic challenge was the change from a play-based pedagogy in ECEC services to a more structured curriculum. School teachers' views about children's adjustment problems in their class may indicate a 'poor fit' between qualities of the classroom context and children's competencies (Hirst et al., 2011). In Dunlop's (2003) study on different perspectives of transition, it was found that the dissimilar ideologies between teachers from both sectors affected their views on capabilities of the same children. In order to bridge the qualitative differences between the two settings, recommendations include encouraging stronger communication and a shared understanding across prior-to-school and school staff, resulting in the development of point-of entry activities such as visits to schools and sharing of prior-to-school teachers' evaluation of a children transitioning to school (Broström, 2005; Cassidy, 2005; Kauerz, 2006). The

necessity for emphasis in terms of pedagogy and curricula, have been recommended but less comprehensively implemented and researched. Furthermore, there are few studies that focus on teacher beliefs or perspectives concerning play-based pedagogy (Fisher, Hirsch-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2008; Howard, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Tobin & Kurban, 2010), particularly across the transition process in the Australian context. Transitions are complex, and given the diversity of teachers and their varying pedagogical practices, they have differing beliefs and experiences of their roles in the facilitation of the transition process (Lickess, 2008; Peters, 2002) and this is important to explore. The findings of the current study contribute to this growing body of knowledge.

2.6   Pedagogy in early years settings

As the importance of high quality care and education has become more clearly understood in the early childhood sphere, so has the role of the educator or teacher within this. This, therefore, demands a strong comprehension of the meaning of pedagogy and how this unfolds in individual early years settings. A range of factors are involved in the development of pedagogy including evidence from research and theories, the expertise and experience of educators, political drivers, evidence from reflective practice, and community expectations. In addition, Alexander (1999, 2004) maintains that the macro-context factors such as school ethos, classroom design, school day and lesson structure are fundamental to notions of pedagogy. These factors are evident in curricular approaches such as *Te Whāriki* the New Zealand early childhood framework (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996) and Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993).

Whilst the term 'pedagogy' has been situated in the European educational context for considerable time, the notions of pedagogy in Australia have only recently become part of our didactic vocabulary (Dockett et al., 2007). Furthermore, diverse perspectives on pedagogy exist in the research literature. Siraj-Blatchford (1999) discusses pedagogy as being associated with the micro-context as this is where learning and teaching occur. A later definition offered by Siraj-Blatchford,

Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell (2002, p. 10) focused on the styles of interaction between teachers and children as being essential:

> the instructional techniques and strategies that allow learning to take place. It refers to the interactive process between teacher/practitioner and learner and it is also applied to include the provision of some aspects of the learning environment (including the concrete learning environment, and the actions of the family and community).

Alexander (2008) and Stephen (2010) explain that teachers express a reluctance to engage with pedagogical discussion and have difficulty articulating their chosen practices to support children's learning and this merits further investigation. In fact Stephen (2010) has referred to pedagogy as "the silent partner in early years learning" (p. 15). Drawing on the research of Moyles, Adams, and Musgrave (2002), she argues that "inhibitions about engaging in debate over pedagogy may hinder support for children's learning and may also limit professional growth of educators" (Stephen, 2010, p. 18). Moyles et al. (2002) maintain that teachers' unwillingness to engage in debate over pedagogy can impede support for children's learning as well as constrain professional development. Indeed, in the current study this proved to be a significant factor. Debates over pedagogy need to consider the various modes of constructing learning and the purpose of early years education. Alexander (2015) now provides a more contemporary definition describing it as "both the act of teaching and the ideas, values, knowledge and evidence that shape and justify it" (p. 253) adding that it is "what the teacher needs to know in order to make valid, effective and defensible classroom decisions" (p. 253).

However, such a perspective places the focus squarely on the teacher's role and aim in facilitating learning. The problem with such a perspective is that teaching may be conceptualised as distinct from the process of learning. The current study draws on the definition as expressed in the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 11): "…pedagogy refers to the holistic nature of early childhood educators' professional practice (especially those aspects that involve building and nurturing relationships),

curriculum decision-making, teaching and learning". This definition highlights a model of pedagogy that incorporates aspects of the teacher; classroom or other contexts; content, and the view of learning. In order to delve into teacher beliefs and theories about play-based pedagogy, it is first necessary to examine the literature base on definitions of play.

2.7   What is play?

Play has been recognised as a specific right for all children by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, in addition to and separate from a child's right to leisure and recreation (United Nations, 1989). The importance of play in the lives of young children has long been established over the centuries. Froebel (1782 –1852) and Pestalozzi (1746 –1827) identified the significance of play in children's development in the early 19th century (Goodine, 2010). These education pioneers highlighted play as a vehicle through which children can experiment and discover their surroundings and emphasised the importance of a stimulating, rich play environment for learning to occur. Their research and investigation laid the groundwork for further discussion and discourse about play's importance in child development. However, they struggled in their development of theoretical perspectives, as at the time, play was seen as frivolous and unnecessary. Studies continued over time to establish the importance of play, its benefits and the fundamental role of play in children's learning (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pramling-Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012; Wood & Attfield, 2005). According to a report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), play as a medium for learning is a core component of curriculum in successful early education settings (OECD, 2004, 2006, 2012).

While it is not the intent of this literature review to provide a comprehensive overview of all the significant theorists who have contributed to the extant literature on play, it is important to acknowledge some of the key origins that have shaped teacher ideas and theories presented in the current study. Teacher educators are

most probably strongly motivated and guided by what Ailwood (2003) refers to as the developmental discourse of play which has sprouted from research and theory of developmental psychology.

