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

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CHAPTER FIVE: NARRATIVE CASE REPORTS

"The growing allocation of kindergarten time to academic content has firmly pushed play to the edges"

(Graue, 2011, p. 150)

Introduction

In this section two case reports are included that describe the within-case analysis. The purpose of this chapter is to capture participants' perspectives, understandings and constructs of play-based pedagogy and pedagogic continuity, together with influencing factors, as described and experienced by them across the transition to school process. They describe participant beliefs as case study narrative reports to tell the story of the findings, allowing the story to unfold from the rich and multifaceted accounts, clearly separated from interpretations or conclusions. As Flyvbjerg (2011) so eloquently and simply explains, "the case story is itself the result. It is a 'virtual reality', so to speak" (p. 312). Each report is unique and diverse, and the participants' responses are represented as direct quotes. In this manner, it leaves the capacity for readers of different backgrounds to construct diverse interpretations and draw varied conclusions so that the study becomes "different things to different people" (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 312). The first case presented is the prior-to-school educators followed by the second case of Kindergarten teachers. Participants provided their perspectives through the semi-structured guided interview process.

5.1 Case Report One – Prior-to-school Educators

5.1.1 *Research Question One – How do prior-to-school educators view play-based pedagogy and how do they describe their role in play-based pedagogy?*

Prior-to-school educators presented multi-dimensional outlooks and stances on play as a medium for learning. When participants were asked to explain *"what is*

your understanding about play as a medium for learning?" this question yielded the shortest responses of all questions asked in the interview protocol. Educators varied in how they defined play-based learning and articulation of a clear, unified definition was elusive. One participant summed it up as follows:

> EC2:   *Play… Such a huge term…Yeah, it's like it's indescribable.*

Their explanations did include elements of fun, choice and a sense of naturalness that they believe contribute to higher forms of learning and a less formal, directive approach to teaching:

> EC1:   *I think too, if you make learning fun, the children are much more likely to become involved and go to a higher level of learning, rather than the rote teaching, where you're basically trying to pound it into them, that's my understanding.*

> EC2:   *Play is an - it's an indirect way of teaching the children, isn't it? It's informal.*

> EC3:   *I think during play they are themselves. They're relaxed and they're natural [laughs]. Yeah they do what they want to do and that's the time where you can teach them through those teachable moments.*

Play-based learning was the dominant pedagogy used in these services and educators recognised that this is what they engaged in every day:

> EC2:   *It's always part of our day. We have our morning play. We have our afternoon play… The whole day is play. The whole day is sitting with the kids, playing with them.*

> EC3:   *I mean teaching through play I think is kind of what I do all day.*

5.1.1.1 Play as active exploration

All participant responses positioned children as active constructors of their learning. Several key words and terms occurred repeatedly as educators expressed their views in relation to the meanings they held about the experiential aspect of play: "hands-on", "doing", "touching", "practise", and "experience it". Thus, educators concurred that children learn by being active:

EC1: *So to me, having the play-based learning, means that they can learn it, but they can experience it, and they can practice it over and over again, until they're competent with it basically.*

EC4: *A play-based curriculum involves children learning by actually doing something… their hands totally immersed into the - to understand it.*

5.1.1.2 Play as purposeful, child-focused pedagogy

All four stressed their personal belief in the importance of play and emphasised that they considered that this is how children learn best and that progression in learning was visible. Their explanations highlighted their opinions of the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach, exemplified in comments such as:

EC1: *That's the way they learn, so that's the main reason. For me I've always had a play-based philosophy, and I've seen the results of that, and you can really see children make lots of gains throughout the year, through that way of teaching.*

EC2: *I think it's so important. I think without play there would be no learning, or very little.*

EC3: *I do believe very strongly that it is the strongest form of learning…*

Understandings about play-based pedagogy revolved around prioritising the child and centred on the idea of planning from children's interests. Most commented on the importance of employing an observational perspective and using children's input to assist in inspiration for planned learning experiences. Typical views included:

EC1: *Just through observing them as well, and planning and learning from what you've observed, you can see how much they can learn… But it's coming from them; it's not coming from me. So that's the importance of it I think.*

EC4: *We watch and see how they use those play materials and we follow children's suggestions on what they want to do with those materials or what they would like to be extended with those materials.*

Their stated views about how they felt play-based learning was used in the settings expressed the importance of a prepared environment that included both the indoors and outdoors. Programming and planning by means of a team focus was a central

aspect in how they implemented a play-based approach. One educator explained it as follows:

> EC4: *Well, obviously we talk about it in program meetings and use the other educators that are in the preschool. We talk about it in staff meetings. We talk about it twice a week, what we call programming meetings… So it's really that teamwork of contributing ideas to learning that the children's play does develop.*

The educators explained that they plan for their environments to be comprised of specific self-choice learning areas or centres based on children's interests, family input, local events, or concepts they felt children need to experience. Learning was on-going and mainly occurred in small group experiences or individual interactions, and sometimes in large groups.

> EC1: *Basically the way we implement play, we have some activities out that are self-choice areas, but they're based on, it might be an observation we've seen or an interest of a child, or a discussion with a family… So that's the main way we do, is setting up the environment and having educators there to interact and support and encourage, and also separating the children at times into small groups, for certain interests.*

> EC2: *So most of our play is small group play. You'll very rarely find all 20-something children come together…we have that opportunity to sit down with a small group of children and actually talk to them and discuss with them certain topics and issues.*

Each participant also acknowledged the importance of the involvement of a responsive adult in children's play. Of significance for these educators was their active role in supporting children's learning. They explained that they believed educators should be present and engaged in children's play for learning to ensue. For example, preschool educators 1 and 2 offered:

> EC1: *You need the educators there interacting with the children to make that happen, to make learning happen. It doesn't just happen if you sit back… it's play-based through educative relationships with the children.*

> EC2: *I do think that the teacher's - the educator's - role is so extremely important in the child's play. I just think you can't set an area up and then just walk away from it.*

Two of the educators (high SES and low EAL) also stressed that play-based pedagogy involved peer interaction and collaborative support. These participants

shared that learning was enriched when peers scaffolded one another and there were opportunities for co-construction of learning between them. For instance, they proposed:

> EC3:   *I see them really learn a lot from one another. In these informal play scenarios is often where I see the children learn the most skills through one another…*

> EC4:   *I see peers as a very strong component of that as well. What they learn from peers.*

5.1.1.3 Roles of the educator in play-based pedagogy

After pondering how they viewed their roles in using play as medium for learning and teaching, educators offered descriptions of strategies they employ and explained they assumed a wide repertoire of roles in order to maximise children's learning. Their accounts portrayed a range along a continuum from indirect support to more direct engagement. Generally, their responses reflected a greater prominence of low-interaction supportive strategies. With regard to these, all the participants mentioned a key role was to be an observer. However, their interpretations were not of passive bystanders but of active on-lookers. Sometimes this observation was to help inform room planning or to establish children's learning requirements. At other times it was to refrain from interfering in, and directing, children's inquiry and to promote their self-discoveries.

> EC4:   *The one thing I have found about myself over time is you've got to stand back from being the teacher and observing them and not wanting to take over… you have this knowledge and you want to impart it but it's not about that. It's not about that with play-based curriculum.*

> EC3:   *Then I guess also the observing is the other one. So observing and watching what interests the children and that informs my program. So observing, like I mentioned before, their interest strengths and needs so that they are developing and learning the skills that they do need to learn.*

Educators considered their role at times to be more of a supportive stance – facilitating and encouraging children's learning or providing provocations within the environment to initiate this. They referred to this role as that of an instigator:

> EC1: *Instigator is one of the things that I think we do, instigate different learning through play. A supporter as well, like supporting children and encouraging children.*

> EC3: *So in some ways I think we do - we're the instigators in that way. But then we're also - like help to facilitate their learning… So it comes back to then I guess the environment and how I've set up the environment.*

Extending children's play, for one participant, was in the form of providing or adding materials.

