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

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CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

"When a seedling is transplanted from one place to another, the transplantation may be a stimulus or a shock. The careful gardener seeks to minimise shock so that the plant is re-established as easily as possible"

(Cleave, Jowett, & Bate, 1982, p. 19)

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore whether play-based pedagogy was an important aspect for prior-to-school educators and Kindergarten teachers in supporting pedagogical continuity across the transition to formal schooling. In Chapters Four and Five, the findings of this research project were presented and brought to light the similar and contrasting beliefs of the eight participants. The data provide important insights concerning the use of play-based pedagogy to promote pedagogic continuity and the various ways educators enact its use across the transition to school. This chapter will address and discuss the convergence and divergence in perspectives within the two case studies in relation to the three research questions when compared to and linked with the theoretical framework in Chapter One and literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The discussion will be presented sequentially in line with the research question categories to maintain readability and simplicity including explanations of the findings of this study. It is important to remember that educators do not function in a microcosm that only encompasses themselves; instead they operate within a wider system that incorporates directors and principals, local councils, policy makers and politicians. These external sectors have the potential to influence teacher beliefs in a number of ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

6.1   Discussions of findings for Research Question One: How do prior-to-school educators and Kindergarten teachers view play-based pedagogy?

Participant perspectives about the notion of play as a context for learning and teaching, together with their views of the function and relevance of play-based pedagogy, were explored. Investigation into play-based pedagogy uncovered a multifaceted collection of understandings among both sets of participants. The differing views offered by the participants were informed by their diverse understandings of the purpose of play in young children's learning. It became apparent that they had assorted positions that revealed various personal interpretations and definitions informed by their individual beliefs, knowledge and personal experiences. Explanations were wide-ranging, contingent on what they believed and understood about this construct, which was in turn shaped by the educational purpose of their setting. Whilst educators in both settings championed the importance of play, their beliefs of its value as a 'pedagogical priority' (Bennett et al., 1997) were more evident among the prior-to-school participants. There was congruence between the prior-to-school educators on the one hand and between the Kindergarten teachers on the other, but there was limited congruence between the two groups. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that the belief systems of significant others, such as teachers, within the child's immediate environment are particularly critical because they function as initiators and sustainers of the ongoing reciprocal interpersonal interactions. Thus, in light of this model, the type of teaching and learning processes that occur in the child's microsystem, particularly the style of teacher-child communication and interaction within those processes, affect each child's transition.

6.1.1   Category One – Play as active exploration

An intersecting position for both groups of participants was noted in their descriptions of the nature of play as an exploratory activity for children that included elements such as "play and a self-discovery" (PT1) and experiential learning – "it's really about doing" (EC4). This was particularly evident among explanations from the Kindergarten teachers. Their most cited reason for including play in the school classroom was that children "need to touch things…they need to be able to move" (PT2). This active learning perspective reflected their perception

that the true value of play is inherent in the activities rather than in adult-child interaction. Such a view reveals an underlying philosophy that deems adult contribution in play as more intrusive than informing for the child. Thus, participant beliefs about play as active exploration revealed a predominantly Piagetian constructivist viewpoint, with an emphasis on self-discovery, first-hand experiences and experiential learning (Piaget, 1962) or the 'watch and wait' approach. This finding is consistent with the literature that suggests an adherence to a Piagetian perspective is understandable as his theories have strongly influenced pedagogy (Edwards, 2007; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Wood, 1997). What it also implies is that teachers merely set the stage for play by providing an inviting environment but then step back and do not directly intervene. Moreover, such a view may also contribute to: perceptions held by some educators' that play is frivolous; a general mistrust of play in school contexts and; perpetuating the dichotomy of didactic instruction and the discovery approach. This adds to its minimal presence as a curriculum priority and to the lack of planning for play-based pedagogy beyond prior-to school settings. Teachers in the school sector then question its educational value amidst the struggle and demands for accelerated learning, accountability and reaching achievement targets.

6.1.2   *Category Two – Play as purposeful, child-focused pedagogy*

Overall, participant responses indicated that there was limited congruence in beliefs and practices between the two sets of teachers. Participant groups varied in their beliefs about how they valued play-based pedagogy and therefore this significantly impacted on how it was implemented in their settings. Play-based pedagogy was perceived differently in the contexts of prior-to-school environments and the school classroom. Thus, the microsystem of the classroom or learning environment influences the type of learning and teaching that children experience (Bronfenbrenner, 2001) such that it is either intended as a play space or an academic classroom.

The only point of convergence between the two groups within this category was in the theme of collaboration with peers. Here participants aligned in their

interpretations that play-based pedagogy was purposeful and child-focused when children interacted, supported and scaffolded one another so that "peers contribute ideas to their learning" (EC4) and "peer reinforcement of different things" (PT3). Such a view offers a more social-constructivist orientation, in line with Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996) who emphasised the role of peers in supporting and scaffolding children's learning.

The variances in pedagogical foundations between the two groups became more evident as they discussed and expanded on their views of play-based pedagogy. Yet, both groups struggled to clearly articulate their understandings of play as a medium for learning and teaching. It proved somewhat difficult to probe participants' thinking beyond the nature and characteristics of play, to analysing play as a construct for learning and particularly, teaching. What the Kindergarten participants tended to define or label as play-based learning did not in fact provide children with opportunities to make true choices or direct their own learning, nor were these experiences derived from a child-centred perspective. Instead, what featured was the predominance of required teacher-directed structure: teacher-chosen activities so that "we set the activities out" (PT2) with a prevalence of teacher-oriented learning. This parallels the findings of Ranz-Smith (2007), whose research conveyed that school children were required to conform to the narrow limits of the classroom teacher who primarily imposed learning experiences.

Additionally, most of the Kindergarten teachers referred to the benefits or the affective quality of play – "there was just so much enjoyment" (PT4), or its favourable role in children's development, not learning. Furthermore, extending on Hyvonen's (2011) research, the school teachers valued play for having social relevance, as a socialisation activity where children were seen as practising friendships. Also, informal play experiences were provided because "kids at this age don't have fine motor or gross motor skills that they would have had when I first started teaching" (PT2). In line with research by Dockett (2011), few were able to articulate or convey their understanding about the impact of play on children's

learning beyond references to developmental domains such as "social and emotional and fine motor and all that sort of stuff" (PT3).

The early childhood educators maintained that play-based pedagogy was foundational to their teaching and explained that play was implemented "absolutely, every day" (EC2), but they also grappled with their interpretations and definitions. Some shared their definitions tentatively – "I've never really thought about that before" (EC2). They did, however, all emphasise that "I know how important play is for children" (EC2) and "I couldn't imagine it any other way" (EC4). Throughout their accounts, these educators repeatedly stressed that "that's the way they [children] learn, is through their play" (EC1) and it was possible to see "what they're learning from it" (EC3).

In their definitions, play and learning were inextricably linked; this parallels research findings that the two are inherently woven together (Pramling-Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012) and inseparable (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010). Each one explained that they focused their instructional practice on play-based learning. They specified that play-based pedagogy was child-centred and that they purposefully planned for it from children's interests through "planning and learning from what you've observed" (EC1). Additionally, they stated that the provision of a play-based approach was what made learning meaningful to children within authentic contexts. Understandably, prior-to-school educators have much of their educational training and experiences based on this approach, and so recognise the importance of play. Additionally, in Australia, play-based learning is mandated and validated in the national early childhood framework – the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009). While all the prior-to-school educators considered play-based pedagogy as purposeful, as underpinning children's learning and foundational to their own practice, their explanations did not include all those aspects described in the literature or in definitions in the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009). What was missing was the acknowledgement of the importance of sustained-shared thinking or co-construction of knowledge (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Extending on the work of researchers such as Rogers (2011) and Wood (2010a), the

current study found that the ability to describe good quality play in practice persists as an on-going challenge for early years educators that further extend the tensions between the rhetoric and reality of play for learning.