Two of the most influential theorists within this discourse who have shaped current understandings of children's learning and development are Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget's (1962) cognitive constructivist theory emphasises the importance of young children actively constructing their knowledge about the real world through their own activities and considered play to be a major tool for facilitating children's mental development. The role of the teacher then was viewed as being passive or reactive; one of a facilitator or enabler. His stage-based theory described a characteristic type of play in each phase – with an emphasis on children having an active role in their learning, through first-hand experiences, both physically and mentally. Piaget (1962) argued that play can assist learning by promoting children to assimilate new information into existing cognitive structures (or schemas) and then move forward to new learning via the process of accommodation which involves changing or extending those cognitive structures. In this way, he believed that children's thinking proceeds from immature to mature, from simple to complex, and from concrete to abstract, with these stages being related to the idea of children's developmental readiness to progress to a new level. Vygotsky (1978), whose ideas centred on make-believe play, argued that it is the leading activity of young children and promotes development in the cognitive, emotional and social domains. Furthermore, he emphasised the social influence in how children learn – that cooperative dialogue with more knowledgeable adults and peers in play is required for children to develop ways of thinking and behaving in the culture of a community. In this path, he argued that play creates zones for proximal development (the difference between children's actual and potential developmental levels) and so children can move ahead in their current stage of development with this supported assistance. Hence, the adult's role is more proactive and complex, and involves guiding, supporting and extending children's learning. Therefore, what happens in early years educational settings in terms of teaching through play depends on which of these two perspectives teachers draw upon.

A clear definition of play in the research literature is elusive and indistinct because of its complexity, changing nature and its existence in diverse forms (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Dockett & Fleer, 2002; Fleer, 2009; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Gordon, 2009; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Moyles, 2010a, 2015). Furthermore, achieving clarity is further hampered as play is context dependent (Brooker, 2011; Wood & Attfield, 2005; Wood, 2013) and contexts can be wide-ranging. Definitions vary among educators, theorists and researchers (Dockett & Fleer, 2002; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Moyles, 2015; Wood, 2009). Indeed, Ailwood (2003) writes "few authors writing about play would be brave enough to profess a final definition of play" (p. 288). Play operates as a wide-ranging term which encompasses an extensive scope of activities and behaviours. Play has been termed according to category, criteria and continuum groupings (Howard & McInnes, 2010). Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that almost anything can be termed as play. However, we must be wary - theoretical ambiguity in relation to the construct of play poses as one of the greatest challenges to implementing a play-based curriculum (Howard & McInnes, 2010).

Children's play has been defined as pleasurable, meaningful, intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, episodic, symbolic activity, non-literal, active engagement, and dependence on internal rather than external rules (Fromberg, 1992; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Moyles, 2015; Wood, 2009). Play also contributes to every facet of children's development: physical, social, personal, cognitive, creative, linguistic, moral and artistic (Saracho, 2012; Saracho & Spodek, 2006; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Such definitions provide an insight into the multifaceted nature of children's play. Play is also a foundation for Developmentally Appropriate Practice which positions play as a highly effective developmental activity (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Indeed Moyles (2015) suggests that it is best to view play as a process rather than to attempt to quantify its ephemeral nature. In an effort to limit interpretations of play, Pellegrini (1991) defends a more flexible approach to definitions that views children progressing along a continuum from pure play to non-play and so avoiding the play/work dichotomy.

However, some contest this idealised notion of play (Colliver, 2012), suggesting that many taken-for-granted ideas about play are acknowledged without challenge – such as ideas that play is "natural, normal, innocent, fun, solely about development and learning, beneficial to all children, and a universal right for children" (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010, p. 1). Other researchers agree that the influence of the dominant discourse of Euro-American theories and definitions do not address differences in children's social, cultural, economic, and political conditions (Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Rogers, 2011; Smith, 2010; Wood, 2013). In spite of this, it is important to note that these authors are not suggesting that play is not beneficial nor that it does not hold a significant place in children's lives or development.

2.7.1   *The relationship between play and learning*

Whilst a shared definition of play is a debated issue in early years education, the value of play has been widely endorsed (Dockett, 2011). In fact, in the seminal study by Bennett, Wood, and Rogers (1997), English reception class teachers revealed that they strongly valued play as a 'pedagogical priority' and expressed that they viewed play as "a vehicle for learning" (p. 33). Play's value as a medium for young children's learning is recognised and evident in the position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009, p. 4) which states: "Play is an important vehicle for the developing of self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and a social competence". It is evident throughout international early childhood curricula that there a similarities in the ways play is valued. Nevertheless, the relationship between play and learning in past research has been tenuous (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Pramling-Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Wood & Attfield, 2005). The views educators hold of how children learn determine the circumstances in which that learning takes place and this influences how adults interact with children and support their learning (Trudell, 2010). Perhaps part of the problem lies in how learning is conceptualised, constrained by traditional notions of curriculum wherein subjects and learning are compartmentalised and separated by time and space (Briggs & Hansen, 2012) or

perhaps because play-based learning so differs from traditional linear learning. Furthermore, Ranz-Smith (2007) suggests that "fostering a sense of play in the learning process is perhaps a threat to adult perceptions of what school and learning ought to be" (p. 275).

Current literature strongly suggests that play and learning are intricately intertwined (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Broadhead, 2010; Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009; Myck-Wayne, 2010; Pramling-Samuelsson & Fleer, 2009; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Roskos & Christie, 2011). However, conceptualising play-based pedagogy poses a challenge for educators (Wood, 2004; Wood, 2009; Wood, 2010a). Indeed, whilst many early years practitioners espouse that children learn through play, and regard it as essential to children's learning and development, few can sufficiently articulate that tenet with in-depth knowledge or move beyond references to developmental domains (Dockett, 2011; Moyles, 2010b; Wood & Attfield, 2005). It is important that educators are able to articulate 'why' they provide a play-based approach so that they are able to validate it to others.