> EC1: *I think extending as well, ways to extend on the play, and provider of materials, that's probably the other thing too. So extending on the play, or adding more things into the play, to make it go further, to extend it.*

An additional supportive role included that of planning or programming for learning through play in their settings. This involved not only careful consideration about how to structure the environment to facilitate learning but also afforded the opportunity to note patterns in how children learn. Comments included:

> EC3: *Then we try to plan for their needs usually in a play environment… So I think we think very carefully about how to structure the play environment to help them learn.*

> EC3: *Yeah. It helps me to see patterns I think especially in children's learning.*

Documenting children's learning was another supportive behaviour mentioned by these educators. This then provided assistance for further planning and programming as well as evidence of children's learning in the form of journals, portfolios or reports. However, one participant warned of the dangers of educators becoming overly immersed in documentation to the detriment of their involvement in other aspects of their role.

> EC2: *You're documenting it and you have to document their learning…Documentation then following up on it. So you can't just leave it at that, you have to keep going.*

> EC4: *We do document the children's learning so you can track over a year what the children have been interested in and what we could extend them on and things like that. We do do learning journals.*

> EC1: *They're that engrossed in trying to record every moment and every conversation, that there's nothing else going on, that's a worry I think.*

One educator considered that her role involved flexibility. She explained that in her room, even though she programmes for a range of learning experiences for the children, she acknowledges their contributions and visions which can alter the course of play. In this way, she believed her role is to relinquish control and instead prompt or stimulate children's learning through making provisions for play.

> EC3: *I mean children have a lot of their own ideas and some days I come in [laughs] and I think I've had all these great ideas and I've planned this program and the children just take it somewhere else and that's okay.*

This educator also offered another alternative non-verbal role, that of being an effective listener. Listening for her afforded opportunities to tune into children's interests and extend their learning.

> EC3: *I think sometimes we teachers get a little bit stuck in that transmitting information role and I think we also need to take a step back, and yes we're there as a teacher, but we need to also be listening to the children so I guess it comes in the reflecting side of things and the scaffolding and their interests. But yeah I think listening is a big part of... my role and extending their learning. So I need to be able to do active listening to know what it is that they're interested in and what they're learning, how can I extend them?*

Another educator described her role as finding a "balance" between observation and interaction, knowing when to move in and out of children's play.

> EC1: *You don't always have to be involved, but I think sometimes you do need to be involved, there's that balance. It's knowing when to move in and when to move out of the play as well.*

She was also the only prior-to-school participant to explicitly refer to using a more mediating strategy, that of demonstrating:

> EC1: *I demonstrate some tasks and skills, so demonstrate...*

Two of the interactions participants mentioned included further mediating strategies such as scaffolding and questioning. However, these were not explicitly explained or defined but applied to references of extending children's learning or to gauge their thinking. Some examples included:

EC2: *Yeah, so you're scaffolding their learning. Yeah, that's the word. Scaffolding. You're building their learning. You're the foundation… I think scaffolding says it all. You're building on what they know. You're seeing what they know and then you're building on it.*

EC3: *I guess the other thing I'd add to that is of course how we teach. So giving them like the scaffolding. So sitting with children and talking with them, questioning them about their learning or what they're doing and thinking of ways of how to extend them if that's the scenario that they're in.*

EC4: *…maybe leading slightly, but still a scaffolding, you know, the Vygotsky scaffolding. It's sort of just helping build around the child as they're learning rather than - you really want to tell them but you can't.*

EC1: *…a questioner, I like to ask the children questions, to try and extend on their thinking, also just to see what they're thinking.*

Having exhausted their deliberations on play-based pedagogy, the next research question focussed on participant views about the importance of continuity of learning and teaching in the transition process for children moving into formal schooling.

5.1.2   Research Question Two – What do prior-to-school educators believe about pedagogic continuity in the transition process?

Educators found it difficult to articulate their understanding of the concept of pedagogic continuity. One educator described it as a "flow" while another explained that it should be about "easing" into formal schooling.

5.1.2.1 Differing expectations

Even though they struggled to explain the term, there was collective agreement about the importance of educators considering pedagogic continuity for children entering the first school year. The acute difference in learning contexts was highlighted as a reason for the need to "smooth" children's progression by providing continuity through the transition process.

EC3: *Yes, absolutely. I think the continuity is what helps with those transitions. If there isn't any continuity it's suddenly taking one child from one context to another and they might not be prepared for it. So I think as much as we*

> *can on our end we try and prepare them but there's somewhat preparation I think from the school end.*

EC2: *Yeah, well I think that if you understand that more [pedagogic continuity], you understand the children's behaviours. You understand that they can't sit down and concentrate because they're just been from preschool where the atmosphere was very different.*

The participants expressed their concern about the abrupt difference in the expectations and demands of more formal learning on children as they enter the Kindergarten year. They identified issues that could be possible sources of challenge such as sitting at desks, using blackboards or whiteboards and listening to teachers' instructions:

EC1: *I think it's very hard for them to go from this to sitting at a desk, very formal teaching.*

EC2: *Because it's too extreme. It's the extreme of preschool and then the extreme of - and I'm not saying that the whole Kindy day is sitting down at their desk and doing stuff… But it is a very different atmosphere.*

All four strongly acknowledged that entering the first year of school entails a significant and stark change in the learning environment. Typical remarks were:

EC2: *I think just going - just Kindy because Kindy's probably one of the hardest years that a child could go through, I think, in my opinion. It is because you have gone from a preschool extreme to a Kindy extreme.*

EC4: *Yeah, yeah definitely. It is a different environment. That's what we have to be aware of. It's a totally different environment for them…*

In terms of how learning occurs in the school classroom, the educators concurred that very little crossover exists.

EC1: *I know that the school system is not based around play, which is a pity, I know it's much more formal… because it's a big difference in the environment…*

EC3: *As we see at school there are a lot of things they don't have choice in, that kind of environment and that's our understanding of what school is.*

5.1.2.2 Academic push-down

When asked to consider how they felt their teaching practices accommodated for continuity of learning when children transition they generally focused on discussing their beliefs in the importance of child readiness aspects and skill development:

EC2:   *I just think getting the children prepared for school in a preschool is the most important thing because otherwise they're going to school next year and they're going to be surprised.*

EC3:   *Well I mean it's the continuity of learning between the settings. So it's difficult between preschool and school. I think we try at preschool to help with that transition, to help with the continuity of learning is like I said before to have a little bit more structured group times or things, task orientated group times…*

The educator from the low SES preschool summarised it as follows:

EC2:   *That's what we're doing. We're a preschool. We're preparing the children for school.*

Most directed their explanations to aligning practices with school-like activities or learning experiences. Introduction of more structured school-type learning featured in their responses:

EC1:   *Definitely having some times during the day too where there is more formal teaching, like even though the majority of it is learning through play, we do have our group times which are more structured, so I think that helps definitely with easing into school too.*

EC 2:   *I gave them my stamps and I said - and it's not something that teachers normally do is to give the children the stamps and say for every word you write you can give yourself one stamp. But because of that it was encouraging the children to come sit down and really try hard to write the words.*

EC3:   *So the task is to play and they move through - it's hard to explain. It's easy in practice. They move through - we tend to set up numbers around the room so there might be nine activities. Usually we have 18 children so in pairs there's nine activities. We put a number with each of the activities and they're at an activity for five or 10 minutes and then we ring a bell and they need to tidy it up for the next person and move onto the next activity.*

The educator from the low SES preschool explicitly stated her belief that as transition approached, experiences for the children should reflect the type of learning that occurs in Kindergarten:

> EC2:   *I'm saying... incorporating what the children do in Kindergarten… I also believe that the children should have some time where they sit down and actually concentrate on something. I know a lot of centres don't have that time for the children.*

5.1.2.3 Aspects of enhancing transition

Using a play-based approach in school was suggested by three educators as a way to help ease children into this new environment. Play-based learning was considered to be able to offer children a familiar bridge in their transition or be used as the dominant pedagogy in the first year of school.