Hence, the diverse perspectives offered by the participants support assertions among the play literature of the many meanings attributed to the word 'play' (Fleer, 2009; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Reflecting the findings of play researchers (Dockett & Fleer, 2002; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Moyles, 2015; Wood, 2009), play-based pedagogy in the current study was difficult to define as it was context dependent (Wood & Attfield, 2005; Wood, 2013) and contexts were wide-ranging. I therefore argue that the term 'play' has come to mean everything and nothing, weakened in its significance and trivialised, due to over-definition and over-use. Vagueness around a clear, operational definition of play-based pedagogy does little to confirm and support the claim that children learn through play, particularly for teachers in schools faced with pressures of administrative directives and accountability. Furthermore, within the field of education, and more broadly within society, there exists competing discourses around the notion of play which challenge its idealised status (Wood, 2013). Tensions surrounding the ideological forms of free, discovery play and the educational versions of 'purposeful' play create philosophical struggles for teachers who develop ambiguous or hazy conceptualisations. Lack of theoretical clarity presents a primary challenge to constructs of play-based pedagogy (Howard & McInnes, 2010). Definitions should take into account these different contexts as play carries different meanings and connotations depending on the experiences educators have had with it.

The findings also illuminate the complexity for educators in articulating the practice of play-based pedagogy and explaining how they facilitate learning and teaching through play. In the current study, this may be more expected for the Kindergarten teachers, whose tertiary qualifications may have had a limited play-based component, but was particularly evident among the prior-to-school educators. This also brings to light the enduring debate about the relationship between playing, learning and teaching (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Conceptualising

play-based pedagogy posed a challenge for all the participants in the current study (Wood, 2009; Wood, 2010a). The fact that the participants with specific early childhood qualifications were more confident in explaining conditions for learning rather than conditions for teaching warrants more attention. An explanation for this could be the dominance of a long-standing child development perspective, derived from developmental psychology that propels early childhood pedagogical and curriculum decision making (Grieshaber, 2008; McArdle & McWilliam, 2005; Ryan & Goffin, 2008). Consequently, 'teaching' has not been foregrounded in ECEC research and whilst mentioned in the *EYLF*, the use of the term is minimal.

In their explanations, the early childhood participants were the only group to all specify that play-based pedagogy required the responsive engagement of educators "to make learning happen" (EC1) and "promote the learning a little bit more" (EC4). There was a strong belief that the active presence of adults was essential which "helps them [children] to develop and learn" (EC4). Their stated beliefs underscore the literature about the importance of the role of the adult in play-based pedagogy (Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis 2011; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Wood, 2013; Wood & Attfield, 2005) and the important role of interactions to facilitate the 'meaning-making' process. Hence, this perspective indicates that these prior-to-school educators have embraced aspects of social-cultural theories locating play within Vygotsky's and Bruner's models of adult-guided scaffolding. What was noticeably absent from their descriptions was reference to intentional teaching (DEEWR, 2009; Epstein, 2014) and how responsive adults promote and engage in sustained shared thinking, problem-solving and co-construction of knowledge (DEEWR, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). So, in light of Bronfenbrenner's framework, it is the role of the responsive teacher to ensure that the proximal processes in the child's microsystem are valuable and challenging. Proximal processes that only involve infrequent episodes of prolonged, interactional activity or those performed over short periods of time will have limited influence on children's learning and development.

6.1.3   Category Three – Limited place for play

This category, unique to the case of the Kindergarten teachers, became evident in the findings as they expounded their theories of play. Play as the predominant pedagogy was absent either because of misconceptions of play-based pedagogy and the value of a play-based curriculum in a school context, or was minimal as a result of constraining influences. Here, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) exosystem and macrosystem influences on teachers' beliefs and theories of play became evident. He pointed out that children's early experiences, such as school transitions, are not only shaped by their surrounding microsystems and mesosystems but also by more distal contexts such as local exosystem decision-making and policy initiatives, and societal macrosystem influences.

Even though each teacher, in her own way, expressed value to be found in play, and professed the importance of play in young children's lives, in line with Hyvonen's (2011) and Lynch's (2015) research findings, it was relegated to limited episodes. This is also in agreement with research conducted by Moyles (2010b), in which although teachers expressed they valued play, it was secondary to adult-led or designed activities. Hence, participant definitions and interpretations included teacher-directed activities that solely incorporated playful games or comprised of play as occasional free time. Thus, where play was used it was often as: time for socialising and exploration of manipulatives; relief from didactic instruction when children were tired; or it encompassed a reward for work completed. Play was also limited to brief transitional phases at the beginning of the school year as "that's a real focus in those first few weeks" (PT2), but as time progressed this teacher lamented that it was decreased to "about an hour and 20 a week" (PT2). The use of organised games was a means of supplementing components of more formal education in a fun and interesting way as it "enhanced the learning experience" (PT4). This infused teacher-initiated play provided moments in the day where, as an instructional strategy, it proposed to keep children focussed and engaged because "I need to use what connects them and gets them into the work" (PT2). Though, one teacher added "so that's what I would call play, in a very general term" (PT1). The

use of games as play in these Kindergarten classes supports teachers' understandings of the Piagetian perspective and the increase in games with rules in the school years. However, what such limited perspectives and occurrences ignore is a major feature of play as existing on a continuum and so the educational potential of play in these classrooms was not fully realised. It is important that teachers develop an understanding of the development and progression of play in both complexity and challenge as children progress through the school years, rather than simply using play for its ability to make learning fun for children or solely to develop social skills.

Constrained play was another feature of this category. Of the four Kindergarten participants, the early childhood trained Kindergarten teacher held play in the highest regard and expressed her deep belief in the value of play. She explained her attempts to translate her training into practice and expressed her strong desire for its inclusion into her classroom as she envisioned it, but regularly reiterated that at school "we have to do the structured stuff" (PT3). Others revealed less trust in play – "when I say play-based I'm thinking a structured learning experience incorporating play" (PT4), or "to meet the outcomes of the syllabus and what our unit of work wants it is quite structured" (PT3). In this instance, play was constrained by the beliefs that play requires high levels of teacher structure for it to be valuable in children's learning, or that it was constrained by curricular expectations.

The final theme identified within this category was the marginalisation of play. Two Kindergarten teachers specifically stated that play-based pedagogy was neither a beneficial nor relevant medium for learning in the school environment, though they valued more romantic or idealised notions of free play. One teacher explained that "if I do do it, it's number one to transition children from pre-school into school" (PT4) but this was only "for the first three weeks of school" (PT4) when formal programs were collapsed. The other teacher reasoned that she did not think that the "idea of just play and go away and discover it by yourself is really going to teach them anything" (PT1). Thus, this study contributes to the research base that

how teachers view play is based on their pedagogical orientations and this reflects the position that play is assigned in the learning environment and similarly in the transition process. The current study has identified that encouraging teachers to question how their values, beliefs and theories of play influence their practice is important. When considering the status of play, this can be viewed in relation to the status accorded to children. Data from the current study strongly indicates that teachers in schools may find the idea of giving children choice and allowing them to make or share in curricular decisions as threatening adult authority, or it may not sit well with their own values. Also, limited educational training or professional development opportunities around play-based approaches narrow teachers' understandings of the function that play has in children's learning and of the significance of the proactive guiding role of the adult that is required to facilitate this learning.