Wood (2010a, 2010b) reasons that mixing play and pedagogy, or constructing the link between play and learning "has always been problematic" (Wood, 2010a, p. 12) because teachers either view both as separate or they employ mixed rather than integrated pedagogies. Mixed approaches tend to feature adult-led activities, leaving play on the perimeter of practice (Wood, 2010a). She proposes that this association can be viewed through two lenses: outside-in and inside-out. The outside-in outlook stems from the cultural transmission/directive orientation or the 'what play does for children' focus. The inside-out perspective derives from the emergent/responsive approach or the 'what play means for children'. Wood (2010a) argues that problems develop when the former standpoint overshadows the latter, and that the inside-out position should inform integrated pedagogical approaches to avoid the play-learn dichotomy. What is beneficial, states McInnes et al. (2011), is that educators not only establish a pedagogy based on a strong understanding of the relationship between play and learning but also the educator's role in

facilitating play and learning. Dockett (2011) concurs proposing that a focus on teaching through play is a comparatively current notion, given that traditional conceptualisations of the role of the educator promote that of being an observer or facilitator. In fact, Hyvonen (2011) asserts that "new insight is required to relate teachers' pedagogical knowledge to play-based teaching - something which is currently limited" (p. 67) and to move beyond viewing play merely as having social relevance. A fundamental element to this understanding is deliberation of teachers' theories of play and how this impacts on their practice – indeed, this is a key consideration in the current study. A key challenge in developing a pedagogy of play is crafting unity between play, learning and teaching (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Nevertheless, Hedges (2010) explains succinctly that "the adage of learning through play has never sat comfortably alongside the notion of teaching through play, and is unlikely ever to do so" (p. 25).

2.7.2   *Conceptualising a pedagogy of play*

In early childhood education, play has long been recognised as a valued pedagogy (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2008; Kennedy & Barblett, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009; Moyles, 2010a; Piaget, 1962; Pramling-Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Historically, play-based learning has been associated with the notion of child-centred pedagogy (Edwards & Cutter-McKenzie, 2011; Ryan, 2005). Chung and Walsh (2000) explain that while the term child-centredness may seem self-explanatory, their extensive investigation uncovered up to 40 different interpretations of this concept in the field of early childhood contemporary literature. These meanings included a scope from learning based on children's interests, to children's participation in decisions related to their learning, to an emphasis on developmental strategies, to the development of the individual potential (Chung & Walsh, 2000).

Recently, there has been increased debate from post-developmental perspectives about the notion of child-centred play informing the early childhood curriculum (Edwards & Cutter-McKenzie, 2011, Wood, 2010b). Emerging research highlights the significance of teacher interactions and guidance during children's

play (Fleer, 2010; Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis 2011; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Ryan & Goffin, 2008; Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013) and the teacher's role in planning for learning in play-based experiences (Gibbons, 2007; Gronlund, 2010; Howard, 2010). Such perspectives challenge the traditionally held notion of child-centred play where children are encouraged to develop their own understandings and learning through open-ended and essentially self-directed play.

Synodi (2010) claims that for teachers to truly consider they employ a pedagogy of play, the three approaches of child-initiated or child-directed play, teacher-directed play and mutually directed play of both teachers and children need to be provided. Child-directed play means that children are allowed to play without direct interference from the teacher (Gmitrova, Podhajecká, & Gmitrov, 2009). Children play freely and have power and control over it. Teachers' involvement may include the role of organiser, stage manager, observer, listener and assessor (Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Teacher-directed or teacher-organised play (Wood & Attfield, 2005) involves games or playful activities that are prepared by teachers to be used as teaching opportunities. Such play is employed to assist children to consolidate and practice what has been taught and the teacher's role is one of a tutor (Gmitrova et al., 2009). Teachers set the rules of play and hold the power of control of the play. Mutually-directed play occurs when teachers engage in children's free play in a non-disruptive manner, respecting children's intentions and being involved on their terms (Goouch, 2008). Their role may include a co-player, mediator and scribe (Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Both the teacher and the child share the power in play. Similarly, Ashiabi (2007), and Howard and McInnes (2010) – discuss the need for a balance of child-initiated and teacher-guided experiences. Teachers' beliefs and perceptions of these three approaches determine whether they become a part of a pedagogy of play.

Dockett and Fleer (2002) explain that the teacher's role in children's play can be viewed as a continuum from indirect planning for play to a direct engagement in the play. At the indirect end of this continuum, teachers assume the role of manager

where they organise time, space and resources to support play. When teachers adopt a more involved role in the middle of this continuum, they become facilitators, mediators and interpreters of the play that occurs. It is here where the roles of mediating and interpreting are closely linked to promoting equity in children's play that address issues of gender, power and inclusivity. Direct involvement is attained when teachers occupy more directive and active roles such as co-players or play tutors with the aim of developing complex play. Control of the play at this end of the continuum is more likely with the teacher than with the children (Dockett & Fleer, 2002).