> EC1:   *I think it's really important when they first start Kindergarten you're talking to start with more of a play based learning approach, I think that's really important to have that continuity. I don't know if it happens at a lot of schools, but to have that continuity, and then to gradually ease into the more formalised teaching…*

> EC2:   *So I think that having a Kindy class which is a lot more informal and a lot more - maybe not so much play-based. I think play is important for kindies but like a happy medium. So have some play and then some learning stations and then have that intentional half an hour of teaching.*

> EC4:   *…but that's what I would like to see. Yeah a lot more of that [liaising], and the play-based curriculum in the kindergarten year.*

Three educators expressed views of the need to improve the transition process by addressing communication avenues between the two settings and felt that this was important when considering pedagogic continuity. According to one educator, a substantial void currently existed and the sharing of information would enhance stronger linkages, whilst another believed that this could be addressed with more opportunities for liaising and shared visits:

> EC3:   *But it would be good if there was more exchanging of information to aid in that continuity of learning. I think that's the big hole at the moment. We do lots on our side to help with the continuity and then the schools do a bit*

> *on their side but there's no actual crossing over. There is some I have to -*
> *sorry there's not no crossing over, there's some. But it is I guess limited.*

EC4: *I would like to see more liaising and I think that that is probably - I've only*
been in this community a small - so I think I can make excuses, but I think
it's true… Well I would also like that they come here… just come and see
them in this natural environment and how they are, I think that would be
great… I'm sure all of us would love to liaise a lot more than we do. I'm
sure we would. We're all open to it, but it's just finding the time and
resources and money.

They believed that teachers in schools should recognise and have an understanding of children's prior learning in preschools and that there is a need to transfer and share that information when children transition to school. For example:

EC1: *Yeah very important. I think they need to look at where they've come from.*
I think they need to take on board some of the things that we say as well,
because there doesn't seem to be a lot of flow between services and the
schools. I do send along a fairly comprehensive summary of each child… and
I do hope that the teachers take that on board as well, just to provide that
continuity so that when they do start school, the teachers know where
they're coming from.

EC4: *I'd like to see that we eventually have that transition to school where schools*
would read our reports…We do spend a lot of time on our reports…I don't
know, but we'd like to - I think our [profession] would like to feel that
primary teachers aren't starting at square one if they read our reports.

One educator expressed that this was a challenging endeavour – trying to gauge how much information the school required.

EC3: *It's kind of that grey area of I don't know how much information they really*
want from me. I would love to give them as much information as possible to
make this transition easier on the child because I think it is a very stressful
time.

Participants were also encouraged to reflect on and respond to interview questions about perceived influencing factors associated with their decisions to implement a play-based approach in their rooms. This was explored within their responses in the following section.

5.1.3   Research Question Three – What factors influence prior-to-school educators' decisions related to using play-based pedagogy in the transition process?

5.1.3.1 Intrinsic factors

The participants expressed a range of personal reasons as factors that influence their decision to implement play-based pedagogy in their room. As they reflected, it became clear that their reasons were not limited to just one feature but were a combination of many. Some pondered that it was a personal belief that motivates this decision but this was often shaped by other contributing aspects such as personal experience and/or their educational qualifications and theoretical knowledge. This is illustrated in comments such as:

> EC2:   *I think it's more my belief. In saying that, my belief has been changed a lot from working here… I think it's my beliefs as well but I think that a lot of my beliefs have stemmed off what she [the director] tells me and what I see in the centre and how I see them playing with the children.*

> EC3:   *So I guess the factors would be my knowledge as an early childhood teacher, my studies of what I know the benefits of play are…Well I mean my personal belief I do know that. Yeah my personal belief, I believe children learn through play. But my personal belief is of course informed through my studies and through my reading and how I feel children learn… I see children learning in that context so I know as an early childhood teacher from my years of experience that play is a very powerful learning tool. So I guess it's through my experiences as well.*

> EC1:   *Seeing that it does work, getting the feedback that families are very happy, the children are doing really well at school, and just seeing the children's involvement in the program and the high level of learning that happens from their involvement in the program.*

One participant specified that in regards to personal experience, her recorded observations of children's play are an essential component in confirming her beliefs in play-based pedagogy.

> EC3:   *But I guess my observations do contribute to my play-based learning. So-and-so might need help with a social conflict and how to deal with social conflicts and the best way to do that is through allowing them to play and finding those teachable moments in those situations where we can scaffold or model.*

Educators gave specific examples within their range of experience that described for them the benefits of children learning through play or explained how it validated that this is children's preferred mode of learning.

> EC1: *That's what I get really thrilled about, is when you see - and it might be something that's totally not come from anything I'd planned, but something that they started, and you've built on and built on and built on, and seeing the learning that happens with that, I think that's fantastic… Things like that to me, that happens in a play-based learning program, whereas a more structured learning program, I don't think that sort of opportunity comes up.*

> EC2: *It's what the children want. It's what they're interested in. It's what they want to do, and you can't force a child to do something they don't want to do. I think that's part of the reason why it's been so successful as well.*

But for one educator who was not long out of her tertiary studies, she reflected that is was her lack of experience that could be a possible negative factor.

> EC2: *I'm my own obstacle, really. I think my ignorance, my lack of knowledge. I feel like I don't know. I still have so much to learn. I still have so much to know and learn about that…*

5.1.3.2 Extrinsic factors

When asked to think of any other factors that could influence their decisions, the prior-to-school educators stated a number of external elements. An external barrier that was cited was the physical environment. Even though this may not necessarily be an obstacle in their setting, educators reflected that this could prove to be a potential consideration in other services. They suggested that building design and access to play environments could affect supervisory responsibilities and how play is offered.

> EC1: *I was just thinking the physical environment, but our environment's set up really well for that, so it's not really an obstacle for us, but it would be probably for other services.*

> EC3: *Our environment because of the building that we're in we can't really do a lot of indoor/outdoor play and I think that crossing over between those two contexts is really important for children. But the way our service is set up*

> *it's just not possible supervision wise and structurally. So I guess to me that's one thing.*

Organisational or structural barriers also featured in their narratives. Three educators voiced time as a constraint in the implementation of play-based learning. In order for children to deeply engage in play or be able to follow through with their ideas, the educators believed that without extended periods of time this could not be achieved.

> EC1: *Probably time as well really, time in that they do need to have big blocks of time in order to engage in play. The way your day is organised, you have to have big blocks of time, because otherwise they'd never get fully involved.*

> EC3: *Yeah I think that time has a big difference on that. I've worked in a couple of centres where it is lots of rush, rush, rush and children did get quite frustrated at the fact of they didn't quite get to finish that thought. So whatever they were doing they obviously had a thought of what they were trying to accomplish or achieve and I could see the frustration.*

Time also featured in their descriptions of routines. Compared to long day care services, the shorter hours offered in preschools meant that educators believed personal care routines took up considerable stretches of the day or intruded into children's play agendas. By comparison, one participant explained that even though her service was increasing operational hours, she reasoned this left less time for educators to organise resources for play or to prepare the environment.

> EC3: *I guess the other one is routines I think here… The children are only here 9:00 till 3:00 and they have to have morning tea and lunch and wash their hands. There's all these things that I think interrupt their play but no, they need to eat or they need to go to the toilet [laughs]. All these things.*

> EC4: *Our routine's changing from, we were traditionally 9:00 to 3:00 preschool this year. We'll go to 8:30 to 3:30 next year so we're adding another hour onto our day. That will change things like how we set up and all of that sort of thing, because it will mean staff have less time to prepare. So that affects what we will put out and how resourceful or how prepared we are.*

A shared passion and philosophy of play-based pedagogy among staff members was important for two of the educators. They spoke of working as a team towards a common goal of fostering children's learning through play.

> EC1: *I think too I'm fortunate that all my staff are very passionate about play-based as well. But a lot of the staff, we all started together here, so it's been really great to do that, work towards that together.*

> EC2: *All the staff, not just the director. But yeah all the staff… so you kind of take on what the other staff want to do as well.*

For one participant, the support of a national curriculum statement was a central factor that underpinned her core beliefs and practice in play-based pedagogy. She regarded the *EYLF* as a valuable document that helps champion educators' choices to families as to why they adopt a play-based approach in their settings.