These findings highlight a dilemma - that locating a place for play within the learning environment is problematic beyond prior-to-school settings. A key finding from the current study is that while there is increasing evidence in research and the literature that play as a vehicle for learning should be the preferred pedagogy in the early years of schooling (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Devlin, 2012; Harrison, 2015; Hunkin, 2014; Sandberg & Heden, 2011; Smith, 2015), nevertheless it is not being utilised in the Kindergarten year for a number of reasons. In the first year of school, where educators are grappling with the 'crowded curriculum' and the pressures of meeting outcomes, play is becoming lost in transition and squeezed out of classroom life. Furthermore, there is limited research about play beyond the early childhood period to enlighten educators about how children's play advances as they mature and how the school curriculum can scaffold the advancement of children's learning through play (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Smith, 2015; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Added to this, there is conjecture around the idea that much beyond age five, play for children becomes less relevant (Wood & Attfield, 2005). As children move through the early years of formal schooling, play becomes a distant memory.

6.1.4   Category Four – Roles of the educator in play-based pedagogy

There was congruence between the two groups in their descriptions of their roles. Generally explanations of their perceived roles in play-based pedagogy revealed that these were multi-layered and contained various degrees of involvement from supportive to mediating behaviours. The *EYLF* mandates reflective practice on the part of early childhood educators, however in the current study there was a noticeable absence of descriptions of reflective behaviours particularly within the prior-to-school group. Participant views of their roles can be considered in the light of Bronfenbrenner's (2001) bio-ecological model which notes the significance of reciprocal interpersonal relationships, or proximal processes, between the individual (child) and his or her ecology (in this case the microsystems of preschools and schools) as being key to children's development and learning. Bronfenbrenner (2001) contended that 'proximal processes' are effective when they occur continually and regularly over time, thus strengthening human relationships within supportive environments and so can increase the scope of development, and therefore, learning.

Prior-to-school educators demonstrated a stronger understanding of explaining supportive behaviours in their role as compared to mediating behaviours. A thorough search through the their data set found minimal uses of the word 'teach' or 'teaching', and instead they used alternate terms to describe their pedagogical work. Overall, the prior-to-school educators in this study most often mentioned supportive behaviours and frequently referred to themselves as "facilitators", "instigators" or "observers" rather than as teachers during play-based learning. Additionally, they also cited their role as that of a "guide", "documenter" and "planner". When participants referred to teaching it was usually in the context of discussions about schools. Mediating behaviours such as demonstrating, questioning and scaffolding featured much less in their descriptions. An explanation for this outlook could be the long-held dominance of the Developmentally Appropriate Practice discourse and developmental perspectives within ECEC as these have narrowed additional avenues of thinking and practices

of teaching and learning (Grieshaber, 2008; Kilderry, 2015). These child-centred, discovery learning approaches have contributed to educators in the current study feeling unwilling and hesitant to employ instructive practices together with a fear of inappropriate intervention. Such views in the current study echo and extend on findings by Kilderry (2012), Leggett and Ford (2013) and McArdle and McWilliam (2005), and highlight that even seven years after the introduction of the *EYLF*, a document which draws strongly on socio-cultural theories, educators are still wrestling with their professional identities as teachers and their accompanying pedagogical interactions. Furthermore, such theoretical strongholds narrow the range of teaching strategies that educators draw upon.

The inclusion of the term scaffolding by some of the prior-to-school participants in their descriptions signified more of a social-cultural view of the participatory role of the adult in play-based learning and is also a reference to the bi-directional, reciprocal proximal processes that influence the type of interactions with the adults in children's environments (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Thus, the style of teaching and strategies used by a teacher in the child's educational microsystem influences that child's learning and development. Stronger and more connected, sustained educational relationships result in more positive developmental and learning outcomes. This is important given that research evidence maintains that the higher the quality of the ECEC experience, the better children do upon entry to school (OECD, 2006, 2011; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). However, the participants did not elaborate on the nature of the type of support and guidance within scaffolded episodes and so perhaps being a "scaffolder" was used to mean any type of teacher support, thus undermining the Vygotskian notion of co-construction of knowledge. The educators in the current study held a limited understanding of this term; a clearer explanation of how educators function in children's Zones of Proximal Development would highlight a deeper understanding of the collaborative and negotiated adult-learner relationship.

Whilst there was a noticeable absence of specific references to intentional teaching, one of the eight practices described in the *EYLF*, it is interesting to note

that in the accounts of the various roles of the prior-to-school participants, they actually described several strategies characteristic of intentional teaching without explicitly naming or referring to this term. As described in the *EYLF*, it was clear that they moved in and out of these roles and depending on the contexts, drew upon a range of these strategies. Some of these included modelling, demonstrating, questioning (sometimes specifically identified as open-ended questioning), and documenting children's learning. When references were made to extending children's learning, this was usually in the form of providing additional resources; however no descriptions of extending included the engagement in shared thinking or problem-solving to foster higher level thinking skills (DEEWR, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Thus, the findings in the current study extend on Australian research carried out by Kilderry (2012) and Leggett and Ford (2013) which highlighted the challenges that educators experience in articulating intentional pedagogies and signals the need for deeper understandings and wider definitions for specifically referring to intentionality. Furthermore, whilst the prior-to-school educators explained the importance of being involved in children's play, they did not refer to themselves as co-players, nor did they explain this involvement as the co-construction of knowledge or joint attention (Bruner, 1996) with children. It is only through the proximal processes of close, sustained involvement and interaction between adults and children that recognition of intentional teaching can be identified. Together with the exclusion of references to their role as reflective practioners, they highlighted that other curriculum priorities such as preparing, organising and resourcing the environment and routines within it; supervisory obligations; and observing, recording and documenting children's learning leaving little time to engage in co-playing and co-learning with the children for extended periods and also time to critically reflect on practice.

Likewise, many of the school participants also depicted similar portrayals within the supportive behaviour category. Given that many of the school teacher accounts of using play-based pedagogy were actually opportunities for free time or organised games, their descriptions of their roles during such periods were also related to supervisory duties. Minimal mention of co-playing with the children,

together with the absence of references to reflective practice within the school teachers' accounts, denotes limited attention to observing, discussing and reflecting on children's meaning and intentions in their play episodes. Coupled with the weight of formal learning, curricular expectations and increased demands of assessment and accountability, this would result in less time spent considering their understanding of what children learn though play – hence play fails to deliver evidence of progress and achievement in children's learning.

Mediating behaviours, including instructing, directing and explaining, featured more strongly in their responses. This is understandable given that teachers in schools tend to employ more didactic and instructional pedagogies, and so these may be transferred to classroom play periods. Only the early childhood trained teacher referred to herself as being a "scaffolder" however she did not provide any clarification as to what this entailed in relation to her role in children's play.

6.2 Discussions on findings for Research Question Two: What do prior-to-school educators and Kindergarten teachers believe about pedagogic continuity in the transition process?

In this section, participant beliefs regarding the concept of pedagogic continuity in the transition process were investigated. Kindergarten teacher and early childhood educator understandings about the term pedagogic continuity revealed that this term is unclear and proved difficult for them to define and explain. A closer examination of their deliberations illustrated their views of the relationship between early childhood education and formal schooling, or as Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the interaction between the microsystems – which he terms the mesosystem. All participants emphasised that the differences between preschool and school, a change of microsystems, are too extreme, replicating findings in transition to school literature. In this study, participants called for stronger communication channels between the two settings. Moreover, participants

noted that the pressure from 'top-down' pedagogy feeds a focus on child readiness concepts and the play/work divide, pushing play to the sidelines. Overall, there was congruence among and within both case studies across the three categories for this research question except for two themes that surfaced from responses by the school participants i.e.

- The play/work divide and
- Crowded curriculum and less play.

In general, beliefs about pedagogic continuity centred on school readiness concepts, disparities between the two educational environments and suggestions for improving continuity. These suggestions seldom referred to a pedagogical orientation, but featured explanations of short orientation programs or transitional activities. Not only did they not provide examples of pedagogic continuity, they questioned the quality of continuity experienced by the children in their care.