A pedagogy of play, therefore, signifies that teachers act as co-players, mediators, scribes, tutors, observers, assessors, planners and organisers (Ashiabi, 2007; Jones & Reynolds 1992; Wood & Attfield, 2005). The value that adults attribute to play, and the role they have in play, influences the type and quality of play that children experience (Goodine, 2010, Wood, 2004). Play is most valuable as a vehicle for learning when teachers are actively involved (Smilansky, 1990; Wood, 2004; Wood & Attfield, 2005). The importance of teachers learning how to play with children intentionally and responsively so that play is enhanced or expanded is also noted by Howard (2010) and Lobman (2005). This contrasts interactions that only involve provision of materials or making suggestions to start the play. Wood (2010a) argues that in order to promote learning through play there are four equally complimentary and valid pedagogic roles: engaging playfully with learners; modelling play and playful behaviours; observing and reflecting on play; and becoming a play partner. Teachers who have strong knowledge of the value of play provide 'good-fit' interactions with children during play and are able to link play with learning outcomes (Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2010). These studies provide important implications for teachers using play-based pedagogy. It is important to consider teachers' perspectives and beliefs about play as their beliefs influence their actions (Fang, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Konig, 2012; Pajares, 1992) and this was a driving force for the current study.

The juxtaposition of play with pedagogy is problematic; particularly as the notion of play is often situated in opposition to its more highly regarded counterpart, work (Broadhead, 2010; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Hyvonen, 2011; McInnes et al., 2011; Rogers, 2011; Walsh, Taylor, Sproule, & McGuinness, 2008; Yelland, 2011). This separation may "prevent the integration of play into pedagogical practice" (Rogers, 2011, p. 5). Furthermore, historically the play-work tension becomes more distinct during the transition to formal schooling stage (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012), and as Wood and Attfield (2005) explain, as children navigate the passage through transition "the boundaries between work and play become increasingly evident in primary school" (p. 16).

A valid question is proposed by Lim (2010): where, in an educational society that regards academic achievement over children's holistic development, how might teachers reach a middle ground within the dichotomy of play and work? It is fundamental that teachers embrace both in the learning environment as complimentary and essential. Spodek and Saracho (2003) argue that it is unnecessary to evaluate activities as either play or work and that a dichotomous play-work approach can limit teaching and learning possibilities (Cooney, Gupton, & O'Laughlin, 2000). Instead, Howard and McInnes (2010) and Wood (2010a) suggest teachers should utilise an integrated approach of both child-initiated and teacher-directed activities where teachers plan for play with the children, based on their interactions and observations. Teaching and learning become co-constructive and relational processes emphasising dynamic interactions between people, resources and experiences in the learning context.

While children's play is valued by many teachers, often they are uncertain of how to guide that play to achieve more educational value (Moyles et al., 2002; Saracho & Spodek, 1998; Wood, 2004). The educational outcomes of play may be limited when there is a lack of intervention or interaction. Children require assistance to make sense of their discoveries and to be able to connect new knowledge with existing understandings so that cognitive advances result. Wood and Bennett (1997, 1999) have critically analysed the role of play, more specifically

play as pedagogy, and found that teachers were often unsure of their role in children's play. Debates centred on when to intervene in children's play and when to leave them to play alone. This represents a general shift in the literature from the more developmental, Piagetian focus of children's learning ('ages and stages') to a Vygotskian notion of adult's role in scaffolding and co-constructing with children. Such theoretical debates highlight the significance of these issues in teachers' practices.

According to Hujala, Helenius, and Hyvonen (2010), learning through play focuses the contextual orientation of children's development and comprises three characteristics: children as active meaning makers; learning as a cooperational process; and environments as active participants in playing and learning. Perhaps part of the problem is in how school teachers conceptualise learning. Learning is traditionally viewed as a structured activity where the locus of control lies with the teacher (Briggs & Hansen, 2012). Additionally, the problem is also that many teachers view play and learning as dichotomous concepts, particularly those in schools. They find it challenging to integrate the two in their thinking and practice (Hujala et al., 2010; Hyvonen, 2011). Teachers in schools are bound by notions of curriculum which derive from "the separation of subjects and learning into compartments" (Briggs & Hansen, 2012, p. 3). The school system seems to predominantly drive children's learning toward essential skill and knowledge development that will assist them to pass assessments and tests. Herein lies what Briggs and Hansen (2012) refer to as "the planning paradox" (p. 9); how do teachers in schools, with a focus on accountability and assessment procedures, find a balance in providing child-centred play-like experiences that do not shift all the control of what is learned away from the teacher and over to the students? If current research is so clear on the value of play as a legitimate pedagogy, it is important to understand why opposing views persist. Thus, there is a need to relate teachers' pedagogical knowledge to play-based teaching so that new insight can be gained. Thus, their views about how they implement play at the grassroots level are essential to this study.

2.8   Barriers to play

A significant body of research on play in early childhood settings (Brooker, 2011; Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010) discusses a consistent theme, that being; "the tensions between the rhetoric and reality create one of the main challenges for practitioners" (Wood, 2013, p. 14). Indeed, this was a significant impetus for the current study. Early years teachers struggle to find a balance between personal theories and beliefs about play and constraining elements that challenge its implementation. Kagan (1990) identified 3 types of barriers to the implementation of play that are frequently cited: attitudinal, structural and functional. Attitudinal obstacles were noted as those associated with teachers' perceptions of play and how they value play (Brooker, 2010; Hegde & Cassidy, 2009; Lynch, 2015; Moyles, 2010b). Furthermore, beliefs about play practice are deeply associated with training and theoretical knowledge as found by McMullen and Alat (2002).

