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

Linda Bellen  
*The University of Notre Dame Australia*

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## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

*“Teachers and parents often feel that play is important for young children, but do not have a clear sense of why it is important. We need to do more to get the word out”*

(Nicolopoulou, 2010, p. 3)

### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews the scope and purpose of the study, and presents a summary of significant findings that contribute to new knowledge. Implications for further research are identified, and recommendations made, with the aim to challenge thinking and conceptualisations of play-based pedagogy and pedagogic continuity, and to broaden knowledge for new directions in policy directives. Limitations of the study are also discussed.

### **7.1 Scope and purpose of the study**

This exploratory case study examined prior-to-school and Kindergarten teacher beliefs about the use of play-based pedagogy to promote pedagogic continuity in the transition to formal schooling. The purpose was to provide an insight into teacher theories of play-based learning and teaching, including their perceived roles and influencing factors to implementation, plus their understandings of pedagogic continuity across the transition process. In examining these phenomena, the study aimed to determine similarities and differences among teacher perceptions in their constructions of play-based pedagogy and pedagogic continuity. Also, the intention was to contribute additional insight into understandings about these terms to help inform future professional development regarding the transition to school and future policy directions.

The study provided answers to the research questions through the findings that were grounded in the data obtained from in-depth interviews and

documentary sources. Interviews with the selected sample provided detailed analysis and a richer understanding of how teachers' perceptions are actually translated into practice. An examination of the different curriculum documents used in the two sectors helped to ascertain whether they impeded or facilitated the implementation of play-based pedagogy across the transition process. What became evident was the complex nature of the transition to school and the tensions and dilemmas that exist for teachers involved in this process. Whilst teacher beliefs did vary, the similarities within the two groups of participants formed a shared discourse and the findings offer an Australian perspective of teachers' theories of play-based pedagogy and pedagogic continuity. The bio-ecological model was presented as a framework through which the proximal processes of the interactions between the teachers across the transition process could be viewed and examined, and helped to identify the critical elements of these interactions that children experience.

## **7.2 Significance of research findings**

### *7.2.1 Towards a new definition for play-based pedagogy*

The first key finding that makes a contribution to new knowledge is that there is no consensus of a definition of play-based pedagogy. This study provides insight into the difficulty for teachers to define and conceptualise this term, and that contexts matter significantly in teaching, in that they either enable or constrain play-based pedagogy in practice. Participant descriptions exposed inconsistencies in definitions and in their implementation of play-based pedagogy. Furthermore, whilst the current national policy document, the *EYLF*, mandates this pedagogical approach in prior-to-school settings, it leaves teachers in that sector to decide how best to interpret this mandate into practice. Lack of a clear definition within this document gives rise to challenges in teachers' understandings of play-based pedagogy, the role they assume within this approach, and how their involvement affects children's learning. Whilst the notion of play was valued by teachers in both settings, and for the prior-to-school educators is a pedagogical priority, in the

classrooms of Kindergarten teachers who operate under the auspices of the *Australian Curriculum*, teaching through play is limited, constrained or marginalised. Misinterpretations and misunderstandings about play-based pedagogy became evident in participant descriptions, particularly in regards to meaningful participation in children's play.

The current study identified that teacher beliefs, shaped by professional training, knowledge and experience, are significant factors for their inclinations either toward or away from implementing a play-based approach. Prior-to-school educator beliefs revealed a strong commitment to play-based pedagogy and the importance of a more relational, responsive and interactional perspective of the adult's involvement. However, they were more comfortable and confident describing conditions for learning than conditions for teaching. There was a degree of hesitation in their descriptions of their role, particularly regarding any mentioning of intentional teaching, despite this being explicitly described in the *EYLF*. The dominance of low intervention or supporting behaviours in prior-to-school educator descriptions signified the primacy of their view of discovery, experiential play-based learning and the tendency toward more passive roles in their teaching practice.

Kindergarten teacher beliefs revealed that they valued idealised notions of play but misunderstood play-based pedagogy. Misinterpretations of play-based pedagogy translated into misunderstandings about their role within this. Play in most cases was misconceived as being simplistic in nature and used separately from actual learning. Hence, descriptions of their role featured either supervisory duties or instructive, directive behaviours characteristic of formal school teaching practices. A shift in how play is viewed in the early years of school is required so that teachers can understand and appreciate how children's play continues to develop and mature, how play and learning are intertwined, and to understand the proactive, interactional role that teachers have in promoting its complexity.