6.2.1   Category One – Differing expectations

The two participant groups were in agreement about the lack of crossover or continuity in the transition process. They expressed a desire for wanting "more of a smoother transition going in from early childhood into your kindergarten or your regular school setting" (PT4). In line with the transition research (Johannson, 2007; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Petriwskyj, 2010), they believed that the period for adjustment should be about slowly easing children into the school environment, although in practice what they described were usually brief phases – not an ongoing process. Contrary to the literature (DEECD, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2008, 2014; ETC Research Group, 2011; Fabian, 2012, 2013) that suggests there are increasingly successful transition mechanisms, both sets of participants maintained that the move to the Kindergarten year was characterised by an abrupt and distinct change and they felt that this juncture did not facilitate a smooth transition – "it's such two different concepts and two different settings" (PT3).

Both groups illuminated the sharp difference in expectations that exist between the different sectors of education and noted that "our expectations are so

far apart for the children" (PT1) and "they need that continuity, something familiar or something they feel comfortable with or they know the expectations" (EC3). Given that the two cases were diverse groups of teachers in different educational settings, it is not surprising that such diversity is reflected in their expectations. However, they considered that the dissimilarities were too extreme or disparate when children first commence formal schooling and "not to expect them to come from a learning environment like this, and move straight into sitting at a desk, having the blackboard and stuff" (EC1). Continuity between the prior-to school and school settings is important to consider in the transition process (Ackesjö, 2013b; CCCH, 2008; Connor, 2011; Noel, 2011) and it is now well recognised that placing more emphasis on the continuity of learning is an essential feature of promoting positive and effective transitions (DEECD, 2009; Dockett & Perry, 2014; Harrison, 2015; Smith, 2015; Smith & Maher, 2016 in press). Similarly, participants in this study remarked that there should be such continuity between the environments "at least for a while until they ease in" (EC1) and perceived that "it could be quite a smoother transition I think, but it's not" (PT3) which led them to the conclusion: "I don't think there is a continuity" (PT4).

A consistent theme in participants' descriptions was discontinuity. Both groups emphasised the abrupt change in pedagogical approaches and the shift to more formal academic demands between prior-to-school education and formal schooling – "it's unfortunate in a Kindy atmosphere, it's a very different type of teaching for the children" (EC2). Furthermore, they explained that as children move across the educational border, the change in learning environments from an active to a more formal, sedentary setting was considered to be a major source of transition challenge for children because "it is formal learning, it is formal instruction" (PT1). There was agreement that the 'sit still and listen' expectation characteristic of a Kindergarten class was unrealistic and this was particularly noted by the prior-to-school participants. For them, it is this variance, or discontinuity, that can be considered as contributing to some of the tension that exists between the two - "but we're here saying no. It's really hard for them to do at such a young age" (EC2). This echoes previous research results that bring to light the dominance of

disparities between the two sectors (Henderson, 2012; Margetts, 2002; Skouteris et al., 2012; Timperley et al., 2003). This study extends these findings to clearly articulate the immediate necessity to create a balance or complementarity between these environments.

This emphasis on the 'sit still and listen' expectation in schools raises the question of whether Kindergarten classrooms are indeed ready to welcome and accommodate a range of children with varying needs and provide more active rather than passive learning environments. I question whether such pedagogical approaches used in the first year of school are the most effective for maximising children's learning opportunities at this level. Moreover, children who have crossed over from prior-to-school settings do not suddenly become changed learners in short transition phases. However, in view of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory, the source of these discontinuities does not always sit within the microsystem where individual teachers operate (Petriwskyj, 2005) but lies in the exosystem in which the fundamental differences of policies and frameworks that guide the two sectors exist. In line with Broström's (2013) findings, this current study also established that though there is a notion of continuity that is espoused, albeit at a rhetorical level, within policy frameworks (DEEWR, 2009; ACARA, 2012) that exist in the exosystem layer (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this is frequently not experienced within the reality of daily life in the microsystems of the two educational settings. Pursuing the coherence and connectedness that Bredekamp (2010) recommends can prove difficult where there is diversity in how teachers think about curricula and their pedagogical work in either the prior-to-school or school setting. It can further create a fundamental barrier to overcoming this challenge. Therefore, what teachers do in transition process within these two contexts has significant potential to ensure pedagogical continuity. Given that transition process necessitates meeting the demands of these two microsystem environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), if strong mesosystem links do not exist and the child's microsystems advocate opposing values and philosophies, then inevitably tensions can surface and the child may experience the burden of this stress as a result of trying to cope with these differing expectations.

The polarity between play and work surfaced when the Kindergarten teachers expressed their doubts about using a play-based approach in the first year of school to support pedagogic continuity, particularly in relation to its function in meeting rigorous academic measures. In descriptions of their teaching practices, these teachers did not conceptualise a play and work continuum but instead viewed them as a distinct dichotomy. Such results extend the research literature in which play is viewed by practitioners in opposition to work or learning (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Hyvonen, 2011; McInnes et al., 2011; Walsh et al., 2008; Yelland, 2011). Expectations of teachers in this study were that children need to understand "Kindergarten… this is the time to sit and do work" (PT1). Whilst they had earlier professed their beliefs in the significance of play, these perceptions were at a superficial level in terms of children's activities (self-discovery and active exploration) and that of children's psychological states (fun, naturalness), or in serving largely social functions. In other words, they regarded play as either an adjunct activity - a work before play emphasis, or as merely free time to "just free play" (PT4) and not as a serious endeavour or pedagogical construct because "it's not play to learn" (PT1). Play was framed as beneficial only in the context as a transitional settling-in phase before 'real' work began, used for relaxing, recreational pursuits "as a tool for when they finish their work" (PT3), or as a reward - "you did your reading and writing, you get to choose whatever activity you want" (PT4). As such, these school participants did not believe that learning outcomes could be attained through play, particularly in terms of achieving curricular academic targets. To them, play was separate from learning. In their descriptions of classroom practice they noted that school was a place for learning, not playing and that "there are expectations for children that they play in the playground but in the classroom it's a learning time" (PT4). Particularly, teachers believed that it would be difficult to achieve effective learning of literacy and numeracy skills through a play-based approach without the use of explicit instruction. Findings from the current study point towards the need for more clarification about what play as pedagogy means in the early years of school.

The lack of a precise operational definition of play-based pedagogy, and limited research that explains and validates how the school curriculum can support play progression and children's learning through play, contributes to such beliefs held by school teachers. Alternatively, such opinions have developed because of diverging perspectives within play research about the relationship between playing and learning (Wood & Attfield, 2005) and so play is viewed as less relevant in schools and relegated to a frivolous activity or a short-lived transitional period. Moreover, this is not surprising considering the differences in training, there is no reason to believe that the both groups of teachers would hold similar beliefs. All but one of these Kindergarten teachers held primary school teaching qualifications which do not essentially provide a focus on a child-centred, play-based approach but instead direct teachers to target syllabus content knowledge and use more didactic, explicit instruction. Thus, teachers' theories about play and work or learning impact on their practice and influence how they implement the curriculum. Furthermore, the abrupt change in curriculum documents between the two settings impact on teaching and learning approaches where there is a distinct move from a process-oriented to an outcome-geared context. At the exosystem level, the systemic requirements of schools within which teachers work, and the accompanying achievement standards and accountability pressures, compel teachers in the current study to direct their teaching energies and strategies to meeting targets rather than meeting children's needs. In view of the Kindergarten teachers, learning then requires explicit teaching and the 'learning through play' mantra has minimal value in terms of achieving the 'work' content that is required.