Structural barriers describe those related to the structure of the learning environment such as time, space, resources, and curricula, and these have been noted in research (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Hegde & Cassidy, 2009; Howard, 2010; Quance, Lehrer, & Stathopoulos, 2008; Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2003). Indeed, Ranz-Smith's (2007) study revealed that curricular expectations in the first years of school have been cited by teachers as a barrier to the inclusion of play in the process of learning. The author highlights that teachers are "engaged in a precarious balancing act as they strive to meet increasing curriculum requirements while remaining responsive to children and their play" (p. 272). Furthermore, the author maintains that "there have emerged defined curricula cultivating the practice of direct instruction as the efficient means to achieve the goals, to the neglect of children's propensity for play-based learning and child-initiated thought" (p. 272). Similarly, Howard's (2010) research identified the influence of curricular pressures on teachers' classroom practice and points out that "understanding play through the lens of the curriculum appears to be constraining, rather than supporting early years practice" (p. 100). Roskos and Neuman (2011) cite issues

around space and access to resources within the learning environment as fundamental considerations which impact on children's learning and social interactions that occur within it.

Finally, functional aspects which are related to contextual elements that impact on teacher provisions for play define the functional elements and these are closely associated with attitudinal barriers (Kagan, 1990). Such elements relate to attitudes or beliefs of others such as parents and considerable research has indicated that parents tend to value academic learning and progress over play, particularly as a measure of children's success in the transitioning process (Barbarin, Early, Clifford, Bryant, Frome, Burchinal, Howes, & Pianta, 2008; Dockett, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Graue, 2009; Hegde & Cassidy, 2009; Moyles, 2010b; Niesel & Griebel, 2001; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Tobin & Kurban 2010). Barbarin et al. (2008) note that parents tend to align their beliefs with policymakers more so than with teachers. Also, principals and other staff in schools may also assign less value to play as children progress upwards through the grades (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Hegde & Cassidy, 2009). Additionally, each school context differs together with its respective challenges for implementing play. Whilst preservice teaching programs provide theoretical and practical preparation, this alone may not be adequate to empower teachers to feel secure in implementing play-based pedagogy in school contexts (McInnes et al., 2011). Functional constraints also include top-down pressures of accountability, assessments and high-stakes testing (Graue, 2009; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Nicolopoulou, 2010). Kindergarten teachers have reported being caught between their developmentally appropriate beliefs and requests from administrators, parents and other teachers to improve academic standards (Goldstein, 2007). Such tensions contribute to play-based pedagogy being minimised in Kindergarten classrooms and an increase in more academically oriented teaching.

2.9 The demise of play, the overcrowded curriculum and 'schoolification' pressures

Currently around the globe, with the advent of rigorous accountability, there has been a major shift in how early years education is conceptualised and implemented (Bassok, Latham, Rorem, 2016; Graue, 2009; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009), signalling a paradigm shift in how early childhood standards, curricula, assessment are viewed (Fleer, 2011a). This has marked a change from recognising the uniqueness of every child and his/her interests (individualising learning) to standards becoming universalised and pre-specified. This swings the starting point of educational pedagogy from the child to the content. Pressure from school readiness concerns (OECD, 2006; Nicolopoulou, 2010) and a lack of understanding about the role play holds in children's learning (Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011) threatens to completely displace play in the school curriculum. Coupled with the misinterpretation of 'high quality' early childhood programs, societal anxieties about the perception that children are lagging in their academic achievements in later school years has led to pressure for a focus on developing academic skills at a younger age (Bassok et al., 2016; Bodrova, 2008; Curwood, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009). Many Kindergarten classrooms are strongly focused on teaching these academics skills with prior-to-school settings following closely behind (Miller & Almon, 2009). The pressure to produce 'school ready' children in prior-to-school settings has also been termed as 'schoolification' defined by Doherty (2007, p. 7) as:

> an emphasis on the acquisition of specific pre-academic skills and knowledge transfer by the adult rather than a focus on broad development[al] goals such as social-emotional well-being and the gaining of understanding and knowledge by the child through direct experience and experimentation.

However, Bodrova (2008) asserts that such attention on early academic skill building proves to be ineffective over time, and can in fact be detrimental to children's future social and emotional development. Additionally, in light of

increasing demands for a greater focus on academic abilities for young children, the absence of an agreed definition of play contributes to challenges in advocating for a place for play-based pedagogy both in early childhood settings and in the school curriculum (Bodrova & Leong, 2010; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

The related changed educational climate in the United States of America and Australia has brought greater pressure of more accountability (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Jay, Knaus, & Hesterman, 2014; McGregor, 2010). The term "accountability shovedown" (Hatch, 2002, p. 462) has been ascribed to this increased focus on accountability. High stakes assessment practices and an academically driven push-down curriculum have affected prior-to-school settings placing a greater focus in preparing children for school and early years schooling concentrating on academic content (Curwood, 2007; Einarsdottir, 2006; Fleer, 2011b; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Jay et al., 2014; Johnson & Dinger, 2012; Marxen, Ofstedal, & Danbom, 2008; Pianta, 2007). Such a focus impacts on perceptions of appropriate curriculum and pedagogical practices not only in early childhood services but also in the first years of school (Bassok et al., 2016; Pappano, 2010; Russell, 2011; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003). As a result, in many early years settings now, young children sit for long periods of time engaged in practice and drill-like activities or worksheets with an academic emphasis, within learning environments that focus on didactic teaching at the expense of play-based approaches (Curwood, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Johnson & Dinger, 2012; Luke, 2010; McGregor, 2010; O'Kane, 2007).

Indeed, in a 2014 review of the *Australian Curriculum* by the Department of Education, school principals and teachers together reported their concerns about overcrowding in the new curriculum adding that "the content being excessive, unduly rigid and prescriptive in many of the learning areas" (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014, p. 6). This is further supported by similar concerns from the Alliance for High Quality Education in the Early Years of Schooling *Discussion Paper* (2014) and the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA, 2014). As Grieshaber (2009) notes, overly prescriptive curricula and

accountability procedures, particularly in terms of mounting pressure for schools to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes, do not yield high quality schooling. Instead she advocates that, particularly in relation to smoothing the transition to school, "having greater similarity between the syllabi and curricula of the pre-compulsory and the compulsory years reduces the challenges children face when making this transition" (p. 10). Furthermore, O'Connell (2012) maintains that what is also needed is a major shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning environments.