When examining the *EYLF* more closely, definitions of play-based learning, pedagogy, involvement, and intentional teaching are all provided separately.

Educators working in early childhood settings struggle to draw together these components to articulate, interpret, and translate these descriptions into practice to form a clear and cohesive understanding of their role in teaching through play. The findings from the current study suggest the need to rethink existing understandings of the term play-based pedagogy so that teachers can move beyond conceptualisations of their role from predominantly supportive behaviours to more mediational interactions and reflective practices. Thus, of particular significance is how play-based learning sits together with intentional teaching. Specific attention to the proactive, intentional role of the educator is required to help strengthen professional identity and professional vocabulary. This would provide a clear articulation of quality teaching in practice. This necessitates the creation of a shared understanding from which teachers can work that focuses on a relational and interactional pedagogy. What is essential, in view of a bio-ecological perspective, is the emphasis on the importance of the quality of interaction, the proximal processes, between the adult and child.

Thus, an operational definition is required that highlights the intentional pedagogical role of the teacher that focuses on the nature of involvement, while acknowledging the child as an active collaborator and contributor in the learning process. This places intentional teaching as a vital component of a pedagogy centred on learning through play and moves beyond the binary of either play-based learning or intentional teaching. Teacher intentionality does not imply more teacher control or direction. Instead, it reveals the complexity of the role and pedagogical expertise required to ensure that the conditions for quality of learning are present so that children can make sense and construct meaning from their play. In doing so, early years teachers will be able to draw on this definition to confidently articulate and explain their specific role within play-based pedagogy and to proclaim its benefits.

In response to the findings about misunderstandings and misconceptions of play-based pedagogy, the current research proposes a new definition of play-based pedagogy:

**Responsive, reflective educators provide a balance of child-directed and adult-guided purposeful and meaningful play possibilities to support and extend children's thinking and learning based on their inquiries and interests. Educators co-construct knowledge with children, in both planned and spontaneous opportunities, achieved through the use of intentional teaching strategies that are deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful to promote sustained shared thinking and high quality verbal interactions.**

If play-based pedagogy is to be recognised as a legitimate and valued pedagogy in the early years of school, and if teachers in both sectors are to commit to a play-based curriculum across early years education, a common understanding of this term and what it looks like in practice is needed. Challenging assumptions about play-based pedagogy involves an understanding that if play affords valuable contexts for learning, then it follows that it must also provide valuable contexts for teaching, and so meaningful participation on the part of the adult is central to this understanding. Hence, a clear definition will afford early years educators the ability to articulate the value of high-quality play-based learning environments and responsive intentional interactions in which adults engage within those settings to promote and extend children's learning and conceptual understandings. Additionally, teachers in both sectors could share a common language in discussions of children's transitions to school.

### *7.2.2 Reconceptualising 'ready schools' and an early years continuum*

Another key finding is that teachers in the current study found pedagogic continuity a challenging concept to define, but all stressed the importance of the need for continuity across the transition to school. The findings contribute to evidence that teachers believe the transition to the first year of formal schooling could be more effective and smoother, and that continuity and collaboration between the two sectors is limited. Even though the present research base provides extensive suggestions for effective transitions, a contribution to new knowledge from this study is that discontinuity was an ever present theme in teachers'

descriptions of the transition process and the disjuncture between these two environments considered too extreme. The shock of formal learning expectations was highlighted as a major source of discontinuity and so consequently, the current study findings recommend that the concept of 'ready schools' needs to be revisited and redefined.

What was significant in the responses of the participants was the presence of a hierarchical relationship with strong notions of school readiness framing constructs of pedagogic continuity. Reported academic push-down pressures are driving the 'schoolification' of prior-to-school settings, and in schools, changing the landscape of the first year of school. The reported overcrowded curriculum burdens and accountability measures have driven play-based learning and teaching possibilities to the sidelines. Findings from the current study confirm the importance of the first year of formal school to be recognised as a very important foundational transition phase with the need for pedagogic continuity across this process to help alleviate the aforementioned tensions and reduce pedagogic misalignment. Suggestions provided by the participants included using play as a transition bridge and the current study proposes viewing this as a graduated, longer transition timeframe rather than as a time-limited bridging change event. Hence, what is important is to move beyond considerations about pedagogic continuity in terms of an initial adjustment to school. This requires a shift in conceptualisations away from thinking about unilateral communication pathways, short-term orientation or induction events, or preparatory transition activities to pedagogic continuity as a long term, multi-year process with a focus on a shared pedagogical approach. Teachers in both sectors need to build an understanding of how to best connect the play-based imperatives of the *EYLF* with the *Australian Curriculum* so that pedagogic continuity can be realised to help smooth the transition to school. There is an argument for thinking about ECEC and early years schooling as two parts of the same continuum which spans from birth to eight years of age, rather than framing prior-to-school experiences and formal schooling as two distinct and separate events in children's lives. Alignment between the two national guiding curriculum documents, the *EYLF* and the *Australian Curriculum*, could be