6.2.2 Category Two – Academic push-down

Notions of school readiness was the one theme in common between the two case studies within this category. Whilst the participants were conscious of the need for continuity, their discussions about transition practices used were framed by readiness constructs - "making sure that they're prepared with all the basic skills that they'll need for school" (EC1). Prior-to-school educator comments oriented towards an awareness of children's individual preparedness and that "getting the

children prepared for school in a preschool is the most important thing" (EC2). These findings are in line with the transition literature that maintains continuity as a concept is closely bound with the idea of children's 'readiness' to commence school with its mainly didactic pedagogy (Arnold et al., 2006; Broström, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2013; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Griebel & Niesel, 2002; Johansson, 2007; Peters, 2010). A central premise within this research is the significance of ensuring continuity of experience for all children as they transition to school. While this remains a problematic concept it does have the effect of challenging teachers to understand what this means.

Participants in both sectors revealed a strong focus on a hierarchical relationship between the early childhood sector and formal schooling – one that maintains and emphasises an hierarchical idea of readiness, with attention to the 'readiness to learn' or 'school readiness' discourse (Moss, 2013). The preschool educators in the current study reasoned that an unequal association results where formal schooling dominates the relationship and considered that "we're kind of at the whim of what's the school structure" (EC3). Readiness constructs were particularly evident in the references made by each of the Kindergarten participants to the Best Start assessment which centres on individual skills of entrant children. These school teachers believed "that's again where the Best Start I think comes into place" (PT3) because it "sets us up to what children know when they come to school" (PT1). This finding reaffirms previous results that have noted a prevailing spotlight on such notions of readiness within Australian transition research that focuses on individual children's abilities (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Petriwskyj, 2010). A focal point on readiness concepts was associated with deeply held personal beliefs of social maturation or the focus on readiness of academic content knowledge (Petriwskyj, 2005, 2010, 2013). A further explanation provided by the participants was that Kindergarten has changed and taken on a more academic role with a greater focus on literacy and numeracy targets – "I think that's the big thing for today's kindergarten is, it is such an intense program. It is intense, I know it's intense" (PT1). This was particularly noted by the Kindergarten teacher from the low-socioeconomic/high EAL school - "all I know is that when they come in we

have clear targets and clear expectations of where we're wanting to go and that's all I'm focused on" (PT4). At a macrosystem level, testable 'school readiness skills', especially in relation to literacy and numeracy, have become an increased focus for policy makers both internationally and in Australia who are anxious to raise standards (Early et al., 2010; Whitebread & Bingham, 2011). Such intervention increasingly places pressure on prior-to-school educators to make children 'ready for school'. Also, teachers in schools are being challenged then, to reconceptualise the school's role in assisting children to continue to learn in a school context. What is further needed is to encourage more disconnection of the readiness notion from the transition period, placing a stronger spotlight on the readiness of schools to receive children and to support their continued learning.

In line with what Moss (2013) proposes in terms of the indisputable relationship between ECEC and formal schooling, an explanation for the readiness perspectives of all the prior-to-school participants could be that they are shaped by the structural framework in which preschools reside, particularly in the NSW Australian context. They are part of the system of ECEC which incorporates the 'childcare' sector (those serving children birth to 5 years) and the sector to which they belong – the 'early education' sector (those serving children over 3 years of age). As such, they fall into the 'pre-primary' approach (Moss, 2013) to education and so are liable to be strongly influenced by formal school objectives and methods. As a result, prior-to-school educators feel their role is one of preparing children for school or providing the groundwork for future school performance by duplicating the experiences and expectations of the Kindergarten programme – particularly as children near the transition period. In terms of the hierarchical education ladder, prior-to-school settings sit on the bottom rung. As a result, ECEC services become locked into a system that expects children to achieve school readiness skills – a foundation that readies children for the next stage of education.

Another theme within this category unique only among the prior-to-school participants was that of: the 'schoolification' of preschool. Attention around child-focussed readiness aspects emphasised a more 'schoolified' approach in their

transition practices – one that is seen more from the point of view of formal schooling (Moss, 2008, 2013; OECD, 2006). Participants suggested that they incorporate "what they learn in Kindergarten, into the centre" (EC2) and resolved "we see at school there are a lot of things they don't have choice in…so our preparation for them is activities like that" (EC3). Whilst they believed it was not about "formally teaching them to read or write" (EC3), elements such as children should "know basic colours, numbers, shape" (EC1) or the preschool's inclusion of "a Jolly Phonics program that we've got in place at the moment" (EC2) characterised the notion of preschools delivering children to school's fixed standards. Such a relationship centres on prior-to-school services being 'future focussed' about preparation for academic success or viewing the child as a future economic resource rather than viewing this period as a time of life. Early childhood education should not be viewed as an acceleration process driven by beliefs that commencing academic learning earlier will advance children in literacy and numeracy, in spite of research that claims the contrary (Whitebread & Bingham, 2011). This unique phase of human development should be valued in the moment. A consideration therefore, could be to not use the word 'preschool' for these early childhood settings.

A point of difference between the two case studies arose in the Kindergarten teachers' accounts as they described exosystem, institutional pressures of an overcrowded curriculum that leaves less time to include play in the school day. This supports and further contributes to the literature base which discusses the current demise of play both in preschool and school settings (Ginsberg, 2007; Graue, 2009; Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009; McGregor, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009; Wohlend & Peppler, 2015). The Kindergarten teachers acknowledged the importance of pedagogic continuity "just to continue the approach of learning that they have in the preschool into the school" (PT3) but lamented on the restrictions imposed upon them by educational expectations in the Kindergarten year. Their comments considered the tensions that exist for teachers between practice and policy and the shift occurring in curricular expectations in this first year of formal schooling "because we've got the curriculum in place being so academic based" (PT2). They

highlighted the pressures that Kindergarten teachers now encounter in their settings in finding a position for play within more formal, academic-based educational contexts – "we do have specific targets and goals that we need to achieve with regards to learning, particularly in literacy and numeracy" (PT4). These teachers revealed they felt overwhelmed "sometimes I just go, oh this is too much… It's push, push, push at them" (PT1) and were resigned to the conformities required in a school environment – "it becomes very much 'so this is what we're doing and this is how we need you to be and this is what you need to do'" (PT4). For them, play exists within short transition-to-school phases, but after children settle into the new school routines "it's not as play-based as it can be" (PT4). Participants explained that at other times play survives on the fringes of the school day "but I also know it gets lost in the business of everything else" (PT2). Play is squeezed to fit somewhere into the busy schedule of academic instruction because "the amount of outcomes… there's so much more these days to how it was before" (PT3). Overall, participants stated there is less time for play in the Kindergarten year because of "such a crammed curriculum" (PT1) and "we've got all these targets which are set for us; all this data" (PT1) or "the shift even of what you're supposed to be achieving in kindergarten" (PT2).

These findings support and extend the Australian literature (Alliance for High Quality Education in the Early Years of Schooling, 2014; Australian Primary Principals Association, 2014; Australian Government Department of Education, 2014) that highlight calls from school teachers about an overcrowded curriculum with an overemphasis on literacy and numeracy development. Furthermore, internationally, there has been a trend to increase young children's cognitive competence. Recent exosystem changes to Australian policy directives that have focussed on the investment in early years education from an economic viewpoint have also brought a sharper focus at the microsystem level of schools to produce stronger cognitive outcomes, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy capabilities. Hence, this accounts for the very limited reference to play in the new Australian Curriculum.

6.2.3   Category Three – Aspects of enhancing continuity

Both groups of participants believed that continuity could be improved across children's transition crossings. However, their discussions around key considerations for this centred not so much at the microsystem level of pedagogical practices within the classroom, but more so within the mesosystem layer of creating stronger communication channels or collaborative partnerships and exchanges between practitioners in both settings. An explanation for this is that the participants consider the pedagogical chasm between the two microsystems just too big to conquer, but that a meeting place in terms of communication was more achievable.