As a result of this early learning shift, families and educators are questioning how a play-based pedagogy and curriculum prepares children adequately for a different educational environment (Dockett, 2011; Fleer, 2011b). In fact, in the United States of America, play-based learning is being squeezed out of the curriculum (Bassok et al., 2016; Ginsberg, 2007; Graue, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009; Myck-Wayne, 2010; Wohlend & Peppler, 2015). In a report from the Alliance for Childhood described by Harris, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek (2011), 30 per cent of American teachers teaching in the first year of formal schooling claimed that they cannot find time for child-chosen activities or play experiences. Most teachers in Australian ECEC settings are willing to help prepare children for their new role, but within the context of play-based learning. This, therefore, demands teachers to be able to clearly articulate how learning and teaching can be achieved through play.

Early childhood teachers relate of the pressure to focus more strongly on academic skills from Kindergarten teachers who, in turn, describe feeling pressured from upper primary teachers to narrow curriculum to a limited range of subjects (Jay, Knaus & Hesterman, 2014; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006; Wesley & Buysee, 2003). In some cases, this is considered as a means of aligning standards across the two contexts (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005). Other researchers view this route as detrimental to early childhood perspectives of child-centred, play-based curricula, resulting in additional push-down of academic curriculum (Jay et al., 2014; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2003) and 'schoolification' concerns (Ackesjö, 2013b; Alcock & Haggerty, 2013; Grieshaber, 2009; Gunnarsdottir, 2014; Moss, 2013;

OECD, 2006). What is essential to consider is the need to maintain high quality ECEC services, and educators who can confidently articulate the value of a play-based pedagogy and its role in preparing children for the transition to school. Key in this is the ability to convey and demonstrate how play-based learning is used to assist children to achieve higher cognitive functioning and outcomes.

2.10   Pursuing continuity in the transition process

There is a strong research base on the transition to school that emphasises the importance of continuity between the settings (Ackesjö, 2013b; Connor, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2014; Dockett, Perry, Campbell, Hard, Kearney, & Taffe, 2007; Dunlop, 2013; Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; Einarsdottir, 2006, 2013; Fabian, 2013; Geiser, Horwitz, & Gerstein, 2013; Mayfield, 2003) and continuity in children's education has also been highlighted by the OECD (2006, 2011). Many of these studies couch continuity in terms of jointly constructed transition activities, reciprocal communication and relationships, and developing strong linkages and strategic partnerships between prior-to-school and school settings (Ashton et al., 2008; Boyle & Petriwskyj, 2014; Chan, 2010; Collie et al., 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2009; Henderson, 2014; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008, Noel, 2011; OECD, 2006). Building on children's funds of knowledge or prior learning experiences as a means to promote continuity is a key suggestion in the literature (Brooker, 2008; DEECD, 2009; O'Kane, 2015; Peters, 2010) highlighting the role educational settings play in supporting individual children. Also, the sharing of information and understandings about children's learning between teachers in these services has also been highlighted as significant to supporting continuity (Dockett et al., 2007; Hopps & Dockett, 2011; Niesel & Griebel, 2007; Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2011). However, in relation to sharing of information between the two contexts, teachers have experienced constraints in undertaking this effectively due in part to professional misunderstandings, knowledge-power relations and working in isolation to one another (Cassidy, 2005; Hopps, 2004; Hopps & Dockett, 2011; O'Kane & Hayes, 2006).

According to Mayfield (2003) continuity is "an on-going *process*, and not a series of isolated events" (p. 239, italics in original) and can be defined as how, and to what degree, one program links to and builds on another for the value of the children. Lam and Pollard (2006) state that continuity refers to the compatibility of two settings in which there is a continuous experience. Such definitions therefore, highlight that where children experience inconsistency and unfamiliarity, discontinuity exists. Hence, continuity of experience can smooth children's transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2014). In the research literature, the notion of continuity that is discussed is more complex than just upholding familiarity across settings. Continuity in transition is focused on teachers building an understanding of what was before so as to promote continued progress (Connor, 2011; Noel, 2011; Peters, 2010). Otherwise, as Wood and Caulier-Grice (2006) advise, some of the benefit of early childhood education may be lessened during later years if it is not built on progressively. They add that "it is sustaining these gains through primary school years which will have the most impact on their adult life chances" (p. 19).

Mayfield (2003) outlines six forms of continuity: philosophical, curricular, developmental, physical, organizational, and administrative continuities. Similarly, Fabian (2002a) discusses three varieties of discontinuities that children experience in the transition to school and summarises these as physical, social and philosophical. Broström (2013) has extended on these to include two additional levels; communication discontinuity and discontinuity in children's views of preschool and school. Philosophical continuity encompasses pedagogical beliefs and approaches as well as teaching practices, such as the balance between work and play, and it is this form that the present study will address.