> EC1: *We have to really put a lot of emphasis on it and educate our families about why we're doing it, and in that way the EYLF has been fantastic, because I can say to them this is a nationwide curriculum, and it is a play-based learning curriculum…That's been really good to back us up with what we're doing, because that's what it's all about.*

Others pointed out that being part of a larger umbrella organisation, whose underlying philosophy is a play-based approach, further validates their fundamental beliefs and motivation to use play as a medium for learning.

> EC1: *Really does help yeah, it helps because it's got the history, the reputation, and that is the approach that [name], that's their philosophy as well, so it definitely does help, rather than being a standalone service.*

> EC4: *[name], our organisation… Yes. They're great, they're fantastic.*

The educator from the low SES service highlighted financial constraints within their service impacting on the type of play experiences that could be offered to the children there. Families struggled to fulfil their fee commitments and this resulted in fewer funds for purchasing much-needed resources.

> EC2: *Of course, funding for our centre… For resources, yeah. Like there's a lot that we can't do because we don't have the money to do it. A lot of the parents don't pay their fees…*

Additionally, she also reflected that as children transition into the Kindergarten year, staff ratios change dramatically and so financial restrictions within schools meant that teachers were often dealing with much larger groups of children on their

own, without the assistance of additional staff, leaving fewer opportunities for individual time with the children.

> EC2: *Children go from 3 staff to 30 kids or three staff to less children to one staff, 1 teacher to 30 kids and I think that's really difficult for the Kindy teacher as well… I think that's also an important thing if the funding is there to be able to do that one on one. I think that's important for the children this age.*

With regard to attitudinal factors, all of the participants acknowledged parental attitudes as a potential obstacle. Three participants specified parental expectations as a hindrance to the implementation of play-based pedagogy in early childhood settings, but not necessarily in their own centre. In some instances, educators discussed parental aspirations for children's academic achievement or concerns for school readiness whilst others mentioned parental misconceptions of play-based learning. However, educators viewed this as timely opportunities to inform and educate families about this approach in order to illuminate children's learning.

> EC1: *So I have to explain to them [parents] why it is different, and why we do what we do. It is really important to explain that, and I'm also honest with them about, because they always ask about the school readiness program, do you do stencils and colouring in? I'm like no, no, and I have to explain why we don't do that, and what we do instead of that.*

> EC3: *I think what we talked a little bit about before is sometimes parents. Not always but sometimes there are different parent expectations… So we say to parents you might think they're just playing but we can see they're developing their maths knowledge or their science, they're hypothesising what might happen next or their social skills.*

> EC4: *I mean it is about educating parents… but it's that expectation, is the parent expecting a piece of work or their photo on the computer in the foyer at the end of the day? So yes, that does affect the way you have it. But I think that's our role, to educate them about what your child's being involved in.*

Additionally, the educator in the low SES service revealed that in her setting, it was not a matter of pedagogical debates or approaches but that parents show little regard for the work of early childhood educators. In fact she explained it is a struggle to even build relationships with them.

> EC2: *The parents have nothing - like they come in, the drop the child off, they leave. They don't want anything to do with us. They don't want anything -*

we've tried to create a relationship… But the parents that I'm talking about, they don't want any of that. They don't want to deal with you. You look after their child. You are their child's babysitter and that's all they see you as. They don't see you as an educator. They don't see you as someone that's getting their child ready for school. They just see you as someone they can put their child with so that they can go home, enjoy their day, and then come back.

Perceptions of early childhood education were a premise that was also present in the response of one educator who further reflected that such issues lie beyond the beliefs of families and included community and political spheres as well. She stressed that she believed it was important to advocate for play-based pedagogy so that community attitudes could change, as well as influencing perceptions at a national government level.

EC4: *I believe that we need to educate more of the community of what a play-based curriculum looks like, because I still have families who come here and say, my child's in long day care and all they do is play. I think, oh god where do I start? [Laughs]. So it's about educating the community as well, about a play based curriculum… They are obstacles that you have to help people overcome, and it can be politicians and it can be a lot of outside forces that don't really understand what a play-based curriculum is all about… I don't know, I'm not disillusioned, I'm still a strong advocate for early childhood, but it still surprises me that we haven't gone very far with educating the community and politicians and I mean, don't get me started on the current government about education. They don't see that this is a valuable form of education.*

5.2 Case Report Two - Kindergarten Teachers

5.2.1 Research Question One – How do Kindergarten teachers view play-based pedagogy and how do they describe their role in play-based pedagogy?

Explanations highlighted the variety of meanings that teachers in schools hold about their understandings of play-based learning and teaching. Three school participants identified that they use different terminology to describe play-based pedagogy: one teacher explained that at her school it is called open-ended learning, another referred to it as developmental play whilst a third described it as free roaming.

PT2: *So we actually call it open-ended learning.*

PT3: *We call it developmental play, but they always go, yay, it's developmental play day.*

PT4: *We call it free roaming, they could free roam, they could do what they wanted when they wanted.*

A fourth teacher defined her understanding of play-based pedagogy as used in schools was that it looks very different to how it is implemented in an early childhood environment.

PT4: *I think it's very different in a primary setting and probably not as much based around play-based learning as in an early childhood setting.*

She continued to explain her perception of how she considered play-based pedagogy was realised in her classroom:

PT4: *What I did at that table the first day of kindergarten was I would say in a way play-based. Those children would come to me and they'd colour in or they'd do something simple… It was probably more aligned to what they were used to in a pre-school setting.*

5.2.1.1 Play as active exploration

The teachers revealed broad descriptions of more traditional conceptualisations of play when asked to provide explanations for the term 'play as a medium for learning'. Active engagement, as opposed to passivity, was identified as a fundamental element by the participants. One such example included:

PT1: *So I do a lot of that kind of get up and be active. To me that playing is when they're getting up and being active. Not just sitting there listening to me. I do a lot of get up and let's do things and let's go outside and do something.*

Only two considered play-based learning as effective and operational in their classrooms (one from the low EAL school and the other with the EC qualification) but this was not the dominant pedagogy used. Overall, when teachers thought about how play-based learning was used in the classrooms, they expressed ideas about how children come to interpret and understand their world. In their

descriptions they noted the exploratory nature of play and that children construct knowledge through direct, first-hand experiences.

> PT1: *So to me that's play, when they do that self-discovery. I guess I think that more of as play, in as part of it being a self-discovery kind of thing.*

> PT2: *Yes, because they need that extra medium, they need to touch things. It has to be tactile, they need to be able to move and explore things.*

> PT3: *Well, play can play a massive part in the children's learning because it's hands-on. It's relevant to them. It's age appropriate and it's just a good way for them to learn effectively through activities and hands-on things for them to build on.*

Another agreed that these opportunities enable children to explore autonomously without the support of an adult:

> PT2: *So just giving them the opportunity to explore it for themselves as opposed to being very directed.*

One teacher explained her perceived view of what play-based pedagogy entailed in preschools as described to her by others. She explained it as follows:

> PT1: *My idea of what happens at preschool - and this is only from what parents have told me, or what the children have said - is that, oh if they didn't want to come and do that bit of work they didn't have to… they didn't have to do anything at all. They could just get up and go if they wanted as well. Well to me that's not teaching.*

5.2.1.2 Play as purposeful, child-focused pedagogy

In relation to this category, peer collaboration was the only theme that featured in the responses of two Kindergarten teachers.

> PT2: *You just watch the connection that they make with each other and the explanations that come out and that peer reinforcement of different things…*

> PT3: *Again, that group stuff. So they're not just on their own, they're working together…*

From the discussions and deliberations of the school teachers, a new category was identified within the findings for research question one as presented below.

5.2.1.3 Limited place for play

It became evident that finding a dominant place for play-based pedagogy in the academic school setting had its challenges. Issues arose in terms of constraining limitations and in the perceptions of Kindergarten teachers.   Participants highlighted that play in the formal schooling environment looked different and they struggled for it to be located within the school curriculum. Three of the Kindergarten teachers referred to using play in the form of educational games and that they believed these are what most engage the children and make learning fun. Furthermore, they explained that these constituted episodes where play is employed as an aid to support explicit teaching or used to facilitate the development of deeper meaning.