A suggestion offered by both groups, which extends the findings of Broström (2013) and does operate within the mesosystem level, was the use of play as a transition bridge in the Kindergarten setting. The prior-to-school educators voiced their beliefs that continuity or 'flow' should be achieved through a play-based approach "to do it the way we do it, through play… just to have that continuity, at least for a while" (EC1). This they considered would facilitate "a happy medium between the atmospheres of preschool and Kindy" (EC2). The Kindergarten teachers also acknowledged the importance of continuity "just to continue the approach of learning that they have in the preschool into the school" (PT3) so "we are giving them a chance to settle from an environment that they used to be familiar with" (PT4). But in reality, it was mostly free play that featured centre stage within brief transition phases during the early weeks of school, or as free time offered during the afternoon. They explained that "we step back from the academic focus for the first two or three weeks" (PT2) and "it is a transition period where we're not doing anything hard and heavy… and it was play-based" (PT4), but afterwards they "really start the learning in kindergarten" (PT4).

What has to be asked though is whether these fleeting transition play bridges are sufficient to ensure effective transitions for all children, or is it more beneficial to make the crossing of the boundary between free play to play-based pedagogy to safeguard children's trajectories in the Kindergarten year and beyond?

Recent research regarding the benefits of play-based pedagogy in the early years of school (Harrison, 2015; Hunkin, 2014; Smith, 2015) has pointed to significant advantages in minimising discontinuity between the two settings and also improving student learning in the long term. Consequently, what the findings demand then, in relation to Bronfenbrenner's model and consideration of the bi-directional influences within that, is that teachers in both contexts will need to advocate at the exosystem policy level. This will require teachers to appeal to governments to listen to research evidence about the benefits for children's transition process of a more gradual introduction into formal learning and to supplement their practice via the transference of the principles of early learning into the school setting to smooth the transition to school.

Extending on Broström's (2013) categories of educational differences, they each agreed that there was communication discontinuity in the transition process and believed that "I don't think that there is enough conversation between the teachers" (PT1). They deemed there was much room for improvement in this area and expressed that "I guess the odds are improving but it's still not I guess where I feel it should be, that continuity of the information exchange" (EC3). Participants in both case studies emphasised their strong belief in the importance of collaborative exchange or sharing of information to improve continuity. Thus, teachers' pleas for stronger communication channels mirror results in the OECD's report Starting Strong II (OECD, 2006) of a 'strong and equal partnership' between both sectors and also Moss's (2013) idea of creating a 'meeting place'. Drawing on the principles of ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) in understanding the transition to school, it is essential to consider the interconnections between the contexts and the people within them, such as teachers in both settings, as these influence how children experience this journey. The extent to which the child experiences the links between the two microsystems empowers his or her transition between these systems to be both positive and successful, as opposed to detrimental and negative. This interrelationship, participants emphasised, was essential which further supports Bronfenbrenner's (1979) assertion that how teachers connect and interact affects the level of continuity experienced by the child. Additionally, this reinforces O'Kane's

(2015) findings that collaborative relationships between teachers in both settings are essential so that the transition to school is a shared responsibility. Some suggestions offered by the participants revolved around short orientation occurrences such as mutual visits or the transference of information. However, it is useful at this point to reflect back on Mayfield's (2003) definition of continuity as being viewed as an ongoing process. Low levels of communication or unidirectional transference of information will not suffice in order to build strong linkages, a shared responsibility, and continuity between the settings.

In addition, extending on the thinking of researchers such as Moss (2013) and Henderson (2014), it is perhaps the very nature of this tension between the early childhood-school relationship that may prove to be a potential site for a new way of relating and co-existing, together with the creation of a "shared borderland" (Britt & Sumsion, 2003, p.134). A joint focus at the mesosystem level between the two educational settings would provide greater alignment in teaching practices within the microsystems. At an exosystem level, policy planners need to adopt the vision of a shared co-construction of transition between the two sectors. In order to develop enhanced continuity in the transition process, a stronger understanding of the relationships between, and divergences of viewpoints, in the two settings is required. The current study has contributed to the research base in this area.

However, in agreement with Timperley et al. (2003) and Ackesjö (2013b) the critical dimensions of continuity and similarity in the current study have not been identified clearly. Whilst teachers advocate for collaborative exchange, work needs to be done on developing an effective process for sharing the responsibility. There seems to be little understanding of the processes required to do this and participants noted "there's no avenue for me to kind of contact someone and pass on this information which I think often is a shame" (EC3). Such a relationship needs to focus on how to create a course for continuity across the transition. If the shared goal between teachers in both sectors is to improve the transition process so that it is smoother and more effective, then understandings about collaborative efforts need to move beyond frequency or avenues of contact. Changes need to be made at

the policy level in the form of a long-term policy strategy, so that these fragmented and uncoordinated local level exchanges make way for a more cohesive national approach which focuses on continuity in children's education, and builds on the knowledge, experience and skills of children. This extends the findings of international researchers such as Dunlop (2013), Einarsdottir (2013), and Fabian (2013) whose focus has been on the construction of relationships between the two settings and have called for the development of formal policies that endorse stronger linkages and continuity of learning between early childhood and school settings that acknowledge and build on children's prior learning.

The recognition of children's funds of knowledge or prior learning experiences was a position of agreement among both sets of participants. This was considered a key aspect in building continuity of learning for children "so that when they do start school, the teachers know where they're coming from" (EC1). This has been a point that has long been maintained in the literature and this finding contributes to the transition research base (DEECD, 2009; Margetts, 2002; Peters, 2010; O'Kane, 2015) and complements Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory that considers the child at the centre of the different ecosystems. The prior-to-school educators felt particularly strongly that it is important to build on children's learning from their preschool years, but expressed some angst about how this is achieved - "I don't know whether they [Kindergarten teachers] want to read our reports" (EC4). Whilst the Kindergarten teachers agreed on the need to gain some understanding of children's current skill levels in the early weeks of Kindergarten, some mentioned individual reports, all considered the Best Start assessment as a valuable tool through which to achieve this. However, the effectiveness of this method has to be questioned when it is only a measure of the presence or absence of children's literacy and numeracy capabilities attained through a short diagnostic appraisal. Considering all the contemporary research literature that exists about 'ready schools' being responsive to the children attending and a shift away from the maturational model of readiness (Brooker, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2009; Graue, 2006; Noel, 2010) this indeed leads us to question whether schools are embracing this new readiness perspective.

It is difficult to comprehend how such an assessment can truly provide useful information about children's prior learning in relation to dispositions, strengths and interests that collectively reveal a more accurate picture of children's current understandings and development. This is particularly so for the growing number of children in NSW who speak English as a second or third language. If we are to take Broström's (2002) perspective that the fundamental goal of transition is to be that children feel 'suitable' in school, then as Brooker (2008) contends, an essential question to be asked is not 'what does the child know' but rather, is the child supported in employing his or her previous knowledge in the new learning environment. At the exosystem level of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework, indeed it must be considered whether our Australian government policies and related assessment documents are truly supporting and upholding the concept of the 'ready school' (Dockett & Perry, 2009; Graue, 2006). The 'school readiness' model is attractive to governments as it ostensibly supplies children to Kindergarten classrooms ready to conform to school routines and practices but fuels the tension that early childhood education is preparation for school rather than life. However, what is important is that schools prepare teachers and the Kindergarten learning environment to take into account what children bring to this new setting and so assist children to feel suitable, competent and experience a sense of continuity. The findings of this study indicate that teachers are not cognisant of the school's need to be ready for the child. If there is a mismatch between what knowledge and skills children bring to school with the expectations and values of the school itself then there is the potential for loss of continuity of learning and so children can be at risk of a problematic adjustment.