Recent transition literature suggests that a key element that has emerged in effective transitions for children is the notion of pedagogic continuity (Bredekamp, 2010; Broström, 2013; Dockett et al., 2007; Dunlop, 2013; Harrison, 2015; Li et al., 2011; Monkeviciene, Mishara, & Dufour, 2006; Neuman, 2002, 2007; Petriwskyj et al., 2005, 2013; Smith, 2015; Smith & Maher, 2016 in press; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Pedagogic continuity across transition processes requires collaborative

partnerships between teachers in both sectors of education and should avoid the notion of 'schoolification' (Moss, 2013; Neuman, 2007). As Bredekamp (2010) points out pedagogical continuity requires more "coherence and connectedness" (p. 135) in terms of curriculum and teaching practices. Planning for pedagogic continuity involves consideration of continuity of teaching and learning, and the shared understanding of effective pedagogy required to ensure children's transitions are successful. This necessitates collaboration, discourse, bi-directional interaction, and the supportive partnerships (Dockett & Perry, 2007a; Noel, 2011; O'Kane, 2015) between teachers and administrators across both sectors of education to build strong pedagogical connections. It is useful here to reflect on what Britt and Sumsion (2003) designate as "'the space between'… a valid space, a site of connection, of intersection, of overlap… a space not only of existence, but of coexistence" (p. 133). Both Bennett (2013) and Moss (2013) reaffirm and extend on the recommendations from the OECD's *Starting Strong* reports (OECD, 2001, 2006) of a 'strong and equal partnership' and suggest teachers in both sectors reflect on Dahlberg and Lenz-Taguchi's (1994) idea of the creation of a meeting place where teachers can mutually rework their pedagogical practices. In this way, the transition to school can be considered a shared space or "a shared borderland" (Britt & Sumsion, 2003, p. 134) with points of intersection, cohabitation and negotiation so that teachers can shift into new relational spaces (Henderson, 2014; Moss, 2013).

Ready schools need to show a commitment to pedagogic continuity through creating pedagogical meeting places and shared pedagogical approaches across the transition process (Kelman & Lauchlan, 2010). Indeed, O'Kane (2015) reminds us that international research has argued time and again for play-based approaches in both prior-to-school and early years school contexts and that such an approach in the early years of school would facilitate smoother transitions for children. The use of play-based pedagogy in the early years of school would enable new learning experiences to be introduced to children in more recognisable, familiar and developmentally appropriate modes. To support the place of play-based pedagogy in children's transition to formal schooling, it is essential to understand what

teachers in both sectors believe about the value of play as a vehicle for learning and teaching, and their role to support it.

2.11   Alignment of curricula and pedagogies

Communication and partnerships between prior-to-school and Kindergarten teachers can provide a valuable link in ensuring more continuity and consistency between the two environments, particularly in reference to curricula and pedagogical practices (Neuman, 2007). As Bredekamp (2010) remarks, the "abrupt shift in instructional practices" (p. 144) is a particular challenging aspect that children experience during the transition process. There is little justification for the change in teaching methods given that children's learning styles do not vary between completing early childhood education and starting school. Thus, there is a strong basis for pursuing greater alignment between the curricula and pedagogy in the two settings. Therefore, Bredekamp (2010) proposes that a crucial measure towards achieving pedagogical continuity and providing smoother transitions for children would be to align preschool and K-3 (Kindergarten to year 3) teaching practices. Furthermore, alignment of preschool and kindergarten curricula has been identified as a vehicle by which to improve the continuity between settings and reduce challenges experienced by children, and so, supporting their transition (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; CCCH, 2008; Fabian, 2002b, 2013; Grieshaber, 2009; Kauerz, 2006; O'Kane, 2015). Additionally, curricular alignment and continuity has a substantial influence on quality, as in the Nordic countries where the effort is to avoid 'schoolification' issues that arise with readiness concerns, and instead early childhood pedagogy is favoured to shape the foundation of early primary education (OECD, 2006).

Alignment can take two forms, horizontal and vertical alignment. Horizontal alignment denotes the alignment of curricula, standards and assessment within a given age cohort, while vertical alignment refers to that between age cohorts (Kagan & Kauerz, 2007). Vertical alignment of curricula implies that comparisons of curriculum documents between the two sectors involve a level of

consistency or continuity in subject content and developmental domains. An example would be prior-to-school standards are aligned with Kindergarten school standards (Kauerz, 2006). When this alignment is strong, curricula complement and build on one another. Globally, in recent years, there has been increased interest in the connections made between ECEC and school settings (Connor, 2012). Until recently, the focus on transition activities and structural connections has primarily addressed certain elements of vertical alignment between ECEC settings and Kindergarten. These include visits to a Kindergarten school classroom or administrative organisation between transition programs. However, one-off transitions events are insufficient. Full vertical alignment implies the continuous and progressive quality of children's learning and development and should include content and pedagogical strategies (Kauerz, 2006). Teachers who are informed and knowledgeable about the developmental characteristics of children aged three to eight years recognise the significance of including developmentally appropriate practices into their teaching (Geiser, Horwitz, & Gertein, 2013). The incorporation of learning-oriented guided play in the early years of formal schooling could promote and improve continuity between the different contexts (Broström, 2005; Walker, 2007). In this way, the learning and skills that are formed in one context function not as an end point, but as foundational skills upon which to build further knowledge in future learning.

With regard to maintaining the positive outcomes and impact of high quality ECEC settings, and avoid a fade-out effect of these, Kauerz (2006) suggests having well-aligned programs commencing in prior-to-school settings and extending through to the Year Three of school. This, she contends, is a crucial element for improving the quality of early years education. Petriwskyj et al. (2013) add that such alignment "provides a context for gradual change" (p. 20). Thus, stronger alignment between the two contexts can be achieved by forming a common curriculum framework across ECEC services and schools. Examples in the Australian context include curriculum documents in the states of Victoria and South Australia. The *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (Department of Education & Training, 2016) originally introduced in 2009 and

revised in 2016, takes into account the full age-range from birth to eight years and provides clear information about the transition to school, including ongoing links to later school education. Similarly, the *South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework* (Department of Education, Training & Employment, 2001) was designed to support continuity of learning from birth to Year 12. These documents provide a shared, common language and guiding principles for teachers in both sectors of education, and therefore promote continuity in pedagogy and practice. At present, no such documents exist in NSW. In order to scaffold improved pedagogic continuity and curricular alignment between the ECEC and schools, policy revision is required.