> PT1:   *As a medium for learning I do use a lot of game - educational based games - in my class. I think children are more engaged when they're playing it as a game…. But before we do the game I will have done explicit teaching.*

> PT2:   *They want to play reading games, they want to play maths, all those sort of things. I need to tap into that. If I remove what I teach from that, from what's familiar, for what engages them, they're not going to learn. I need to use what connects them and gets them into the work… I've got heaps and heaps of games and part of that is just the fact that I've been doing this for a while.*

> PT3:   *We do lots of maths games… We do lots of card games and board games… We do lots of dice games with them adding up the dice, so that's another thing, a way we use play, and the kids don't even know that they're learning. They're just having so much fun they think they're just having fun, but they're actually doing a lot of learning as well.*

Some discussed this as free time or as play that is offered at the end of the day when children were tired:

> PT3:   *So in term 1, again like I said before, we do, do a lot of creative free play, so they're in the home corner, there's not like a focus…Plus they're so tired in term 1. By the afternoon they need a bit of free time…*

> PT1:   *I do give them free time in the classroom. So if they've finished their work and that, they can go and read a book, they can get out the shape blocks and make some patterns for me. There's things in my room that I allow them to do when they finish.*

Even when the school teachers recognised the value of play, implementation was restricted into rationed periods of the school day or within adult-led structure:

> PT1:   *Well I believe it does have a place, I do. But it still needs to be in a structure. I think children like to have a structure; they like to know what they're doing as well.*

> PT3:   *So even the play I provide I feel it's too structured again for the way I believe play should be, but again to meet those outcomes that I'm required to do through the syllabus I have to do it that way.*

They also lamented that in a school context it was not able to be offered as they envisaged or had to be implemented differently. The participant with the EC qualification illustrated this point by offering that within the confines of the organisation of the school system, it is difficult to offer true play-based learning as a dominant pedagogy throughout the school day:

> PT3:   *So it's quite structured play which is also - in a school context I don't think you can get away from that…but to meet the outcomes of the syllabus and what our unit of work wants it is quite structured…I would actually like to incorporate play a bit more in the program, but I just find it really hard to do when you've got so many other areas of outcomes you need to meet in school.*

Two of the Kindergarten teachers articulated personal beliefs that the use of a play-based approach was not an effective pedagogy or was almost absent in the Kindergarten year.

> PT1:   *As far as just playing and learning through play, I don't think that works as in so much as what we have to achieve. When it comes to really learning their sounds, learning their sight words, learning how to write, learning how to form their letters I believe it needs explicit teaching. It can be followed up by games, but I think you have to do that explicit teaching as well.*

> PT4:   *There is no structured planning and programming around play-based learning and the more we develop into the year and the more children have settled into school routines, that is non-existent.*

The teacher from the high EAL setting focused on the culture of accountability in her school. She emphasised the difficulty of realising a play-based approach amidst her school's rigorously set literacy and numeracy targets which is the focus of her teaching.

> PT4: A*t a school level particularly in a school that's low socioeconomic where you have children that are already coming to school disadvantaged, there really are a lot of departmental initiatives that we've taken on board to boost children's literacy and numeracy skills… as a teacher in a school serving low socioeconomic students and with a school with a set target and agenda I've really aligned my teaching practices to that.*

Despite expressing a personal belief in the importance of play, these participants reflected on the limitations of being able to implement play-based learning within an outcomes driven curriculum. Three of the school teachers articulated explicit beliefs that the use of play-based learning was not effective or achievable with regards to meeting curriculum outcomes. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> PT2: *I think it's really important but I also know it gets lost in the business of everything else. I know that you're going to hear so many people that will say to you 'crowded curriculum', the shift even of what you're supposed to be achieving in kindergarten - it often is one of those things that the time gets minimised or you do less of it [play].*

These Kindergarten teachers expressed that play exists within short transition-to-school phases, on the fringes of the school day or ensues as an enriching activity after explicit teaching. Play-based learning is squeezed to fit somewhere into the busy schedule of academic instruction. One teacher viewed the position for play-based learning within the school context as being limited to certain curriculum areas.

> PT4: *The play-based approach I don't think is at the forefront of what I do as a teacher. If I do do it it's number one to transition children from pre-school into school… If it fits into drama it fits in but other than that it doesn't and my reason for that is that we do have specific targets and goals that we need to achieve with regards to learning, particularly in literacy and numeracy, and that is really what's guiding me.*

She continued to explain that;

> PT4: *After we have our transition and we settle into our school…there are still opportunities for them to be individual but it's not as play-based as it can be.*

5.2.1.4 Roles of the educator in play-based pedagogy

The Kindergarten teachers described a narrower scope of supportive roles whilst their descriptions of mediating behaviours signified more direct interventionist or explicit teaching strategies. With regard to supportive responsibilities, a preference for more non-interactionist roles such as that of an observer or guide in children's play became evident in the statements of three of the teachers. Their explanations described more passive elements such as supervisory responsibilities or being available to acknowledge children's accomplishments.

> PT3: *A guide, but I would also be an observer rather than - because I like it to be child directed. If it's child directed it's more meaningful to them. So yeah, I would obviously be there as a - for safety reasons I would be there to supervisor or whatever…*

> PT2: *In open-ended learning I am more the observer. I'm very conscious of I don't want to lead what they're doing. I want them to guide it… More so as the observer, I am stepping back and watching different social interactions as well… I'm stepping back. Unfortunately it's not a time where I sit and go, tap, tap, tap at the computer and work, it really is just a walking around the room. They want to show you stuff as well. It's nice for them to just stop you and go this is what I've done.*

Some teachers expressed their guidance role was to help steer children toward the understanding of a concept in order to assist them in realising an outcome or to stay on topic.

> PT1: *Well I guess it's just that if someone isn't quite getting it right, I could actually guide them along a little bit more. So it is a guidance one as well.*

> PT3: *So there's an adult there that will guide them through it so they are focusing on that topic… they're redirecting them so to speak if they've gone off.*

In terms of mediating behaviours, explaining featured strongly in participant responses. Teachers considered it important to provide structure in the form of explanations or instructions so that children clearly understood what needed to be achieved or the purpose of the play activity.

> PT2: *When we do play, we set the activities out and we explain this might be a writing activity or look at this, this Lego, you can also while you're playing maybe count the bricks or see if you can make a pattern for me.*

> PT1:   *But I think I need to give them that structure of what it is I want them to actually be looking for... I think my role is to actually give them an expectation of what it is - or at least an explanation of what it is - I'd like them to do out there and a structure to bring it back and explain it to the rest of the class.*

Questioning was also used mainly to provide structure prior to children exploring a concept through play to help ensure that learning objectives are achieved. One such example is:

> PT1:   *I have started questioning them before we even go out as to what they - or even, what do you think we might find out there? What do you think you'll be looking for? So we've done a lot of that preamble before we go out there, so that when we get out there they also have a very clear idea.*

Three of the teachers referred to joining in children's play as co-players. Two described these as more spontaneous roles where their involvement was not with the intention of teaching. Teachers take cues from the children and believe it is important to respect children's deep engagement or their sense of agency.

> PT2:   *The expectation is if I'm with their little shop game I am a customer or I am doing whatever, I let them guide me as opposed to me as the adult coming in and telling them how they must behave… So either watching or being totally immersed as a character but not directing or telling them what to do.*

> PT3:   *Also sometimes I like to be part of the actual play, like what would you call that?... Yeah, getting involved, but sometimes I find the kids actually get a bit embarrassed if you're there. If I have come into the home corner they'll stop, which that's also not such a great thing because I find I've interrupted their beautiful play and their creative play.*

The third teacher (from the high EAL school) considered her involvement as a co-player was more instructional and needed to be linked to direct learning objectives.