Also, the new NSW Transition to School Statement had not yet been introduced at the point of the current study's interview data collection, thus no references to this document were made. However, as completion of this newly introduced statement is not a mandatory requirement for early childhood teachers, it may be difficult to establish the extent of the uptake and whether the statement achieves its objectives. Thus, time will tell whether this document improves communication between the sectors and provides better transition support for

children entering school, and whether teachers in schools will be able to effectively interpret and use the content in it to provide continuity of learning for children. One foreseeable concern is that the statement is a form of unidirectional information delivery and does not constitute a more bi-directional and sustained form of contact between the two settings involving mesosystem interpersonal interactions as described in recent literature (Dockett & Perry, 2007b; Noel, 2011). Perhaps this document will encourage teachers in schools to become more familiar with the EYLF and to consider avenues in creating sufficient similarity between the settings so that children can recognise their previously acquired skills and knowledge as being useful and valued.

6.3   Discussions of findings for Research Question Three: What factors influence prior-to-school educators and Kindergarten teachers' decision related to using play-based pedagogy in the transition process?

Influencing factors related to participant decision-making for using play-based pedagogy across the transition process are considered in the following section. Participants identified a number of internal and external elements that had a significant impact on whether they employed play-based pedagogy in their classroom practices. Some factors were positive forces whilst others were acknowledged as constraints. The findings suggest that the beliefs that teachers hold may not always resound in their practices. Particularly for the Kindergarten teachers it seemed that there were contextual factors that powerfully influenced their opinions toward play as barrier in the learning and teaching process. Hence, for the current study, inconsistencies between teacher beliefs and actions were largely due to external constraints. Many of the challenges that both groups recognised were distal, external constraints and outside of the immediate control of their setting. These featured heavily in the responses from both sides of the two educational sectors. It should be noted that the discussion of these factors is predominantly context-bound. The factors are relative to and affected by the

Australian economic, political, governmental, social and cultural milieu which reside in the macrosystem level of the bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

6.3.1   *Category One – Intrinsic factors*

6.3.1.1 Personal knowledge

The results of this study indicated that both groups of participants identified intrinsic factors, which comprised of personal elements such as professional knowledge, experience and personal beliefs, as being influential to their decisions in using play-based pedagogy. In keeping with Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (2001), these qualities relate to the 'person' factors within his PPCT model. Intrinsic factors featured more in the responses of the prior-to-school participants than for the Kindergarten teachers perhaps because play-based pedagogy is at the heart of what they do every day in their practice and sits as a fundamental philosophical belief. This finding supports the extant literature about teacher pedagogical beliefs and their influence on teaching practices (Handal & Herrington, 2003; Hegde & Cassidy, 2009; Li, 2009; Trivette et al., 2012). There was agreement within both case studies where participants expressed their personal beliefs about a play-based approach – both in terms of rationales for its inclusion or exclusion in their programs.

Overall, participant orientation towards play was positive and valued, and they believed that "play works. It just works" (EC2). They related their views that "you do see the rewards and the enjoyment" (PT4) and also "just the learning that comes out of it" (PT3) but particularly for the Kindergarten participants, the challenges were overriding. One Kindergarten teacher recounted why play-based pedagogy is used minimally in her school day: "I think it is also my belief that now they're at school and they come to school to learn" (PT1) and added that "there is a certain amount of the day that I need to actually teach" (PT1). Hence, this perspective is in line with some research findings that highlight play and academic learning or outcomes being viewed as mutually exclusive (Ailwood, 2003; Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Stephen, 2010). A reason for this perspective could be that teachers

in schools may hold incomplete understandings of play-based pedagogy and so do not make the play-learning connection.

Common personal dimensions that the early childhood participants presented included "I think it's more my belief" (EC2) and their experience in "doing a play-based learning program" (EC1). These prior-to-school educators explained that "definitely research" (EC1) and theoretical knowledge "of what I know the benefits of play are" (EC3) and their own tertiary qualifications were similarly significant. They felt strongly that "if you know child development and you know how children learn, there's no other way you'd do it" (EC4). Furthermore, for these participants, their tertiary education contributed to their strengths in observational and recording skills. Additionally, they believed that it was important that "we observe children and we look at their strengths and interests" (EC3) and also "you do have to be a good observer…to be able to record the learning" (EC1) in order to plan for and enable play. The views of these educators reflect their beliefs that curriculum is constructed, learner-centred and individualised as opposed to being determined and mandated by a government syllabus document which prescribes the content and timeframe for learning such as in school contexts. The early childhood trained Kindergarten participant explained that previous experience in prior-to-school settings afforded her the confidence to offer play-based experiences in her Kindergarten classroom with the knowledge that children were engaged in enjoyable and meaningful learning. However, the provision of such experiences was not able to be fully realised in her school setting.

These characteristics identified by the prior-to-school educators are consistent with previous research findings which propose that beliefs about play practices are strongly related with foundational theoretical knowledge and training, particularly for teachers who hold university level qualifications (Cassidy & Lawrence, 2000; McMullen & Alat, 2002; Wen et al., 2011). Similar to McMullen and Alat's (2002) research, the current study also determined that specialised coursework in early childhood education and child development strongly contributed to influencing teachers' beliefs about their implementation of play-

based pedagogy. Paralleling the findings in Lord and McFarland's (2010) study, a possible reason for the discrepancy between the lack of stated influence of educational training between prior-to-school educators and Kindergarten teachers is that early childhood development knowledge does not feature strongly in primary teacher education courses.

6.3.2   Category Two – Extrinsic factors

6.3.2.1 Physical

Common external influences noted by both groups included physical design limitations within the classroom environment or the setting and so can be related to aspects that reside within the microsystem of the settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Kindergarten teachers particularly focused on interior features of school buildings. Room sizes presented a constraint and participants stated that "to have a play-base you would need a huge room to set up for that" (PT1) because "it's such a small area, so your environment is a big obstacle" (PT3). They envisaged "it would be nice to have like a separate place…that would just be the ultimate" (PT2). Conversely, the prior-to-school educators perceived external features such as the layout of their setting which affected supervisory issues in terms of "we can't really do a lot of indoor/outdoor play" (EC3) or whether other groups of children already occupied the outside space. Such microsystem concerns and constraints mirror findings of Roskos and Neuman (2011) who maintain that when contemplating pedagogical approaches, considerations of the environment are fundamental.

6.3.2.2 Organisational/structural

Across the two case studies, microsystem constraints such as time featured strongly in numerous ways as a restriction or barrier to use of play-based pedagogy. The prior-to-school educators stated that "you have to have big blocks of time" (EC1) or "uninterrupted time" (EC4) to facilitate children's deep engagement in play. Nevertheless, extending on the findings of Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson (2003), the prior-to-school educators explained that within their time frame, daily routines plus incursions/excursions meant various interruptions to the

flow or continuity of children's play. This was similar for their school counterparts who echoed that "there are so many interruptions as well" (PT3). Classroom time-tabling issues featured in the descriptions of the Kindergarten teachers - "the timetable is so jam packed" (PT1), so that play "really is mandated by your timetable and what you could fit in" (PT4). Consequently, teachers were left with little time for play though they wished "it would be nice to do it for at least half an hour every day even" (PT2).

The lower ratios of adults to children in school contexts were cited by both groups as another organisational/structural challenge. The participants stated that without another staff member present in the room it was difficult to organise and manage play-based learning experiences in a school environment. The Kindergarten teachers explained that "it is one teacher and 24 children" (PT1) and so therefore "that would be another obstacle not having the extra support" (PT3). This was also a common suggestion among the preschool educators who offered "having an extra staff member if the funding is there in the Kindy class as well would be amazing" (EC2).