achieved through a shared pedagogical approach, together with a stronger focus on the transition to school in the *Australian Curriculum*. The research literature strongly indicates the importance of maintaining a child-centred, developmentally appropriate approach with an emphasis on play-based learning and intentionality in teachers' use of strategies in early years education and emerging studies now provide convincing evidence of the benefits of play-based pedagogy in the first years of school.

Thus, it is suggested that the concept of 'ready schools' be redefined to incorporate the introduction of play-based pedagogy as the predominant pedagogy in the early years of school. This would be in order to provide continuity in children's learning and a less formal approach to teaching that acknowledges, values and builds on children's prior experiences. Indeed, new learning experiences are most effective when they are linked to familiar understandings. What is proposed is something similar to the framework that currently exists in the state of Victoria and their *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (2009)* but on a national level. This would be a common framework for all early years teachers which would cover birth to age eight years - an extension of the *EYLF* into the early years of school until Year 3. The provision for professional development opportunities for teachers in schools would also be required to learn about the *EYLF*, play-based pedagogy, and a play-based curriculum within the early years of school. The commitment to a play-based approach in the school context lies in teachers' knowledge, understanding and acceptance of play-based pedagogy. A strong focus on the transition to school would guide prior-to-school educators and teachers working in schools with children up to Year 3. Readiness concerns and anxieties could be significantly reduced rather than the current perceived role of prior-to-school settings in preparing children for formal schooling. This would support a shift toward maintaining a strengths-based approach and a strong and equal partnership between the two sectors in supporting children's transitions. A key aspect of 'ready schools' would be to embrace the provision of developmentally appropriate, student-centred meaningful learning opportunities through well-planned, challenging play and high quality teaching. Thus, rather than children

being shaped to fit the school, the new school or class accommodates, values and builds on the strengths, skills and interests of their new entrant children.

### 7.2.3 *Macro- and exosystem pressures limiting implementation of play-based pedagogy*

The last significant finding that contributes to new knowledge is that constraining external factors such as misconceptions and misunderstandings of play-based pedagogy. Perceptions held within societal views and attitudes that include families, community members, school staff and principals, and the government sector were identified as prominent in terms of hindering teachers' ability to implementing a play-based approach across the transition to school. Teachers in both case studies expressed the substantial tensions and challenges encountered resulting from parental mind-sets, school staff standpoints, and community outlooks about the perceived minimal worth of play-based pedagogy. Such pressure from external sources contributes to the intensification of more academically oriented, didactic teaching practices, particularly in regard to the transition to school phase. This leaves early childhood trained teachers in an almost professionally isolated vacuum, alone in their role as advocates for the benefits of play-based pedagogy in early years education.

Seen within the theoretical framework of this study, at the exosystem level, these results should then inform policy decisions concerning appropriate pedagogical approaches in early years education. Discussions and advocacy at the policy level should revolve around viewing the transition to school years as a critical period for high quality teaching and learning environments. Even though the last decade has seen an unprecedented focus on ECEC at the policy level in Australia based on the recognition of the importance of the early years, there is still much to be done to expand and restructure policy and public perceptions of early years education, particularly in regards to high quality teaching and play-based pedagogy. The future of the field of early childhood education is being shaped more by business leaders and economists with little input from teachers in determining policy and practice. Exosystem demands from policy makers can alter the microsystem practices of teachers in early years education and schooling with

pressure to perform by enacting scripted curricula. Also, the current emphasis in policy documents on literacy and numeracy skill development within the first year of Australian schools together with accountability demands and student performance measures produce high-stakes learning environments where teachers turn to less developmentally appropriate practices.