> PT4:   *I really do think about what it is. I start with my outcome and what I'm achieving as a teacher and then I will break it down. Unless there's a direct link to learning I never do things just for the fun of doing things. For me as an educator I have a purpose and I do need to have a strong focus on that. That's at the forefront of whatever I do…*

She continued to explain that when drama play experiences have been incorporated into her teaching, she has been able to become involved in children's play but for the purpose of directing towards intended outcomes.

> PT4: *I could take on a role with them; I could be part of the play-based experience myself. It allows you more scope in that way… I think as a teacher you know the direction that you want to go in and you just use those as vehicles to get you to an end point…*

Only the early childhood trained Kindergarten teacher referred to her role as being that of a "scaffolder" (PT3) and did not provide any further explanation of what this entailed in children's learning.

5.2.2   Research Question Two – What do Kindergarten teachers believe about pedagogic continuity in the transition process?

Pedagogic continuity proved to be an intangible notion to define for these teachers as well. Definitions centred on aspects of communication and building relationships or on orientation initiatives but few were able to clearly explain this in relation to a focus on pedagogy. Some examples included:

> PT2: *Some of the preschools around here have been trying to work with us to do this - starting to implement certain things before school… on our transition day we invite the preschools as well as the individuals. So the preschools will often come down and be part of a science fair, book parade, all those sorts of things.*

> PT3: *So yeah, that's my understanding of it, just being able to have that character of the person, who they are, not just from preschool, but the person they are and then be able to continue it and build on it through the school, especially their first year of school where it must be extremely daunting for the little ones.*

One teacher expressed her struggle to articulate what this concept meant:

> PT3: *Yeah, just to continue the approach of learning that they have in the preschool into the school. It's something I find isn't done in schools, which would be a good thing, but yeah, I'm not really sure how to answer that one, my understanding of the continuity of it.*

Another echoed the words of one of the prior-to-school educators in relation to continuity being about the idea of flow through without any specific reference to pedagogy but with mention of curriculum:

> PT2: *Flow through. You'd almost want it to be seamless. I know it's not… But I would say to answer your question initially flowing through, just seamlessly flowing through. That's where perhaps the national curriculum coming into play and the early years thing coming into play more and more over the next few years hopefully will create a platform for that to happen.*

All but one Kindergarten teacher did agree however, that in their personal view they felt it is important to consider continuity of learning for children's transition to formal schooling. Their discussion of the significance of this related to a more overall concept of transition in general. They made reference to how this impacts on children's ability to succeed throughout their schooling:

> PT3: *I think in Kindergarten I always say it's like laying the foundation of a house and then you go from Kindy Year 1 up to Year 6 and if the foundations aren't right then the house isn't going to be able to stay up. So I feel if you can get it right in Kindy and they have a good positive start to school then they're going to learn and succeed through school. So yeah, I think it's very important.*

> PT2: *Totally, because the first year I think is highly underrated by a lot of people. If we don't get it right now they get to Year 2, they crumble.*

5.2.2.1 Differing expectations

There was agreement that minimal continuity and crossover occurs from one setting to the next. Teachers felt that children experience an immense change and a noticeable difference in the move between the two contexts but that continuity could be improved. This is illustrated in comments such as:

> PT1: *Unfortunately that is, it just seems to be there is a huge cut off. I think this is what, when we were chatting with the preschools at that course I went to and it's just like, that was preschool [clap] this is school. There is no crossover. That's just part of it. That's just the way it is unfortunately [laughs].*

> PT4 *To go from here to there I think there's just a big step… I don't think there is a continuity I would say. I think there could be a better continuity and a more successful continuity…*

This teacher also expressed that she believed there was a lack of knowledge of the teaching cultures in each context in order to develop a shared understanding of continuity:

PT4   *As a community I don't think that we know enough about what each of us do to be able to have a shared understanding of where we're both going as educators.*

The sharp disparity between the two educational contexts was also acknowledged by these teachers. They spoke about the noticeable change to more structured, formal instruction and the differing learning expectations in the classroom.

PT1:   *The expectations - from what I gather talking to the preschool teachers - our expectations are so far apart for the children. I do, I think there's this big leap that children are then expected to make.*

PT2:   *In terms of continuity I actually think the end of the pre-schooling environment and coming to school is a harsh difference. They come in here, it looks inviting but it doesn't look fun the way a preschool does if that makes sense… Then there's like well you're done, welcome to the school, it's books, it's chairs, it's the floor, that's it. This is your learning space. It's very structured. The expectations - I'm saying you need to sit still, you need to look at me, you need to be listening, you've got to be engaged.*

The teacher from the high SES school believed that pedagogic continuity was not an important issue when children transition from preschool. She explained that for her, learning in Kindergarten is very different from the early childhood environment and this is something that is just accepted within that process:

PT1:   *No. I think when they come to school it's school. Yeah. I think what they do at preschool is lovely for preschool, but when they come to school we need to go, okay now you're at school. We often do say to them - I use the phrase, now you're at big school, this is what you do here.*

Not all made connections between play and learning. Together with the teacher from the high EAL school, these two participants expressed their belief that play and learning were separate constructs:

PT1:   *But when they get here we can't just have them running in and out all over the place…I think that is what school is about. It's not preschool, it's not playing, it's learning.*

> PT1: *I think it is also my belief that now they're at school and they come to school to learn. I don't think play - I think play can as I've said before - it can help enhance their learning, but you need to do the explicit instruction first.*

> PT4: *Well when I think pedagogy continuity and I had defined it as that learning, and I'm not talking about play, I'm talking about literacy and numeracy, that is important.*

5.2.2.2 Academic push-down

School readiness attributes also surfaced in their descriptions of key considerations for pedagogic continuity across the transition process. Participants identified characteristics such as children's readiness to learn or possessing a particular skill set as useful qualities when entering school.

> PT1: *I think they have to be ready to learn…If they're sending them to school that child is meant to be grown up. I know they're only five, I accept they're five, I understand a five year old…But I want them to learn to be responsible and they do have to be independent and they need to be curious and ready to learn. They, I think, are my three main things that I think.*

> PT2: *What should a Kindy child or what should a child who's five or coming to school - because I've got kids that still are not five - what should their skill set or what could their skill set look like prior to school?*

The NSW *Best Start* assessment featured in all their responses and each teacher advocated its effectiveness in terms of gauging children's current knowledge or skill level. Teachers considered this a beneficial and expeditious tool for gathering information and identifying children's existing understandings in order to help shape their own teaching.

> PT1: *It is very important because that's why we do the Best Start assessment… So I need to know where these children are when they come to school - which is why we do that Best Start assessment - so that I can continue their learning.*

> PT2: *Best Start helps. It has been really good. Prior to having the Best Start assessment tool you really would just meet your group and spend the first three or four weeks looking at how they reacted, what they can do, putting stuff in front, hit or miss if you like…So that, in itself, has been good because you do get a better picture of where little groups of kids are at. From day one you can start to take into account their needs.*

For the teacher from the low SES school, continuity of learning did not include the idea of learning through play. She believed in a strong emphasis on transference of academic skills, particularly targeting literacy and numeracy. However, she did acknowledge that there was room for improving the overall effectiveness of the transition passage which could include the introduction of formal schooling when children are older.

> PT4:   *We're advocates for that [starting formal schooling later] and we're campaigning to have that done but unless there's reform on a bigger scale I think you're kind of stuck in what you can do in schools… If I'm to define my understanding of it I would want it to be more of a smoother transition going in from early childhood into your kindergarten or your regular school setting. It would be a transition. How successful that transition is or how much better it can be, that's still up in the air but that's my understanding.*

Teachers also highlighted the push-down effect of the "crammed curriculum" and how this impacted on their considerations of continuity as the pressure to meet academic expectations were immense and affected their ability to find time or space to include play. Consequently, less time for play resulted:

> PT1:   *Now we've got this new English curriculum that we have to get our heads around. It's telling us that we have to teach kindergartens oh, what noun groups are and verbs. I'm going, huh are you serious?*

> PT2:   *The curriculum is quite busy too…*

> PT3:   *The pressure that you have as a teacher on all the things we have to meet… Then obviously the pressure comes onto the teachers and I just feel there needs to be more opportunity for them to play… it is a lot of pressure and there's only six hours in the day.*

One teacher simply summed it up as:

> PT1:   *The fact that I don't use it [play] is more the fact that I have to get - it is actually the crammed curriculum that we have. That's why I don't use it. Mm, I think that's the simple answer [laughs].*

5.2.2.3 Aspects of enhancing transition

In order to ameliorate for this distinct contrast in learning contexts, the participants explained that they provide continuity in terms of play experiences, more so at the beginning of the school year and sometimes only for a period of a few weeks. The teachers believed these types of experiences aligned with prior-to-school pedagogies, provided a familiar bridge and eased the transition to more formal learning.