Lastly, exo- and macrosystem issues such as school targets and new school curricular interpretation burdens featured prominently as an obstacle to play-based pedagogy in the Kindergarten context. In line with findings of Ranz-Smith (2007), there was uniform agreement that curricular expectations impeded on their perception of viewing play as a curricular stronghold in children's learning. Despite personal espoused beliefs in play, accountability requirements impinged on their time and ability to implement pedagogies of play. The school participants reiterated 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" (PT4). In an evidence-based school climate play was minimal and they stressed that "all the assessments, it is a lot of pressure" (PT3) because "you're expected to get them to this level by the end of the year" (PT1). Extending on the findings of the Australian Government Department of Education (2014), the Alliance for High Quality Education in the Early Years of Schooling (2014), and the Australian Primary

Principals Association (2014), the new Australian curriculum was also targeted by the Kindergarten teachers as they could not find any explicit reference to pedagogy within it "because how much of that is around play?" (PT4). This was seen as a constraint in "that's not spelt out enough in the curriculum for me to justify to my boss why I've then got massive chunks of play" (PT2). These findings parallel the functional barriers identified in Kagan's (1990) research. Conversely, the new national curriculum framework for the preschool educators, the EYLF, was viewed positively as it advocates for the use of a play-based approach. Hence, the prior-to-school participants explained that this can help validate to others why this is a leading tool for teaching and learning in their setting.

6.3.2.3 Financial

Financial constraints in the form of availability of resources also featured strongly in participant responses. This was noted as a significant restriction for the Kindergarten teachers in that they felt they "just don't have the resources" (PT1) and "that takes money" (PT2). The prior-to-school educators concurred that "being well resourced probably is what it comes down to" (EC1). Exosystem factors such as financial issues related to socio-economic factors within the local community meant that for certain schools "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." (PT4). As a result, play-based pedagogy was deemed a barrier to a strong focus on targeting the gap in literacy and numeracy skills for children from low socio-economic backgrounds in their first year of school. This participant reasoned that in other schools teachers would "be able to do more play-based things because children already come to school with a certain set of skills" (PT4).

6.3.2.4 Beliefs of others

Other related issues mentioned were parental expectations and their (mis)conceptions of play as overwhelmingly contributory challenges faced by both groups of participants. They remarked that parental beliefs ranged from issues about more emphasis on academics to a broad mistrust of the value of play-based pedagogy. There was a general view that much effort was needed to educate

families about the value of learning through play because "a lot of parents obviously want numbers and alphabet…introduced in these programs" (EC4). Particularly in a school context, participants felt the pressure to explain the learning evident in children's play so parental concerns were addressed such as "what are you doing with my child? Are they just playing all day?" (PT4). Prior-to-school educators explained "we have to really put a lot of emphasis on it and educate our families about why we're doing it" (EC1). There was a feeling that parents were "expecting a piece of work" (EC4) and so learning as a process not a product was key to explain. A shared concern between the two groups was about the focus parents have on visible outcomes and attainment of specific cognitive skills was apparent. This was particularly evident in the responses of the Kindergarten teachers where parents were reported to emphasise academic achievement and "expecting kids should be reading and things like that" (PT2) because "parents want to see results" (PT4). The teachers felt it was difficult to convince parents that allowing children to play was a positive element "even though there may be research to suggest that it might be" (PT4). Advocacy for play was a common element when explaining to families the learning that occurred "because they don't have that understanding" (PT3). The prior-to-school participants used these opportunities to promote play and "explain to them why it is different, and why we do what we do" (EC1).

Similar to the findings of Niesel and Griebel (2001), this study established that as transition approaches, parents' expectations become more focused on academic skills. The prior-to-school educators explained that parents feel pressured to prepare or 'make ready' their children for the first year of school in terms of academic gains. Likewise, Barbarin et al. (2008) and Tobin and Kurban (2010) found that pressure from parents for a stronger emphasis on academics in early learning settings was irrespective of socio-economic or EAL characteristics and this was evident across all research sites in the current study. These results are also consistent with data from more recent Australian literature such as that of Dockett (2011) and O'Gorman and Ailwood (2012) who also stated that teachers reported parental perceptions and attitudes as barriers to a play-based approach. Such views

emanate from the broader socio-political macrosystem influences of the dominant discourses of school-readiness and the emphasis of the literacy and numeracy agenda within the Australian education context. However, parental pressures such as these may be difficult to resist. Within early years education, there is a strong emphasis on families as partners in the care and education of their children. Those pressures are heightened, together with educators' own qualms and reservations and their professional obligation to respect family views and value their perspectives (Brooker, 2010). In the Australian context, a central tenet of the national guiding *EYLF* is that of partnerships with families particularly at transition times which reinforce educators' sense of responsibilities to honouring that shared decision making. Thus, it is during the transition process that tension can exist between teachers' beliefs in the value of play and their desire to respect the requirements and aspirations of their families. Furthermore, there is even a greater need to develop a shared understanding between families and teachers of the relationship between play and learning across the transition process.

Along with parent beliefs, participants also agreed that beliefs of colleagues in the workplace were significant. Prior-to-school educators focused on their work as team members and of the importance in a shared philosophy. They explained that "having all the educators with the same approach" (EC1) helped to support the inclusion of play because "you work as part of a team" (EC2). The advocacy of leaders in their settings helped to cement their own beliefs in play-based pedagogy because "a lot of my beliefs have stemmed off what she [director] tells me" (EC2). For the school teachers, creating a shared culture for the value of play was essential otherwise staff members would not "necessarily hold the same importance…for the same outcomes" (PT2). However, this was not always easy. One Kindergarten participant clarified that collegial opinions can pose a significant barrier. She explained that for many newly qualified school teachers, rationalisation of play as effective could pose a significant challenge, especially from supervising staff members who could "come past and judge me" (PT2).

In terms of other perceived barriers, societal and political beliefs about play and the misconceptions that are held by others drew strong agreement from both groups. This draws parallels to similar research findings about such external macrosystem forces (Alliance for High Quality Education in the Early Years of Schooling, 2014). Some of these stemmed from views held in the community or the wider socio-political sphere: "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" (EC4). Certain misconceptions included that "some people see play as just this big mess" (EC3) or a general lack of understanding about its learning potential: "if people understood the learning that actually comes out of it I think it would be a lot more valued" (PT3). There was a general sense of frustration, particularly from the prior-to-school participants, about the need to defend the place of play in children's education. In the school context, teachers explained that "it's the way our education system is set up on a whole" (PT4) and felt that "it needs to be recognised a lot more in all schools" (PT3). This contributed to views held about the need to substantiate how children can learn through a play-based approach in schools: "it's about what evidence there is to suggest that there's a better way to do it" (PT4). One prior-to-school educator encapsulated the uphill struggle against the misconception of their professional identity that is linked with their work in the play-based approach: "I mean you'll still get people saying, aren't you lucky, you must have a lovely time sitting in the sandpit playing with the kids. Yes" (EC4).

While the prior-to-school educators reported a connection with the body of knowledge that shapes their profession, however on closer examination it seems that there exists some disconnect between their reported educational beliefs and the teaching practices when it comes to the transition process. Also, while the Kindergarten teachers expressed their belief in the general value of play, they were often unable to implement a play-based approach that was consistent with their beliefs. Thus, it appears that these educators are vulnerable to the influence of macrosystem and exosystem pressures from, and the perspectives of, the socio-political community. The current educational climate with its focus on academics and accountability places teachers in the position of either defending play or

bowing to such pressures with a resultant decrease in play and an increase in time for academic learning (Myck-Wayne, 2010).

6.4 Summary

This chapter discussed the findings of the study in relation to the literature and theoretical framework. Findings from Research Question One revealed that teachers found play-based pedagogy a challenging term to define, and misconceptions and misunderstandings were uncovered in their explications of their various theories. However, the idealised notion of play was valued by all participants. In relation to Research Question Two, while pedagogic continuity was another difficult construct to conceptualise, teachers emphasised the discontinuity that exists between the two sectors of education and the need for greater complementarity to improve the transition to school process. Last, findings from Research Question Three highlighted the internal and external factors that influence teacher decisions to implement play-based pedagogy across the transition process. Overwhelmingly, the presence of external elements and pressures were nominated as substantial barriers. The next section presents the final chapter which concludes the research study. Significant findings together with recommendations and implications for policy and future research will be stated.