In order to counter these barriers, it is imperative that policy makers develop a stronger understanding of the value of play-based pedagogy in early years education and how this relates to academic learning and the accountability structure in the school context. Prior-to-school educators and Kindergarten teachers can support children's transitions on an individual level, but it is important also to advocate for and support wider changes at the exo- and macro-system levels. Hence, it is recommended that advocacy occurs from the microsystem level; a 'push-up' from teachers in both sectors to traverse into the macrosystem by means of a shared, cohesive operational definition so that it is clear what it is they are advocating. This operational definition should be prominent and cited in both curriculum documents to provide a common, shared understanding. Hence, a deeper grasp of play-based pedagogy by policy makers would lead to greater support in schools to make provisions to overcome other reported barriers such as child-teacher ratios that would then make it possible to implement a true play-based approach. School policies and guidelines will not change until there is the directive to do so at the policy level.

### **7.3 Limitations**

The study had several limitations. First, it included a purposive sample of participants from a Sydney region. While the trends identified within the current study may provide useful conclusions for all educators involved in transitioning children into formal schooling, the findings will not necessarily all be transferable beyond the case study settings due to the qualitative nature of the research. However, interviews with the selected sample provided in-depth analysis and a stronger understanding of how teachers' beliefs influence conceptualisations of

play-based pedagogy and pedagogic continuity. Second, the sample size was small and so the study did not claim generalisability across other populations of teachers but begins the conversation about teachers' beliefs about the use of play-based pedagogy to promote pedagogic continuity across the transition process. The decision to limit the number of participants to eight teachers was to ensure manageability of the study yet yield enough data for verification of trustworthiness and authenticity as data saturation was reached. Thus, it is possible for other researchers to use the findings of this study to gain practical and valuable insights on the research topic, guided by the audit trail and rich contextual descriptions of the study.

Furthermore, the study relied on teacher self-report not on directly observed behaviours. Agreements and consistencies within and across the case responses provided some measure of triangulation for individual participants' reported practices. Therefore, as data saturation was reached, the results did provide evidence that could be used to inform practice across the transition process and in professional development about this topic. Also, it was assumed that the early childhood trained educators were familiar with the *EYLF*, however there were limited understandings for how this influenced their role. Nevertheless, the study was undertaken with trustworthiness and authenticity, so the findings may prove useful to other contexts. Last, the issue of self-reports and researcher bias may be a possible limitation but rigour was ensured in the design, the data gathering phase and in the data analysis.

#### **7.4 Implications for further research**

Further study, both qualitative and quantitative would be needed to establish the extent of key findings more broadly. Whilst the research conducted in the current study provides a snapshot into beliefs of teachers about the transition to school as it pertains to the NSW context, it is clear from the findings that misunderstandings of play-based pedagogy and pedagogic continuity warrant a deeper exploration of these constructs.

Currently around Australia, there are a number of separate initiatives related to improving the transition to school. In the state of Victoria there is a mandatory Transition Learning and Development Statement and the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* that specifically addresses the transition to school. In NSW a voluntary Transition to School Statement in NSW has been introduced. Queensland has adopted a continua and transition statement which is completed by ECEC services and made available to parents for their own records; parents may then choose to pass this on to the school. In addition, Transitions, Partnerships and Innovation officers who work with ECEC services and schools to promote collaboration on local transition-to-school programs have been employed across the state. Therefore, it is recommended that ongoing evaluation of these initiatives be undertaken in the form of future research directions to be able to inform their role in improving the effectiveness of transitions to school in the Australian context.

At present, there exists limited examination in research and in policy about the differences in the constructs of play and play-based pedagogy held by teachers. Whilst the notion of play has been researched extensively, it is suggested that further research be carried out to provide more consistent data to investigate the implementation of play-based pedagogy within the Australian educational context and to identify teachers' understandings of their roles and how play-based learning intersects with intentionality. More needs to be done in exploring how play-based approaches are enacted in the early years of school. Future research in this area can provide valuable information as to how curriculum and play-based pedagogy meet and shape teachers' perspectives, as well as how the current *Australian Curriculum* could be transformed to better support young children's learning across the transition to school.

## 7.5 Final words

If we truly desire more effective transitions to school, policy makers and researchers alike must re-examine existing understandings and constructs of play-

based pedagogy which would alter and ameliorate current pedagogic discontinuity as experienced by children in their passage to formal schooling, otherwise, play will be forever 'lost in transition'.