> PT2: *At the start of each year myself and our team - in some ways we step back from the academic focus for the first two or three weeks… In that time it's kind of easing in… we do recognise that if we were to walk in day one and say sit down, cross your legs, write your name, do this, it's not going to work. They don't have that context. So the first few weeks - in some ways I think we try to model what we think preschool may have been and try to ease into that a little bit more.*

> PT3: *So yeah, so then with the play sort of thing in Kindergarten, like I said, term 1 we do a lot of play in the afternoon.*

> PT4: *At the beginning of the year you do have opportunities because you haven't actually started your formal program but as the year goes on that really doesn't occur… We probably sing more and dance more and do more things that are early childhood than I would be doing now… it looked very, very different to what our classroom looks like now and our classroom now will look very different next term once children have those skills. It was probably more aligned to what they were used to in a pre-school setting.*

As with the prior-to-school educators, all agreed that communication exchange could be targeted as a mode to improving pedagogic continuity. They identified that professional dialogue with their prior-to-school colleagues is lacking and proposed the need to either obtain information about children's learning or offer ideas for school readiness.   In most instances, these suggestions were of unidirectional communication rather than a bidirectional or collaborative approach.

> PT1: *I don't think there's a lot of continuity that happens. I think that's because there is no conversation between us. That we don't converse with them, they don't converse with us.*

> PT2: *So we are all feeding off the same preschools and yet we've never all sat down and said… We've never actually sat down with the preschools or the*

> *childcare centres and said we'd really appreciate it if, before school, you X, Y, Z.*

Whilst teachers articulated a desire to improve communication, one participant captured the organisational struggles that teachers in schools are faced with in relation to finding opportunities to visit preschools and be able to construct an understanding of the learning environment from which their new school entrants come.

> PT1:   *No, because I actually don't know what they do at preschool. It's a bit sad isn't it, but I don't know what they do at preschool. It's hard, when am I going to go to a preschool? I'm teaching here five days a week, when am I going to go to a preschool to see what they're doing?*

Matching the responses of the prior-to-school educators, recognition of children's prior learning experiences in early childhood settings also featured in their suggestions or considerations for enhancing continuity. They explained that such information would provide a useful starting point upon which to build on children's prior knowledge in order to continue their learning into the first year of school.

> PT3:   *Being able to have a good understanding, even an information sheet about each individual…So you're able to continue that approach to the learning that they've already experienced, otherwise all that stuff they've learnt probably at preschool would just go out the window if they come into school and it's all just left.*

> PT4:   *I think the dialogue can happen the other way where we could find out where their starting point is, where are they now within the early childhood setting, what skills do they have and what we can do to support those skills? Because when I see children coming into kindergarten and we do our Best Start assessment pretty much within the second week of school, children already come to school with a lot of skills. Rather than assume what they don't have we need to find out what they do have.*

The school participants also pondered about influencing factors and obstacles to their decision-making with regard to implementation of play-based pedagogy in their classrooms.

5.2.3   Research Question Three – What factors influence Kindergarten teachers' decisions related to using play-based pedagogy in the transition process?

5.2.3.1 Intrinsic factors

Only two Kindergarten teachers referred to personal elements. One expressed her personal belief that learning begins when children commence school and that play was more of an adjunct activity.

> PT1:   *I don't think play - I think play can as I've said before - it can help enhance their learning, but you need to do the explicit instruction first.*

The other spoke of length of personal experience and her mind-set. Whilst she was an accomplished teacher herself, she reflected that for a newly graduated teacher, taking on a play-based approach in which you entrust control over to the children could be comparatively challenging for some.

> PT2:   *Experience. Early scheme teachers - that's quite confronting to step back, it's loud, you're not in control. You have to give that locus of control to the students and step back. That's a big deal when you're first couple of years out, to acknowledge that that's productive noise.*

She continued to explain that she also factored in her emotional state:

> PT2:   *… my patience and tolerance on the day. If I'm being completely honest that's a bigger factor than the first one because I can always figure out a way to re-teach it in a different way. If they're off the planet, if I'm tired and cross it's never going to work. So then sometimes you just don't do it. There you go, that's as honest as you're going to get.*

5.2.3.2 Extrinsic factors

Extrinsic factors featured heavily in the responses to the two interview questions related to this focus. The environment was a significant obstacle for three of the Kindergarten teachers in relation to the size of their classrooms and also the ratio of students to teachers who can fit into that space. In a school, this simply restricted possibilities for providing adequate provisions for play. They expressed:

PT1: *I don't have the room set up. I don't have a big enough room set up I think… So you could have corners of your room. I don't even have a dressing up corner or anything like that. Where would I put that in my room?... The rooms aren't big enough… You just can't - you actually cannot do it. You drive yourself insane doing it.*

PT2: *Physical space… I know that some schools who don't necessarily have every - they're few and far between now, but might have a spare classroom. Well, I've seen them set up beautiful play spaces, it's just for play. Bit jealous of that because that would just be the ultimate, that you could walk into this fairy tale beautiful space.*

PT3: *Also the environment sometimes I find can be an obstacle. So having 26 kids sometimes is a huge obstacle.*

Overwhelmingly, all the teachers targeted school directives and accountability pressures as constraints. Quite simply, teachers expressed that the current, intense demands of meeting syllabus outcomes and ensuring that children were achieving expected academic skills could not be achieved through the use of play. Reaching targets, collecting assessment data and attaining specific cognitive competencies featured in their responses such as:

PT1: *I think my biggest - we've got to reach targets. We have to get them to this reading level by the end of this, we have to get these many sight words by the end of term one. We have to do to this, we've got all these targets which are set for us; all this data. We've got to get the kids there and you can't get them there by letting them just play.*

PT3: *The pressure that you have as a teacher on all the things we have to meet… Just there's so much, the amount of outcomes the children have to learn…*

PT4: *The school targets. The school targets and we're really, really focused on those.*

Another external barrier for the teachers was that of time. This was explained in relation to finding time to squeeze play in between additional learning programs and the key learning areas.

PT2: *Time. Time is probably a big factor. We have a lot of extra programs, they're all very valid, very important but then the time that you have with your students in your classroom - you know, fitting play into the curriculum when you are already trying to fit in seven other key learning areas. So then trying to deliberately make links doesn't always happen.*

160

> PT3: *Time is always a big one… The only obstacle would be the time, but again if I was a bit more creative I could probably… make my whole day through a play-based approach.*

Teachers often referred to timetabling issues and academic expectations of the school curriculum to further emphasise the strains they felt existed at present within an overcrowded, content-driven program in the Kindergarten year. One such example is:

> PT1: *The timetable is so jam packed that I sometimes - we just look at it and go, how can we fit all this in?*

Two participants (one from high SES and one from high EAL) suggested that the lack of clear and explicit explanations in syllabus documents about how the use of play would directly meet or improve expected school learning outcomes impedes its implementation in their classrooms.