2.12   Examining the EYLF and Australian Curriculum

If effective and seamless transitions are to be realised, it is essential to understand and articulate the connections between the *EYLF* and the *Australian Curriculum* for schools. In order to support children's transitions from prior-to-school settings to Kindergarten to promote continuity of pedagogy, the promotion of integration and alignment of the two sectors is necessary.

Both documents highlight the importance of children's learning however each reflects a varied focus on that learning. They serve different purposes and signify the unique nature of each of the two educational environments. The *EYLF* embodies a holistic, child-centred approach to young children's learning attained through play-based intentional pedagogies, where curriculum is co-constructed and realised through broad learning outcomes. In contrast, the *Australian Curriculum* is driven by content and proficiency standards with detailed content descriptions (Perry, Dockett, & Harley, 2012). This places weight on the subjects being taught and what is important for children to know, with content being prescribed and predetermined whilst placing little or no importance on the active participation of students in their own learning or recognition of their prior learning.

Connections between the two documents reveal that there exists "continuity at the policy level" (Grieshaber & Shearer, 2013, p. 16) and they are based on the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. Both are underpinned by the belief in the transformational capacity of education. The holistic General Capabilities in the *Australian Curriculum* are described as complimenting the key learning outcomes of the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) and are explained as "…the knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that, together with curriculum content in each learning area and the cross-curriculum priorities, will assist students to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century" (ACARA, 2012b, p. 3). Comparison of the two highlights a focus on building on the outcomes of the *EYLF* and that effective learning foundations have been established to prepare children for their continuing education in primary school. However, in the *Australian Curriculum* the transition to school has minimal consideration and so "it is difficult to see evidence of alignment in advice for teachers and educators" (Grieshaber & Shearer, 2013, p. 17) that could translate into pedagogical practice.

When examined together, the *EYLF* and the *Australian Curriculum* do not seem to facilitate and exhibit a strong continuity of learning and pedagogy. In the *Australian Curriculum* it notes that teachers in schools can choose which pedagogical approaches to implement whilst the *EYLF* advocates for play-based learning and intentional teaching for educators in ECEC settings. Also, enactment of the *Australian Curriculum* means that learning is subject based in schools with prescribed specific content whereas holistic broad learning outcomes within the *EYLF* guide content in ECEC settings. Potential discontinuity and confusion can arise when areas such as learning, content, pedagogy differ significantly between the two. Teachers in both sectors who facilitate the transition process will need to build a mutual understanding to develop a shared meaning of appropriate pedagogic continuity. Having both documents available at this point in time affords the possibility for shared dialogue between teachers working in ECEC and school settings. Teachers involved in this process need to understand that they are working to a common goal of pedagogic continuity. When considering the transition to school, as Perry, Dockett, and Harley (2012) stress, it is essential that teachers ensure

"that young children are not disadvantaged as a result of their learning inspired by the EYLF" (p. 171). Effective transitions and continuity in children's learning is assured when the efforts of prior-to-school and Kindergarten teachers are pedagogical in orientation. It is important that prior-to-school settings and schools plan for transitions that provide cohesion and continuity across both sectors of education for early years schooling. Prior-to-school educators need to draw on the *Australian Curriculum* to lay the groundwork for future learning while Kindergarten teachers need to familiarise themselves with the *EYLF* for early childhood pedagogical advice. In an era of increased accountability and high expectations of early years education, teachers, families, policy makers and the general public need to have a greater understanding of the need for pedagogical alignment between the two sectors within the transition process.

A review of the literature revealed the complex nature of the transition to school process and some of the tensions that exist for teachers in relation to pedagogy and facilitating effective transitions. The relationship between play-based pedagogy and pedagogic continuity has not been sufficiently explored in the Australian context and studies have centred on issues of either play-based pedagogy or pedagogic continuity within the transition process separately. Hence, the present study seeks to address this gap by using the discourse of play-based pedagogy with teachers in both sectors of education together with the notion of pedagogic continuity so that they can richly describe their perspectives. The following chapter discusses the methodology used that guided the study and the rationale for the methods chosen to answer the research questions derived from the literature review.

2.13   Summary

This chapter critically reviewed and examined the literature relating to the topic of this study and highlighted the complex and diverse nature of the transition to school. This analysis has drawn attention to the many factors which contribute to transition being a multifaceted phenomenon and has also illustrated the importance

of the need to ensure that this process is effective and successful for children. A key emerging element in the extant literature base that has been identified in shaping this success is the continuity in pedagogy, particularly the idea of using the discourse of play as a valued pedagogy to promote such continuity. However, barriers arise as a result of differing understandings and perspectives of play, play-based and early years pedagogy and also the use of different curriculum documents in the two sectors. Thus, instead of transitions being seamless, discontinuities exist. The issue of pedagogic continuity in transitions is one that necessitates further attention from policy makers, schools, families and particularly the teachers who manage and enact this process. This literature stresses that establishing such continuity involves moving beyond notions of school readiness to a focus on bridging the pedagogical gap between prior-to-school and school settings. Whilst much research has been carried out on the transition to school, few studies have focused on teacher beliefs and the association between play-based pedagogy and pedagogic continuity across this transition process, particularly in the Australian context. This study addressed this gap to explore the perspectives of teachers across the pedagogical divide. The next chapter addresses the methodological framework and outlines the design for the current study.