> PT2: *The curriculum is quite busy too. If someone could come along… It would be really nice if someone had the time or the resource to go through and say okay, play actually hits blah, blah, blah because then you can better - we search for it but we don't necessarily have time to make every link. It will be interesting to see over the next few years if it comes back into vogue… But now are we hindered because we've got the curriculum in place being so academic based.*

> PT4: *When we're talking about something as big as play-based, my God, it's a philosophy, it's an approach. It would have to be something that would suggest that it is going to improve student learning outcomes… If next year the evidence shows that play-based learning is going to improve student learning outcomes then play-based learning is what we'll do.*

One educator encapsulated their frustrations with the current education system. For her, teacher beliefs did not figure in the equation as the quest for accountability overshadows any personal conviction in the merits of a play-based approach. She depicted this as follows:

> PT4: *I would also say that it's the way our education system is set up on a whole… it's not about what we believe at the moment, until the system actually changes we're in a system where we want to see improvements and until that actually changes and our whole system is changed we're with the system that we're in now and we need to produce the results that people expect to see.*

Financial barriers in terms of access to resources or school socio-economic demographic characteristics were identified by three of the teachers as affecting whether they believed a play-based approach could exist in their classroom.

> PT1: *So I don't know what resources are out there, and I don't think there are enough resources out there to engage all the children at once. To actually set that up in a classroom you would have to - I can't imagine the expense of it, to actually do that and to have enough resources to keep the children engaged.*

> PT2: *I guess space and resources... I need resources and that takes money. I guess a good thing now is that we are resourced to do that. So within the school environment we've got that.*

> PT4: *We have to work differently than other schools. We don't have the, we have to do things differently in our school because of our demographics. That's the reason why we do the things that we do. We are serving a certain demographic and the way I teach at here I probably wouldn't teach at another school that's in a different demographic... It's not that teachers don't believe in that, we've got a whole lot of teachers that believe in play-based approach but we need to do things differently to boost literacy and numeracy skills.*

When these Kindergarten teachers were asked to consider any other obstacles, like their prior-to-school counterparts they all specified attitudinal factors such as parental expectations or misconceptions as significant. There was general consensus that parents did not value play as an avenue for learning. The participants believed that parents who value measurable and visible academic skills place pressure on teachers to ensure that children's learning results in tangible evidence. Their stated responses embraced the view that as teachers they have difficulty substantiating the value of play in a school curriculum.

> PT1: *...the expectations of the parents of this school are that they come to school and that they learn and that they do really well.*

> PT2: *Parents as well sort of perceive play as not educational enough, why do you do it? The amount of parents that then - even what they do with their kids at home, they get affronted when I say to them put the computer away, don't stress about writing. They come to me and they're asking for extra homework for Kindy kids... So it really is almost educating parents.*

> PT3: *The parents I think are putting a lot more pressure on the children to be learning at a higher level than is expected of them. Then obviously the*

> *pressure comes onto the teachers and I just feel there needs to be more opportunity for them to play.*

PT4:   *I also think parent understanding. I would say that if we developed a play-based approach I don't think that parents would actually understand that. I think and I know that there would be benefits and if we could show them benefits but parents want to see results. I think that would be an obstacle. If we had that I don't know that parents would see much value in that.*

Two teachers also identified the belief systems of others as another barrier. Their explanations targeted misconceptions of play and the lack of understanding about the value of play on children's learning.

PT3:   *People don't value play enough I think. They don't really see the value it has on their learning… I've always heard people say, oh you shouldn't just let them play, there shouldn't be a time when they're just playing, but people don't actually understand what they're learning through the play.*

PT2:   *A lot of people still look at it and say well, that's just you sitting down doing nothing as a teacher isn't it, that's a cop out… If you haven't created a culture where play is valued and explicitly to your adults explained why it's valuable it does become that cop out time. It doesn't necessarily hold the same importance or aiming for the same outcomes.*

5.3   Summary

In review, the previous two chapters provided the findings that elucidated the qualitative data analysis for each case related to participant interviews and document-based sources which unfolded the identified categories and related themes in the findings for the current study. Extracts from interviews with the teacher participants were used to support, clarify and provide depth to the resultant interpretation. Grounded in the data, the findings and case reports offer an insight into teachers' beliefs about play-based pedagogy, pedagogic continuity and influencing factors in their decision-making to use play-based pedagogy in the transition process.

The next chapter presents a cross-case comparison discussion in relation to the three research questions, woven together with the literature review and the theoretical framework as presented in chapters one and two. Drawing the identified

concepts together for all of the three research questions, Figure 5.1 below represents an overview of the related identified categories and themes as a thematic map to assist in guiding the reader throughout the following discussion chapter.
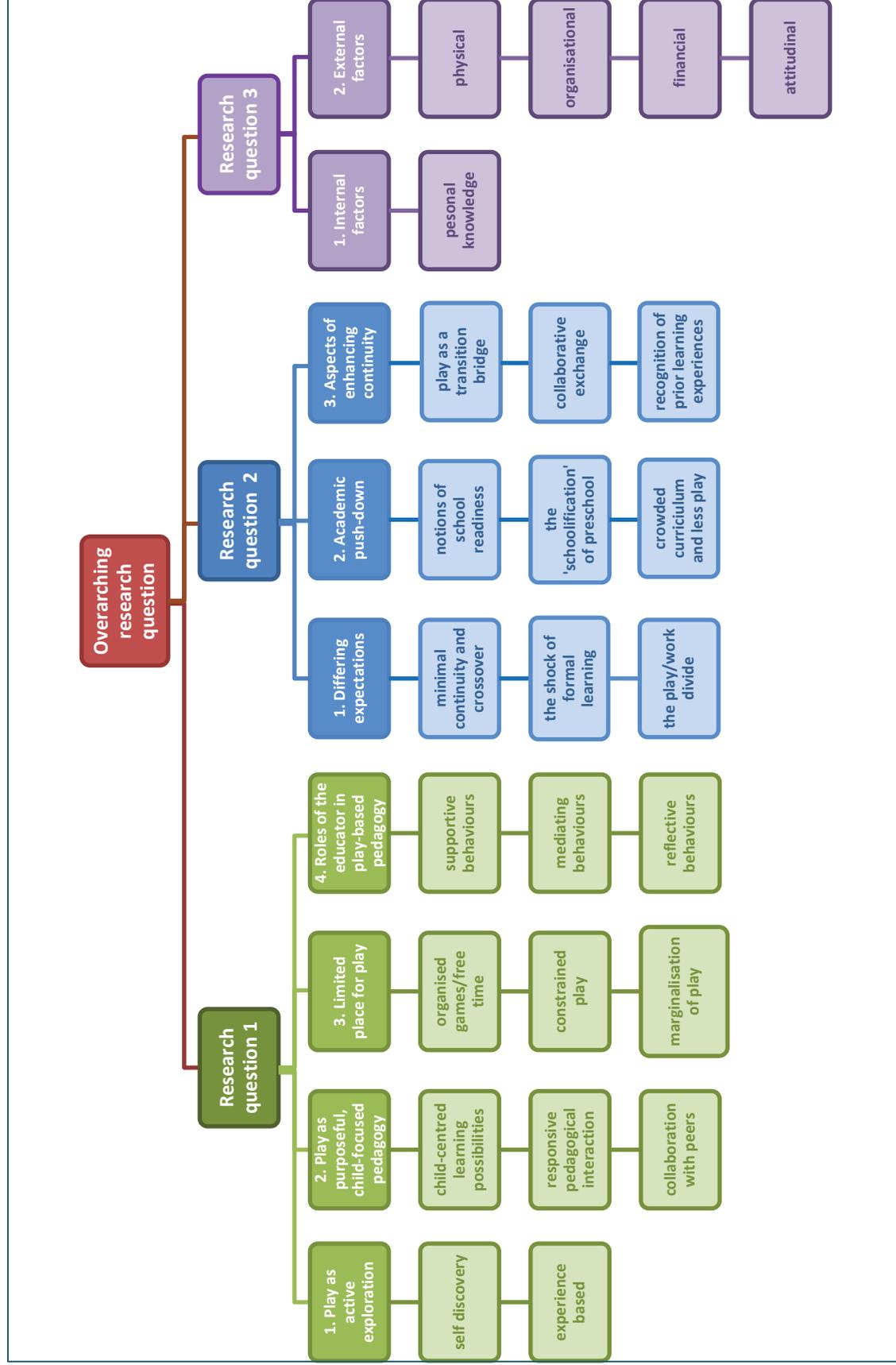
Figure 5.1   Thematic map overview of categories and themes for the current study