

Children's perspectives of play in an early childhood classroom

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Agency, Australia, child-adult relations, child-researcher interactions, children, children's competence, children's perspectives, curriculum, early childhood education, early years, education, educators, ethnography, expert informant, generational order, kindergarten, learner, learning, Mosaic approach, parents, participation, partnership, pedagogy, play, play-based learning, Prep, Preparatory Year, pre-primary, preschool, primary, Queensland, reflexivity, school, social membership, social order, sociology of childhood, teachers, work, young children

Abstract

While play is valued conceptually and pedagogically, its place in early years settings is under increasing pressure. So too, children's access to agentic play-based opportunities is ever more constrained and regulated by policy agendas that privilege academic, formalised outcomes over play-based approaches. In that context, this ethnographic study investigated young children's perspectives of play and their experiences of classroom activities in the Preparatory Year ('Prep'), Queensland's first year of primary school. Investigating children's experiences from their own perspectives affords children opportunities to have a say on matters of importance to them, such as play. Findings of this thesis are presented through three papers written for publication.

Paper 1 reports on data collected over five months of fieldwork with children in the Prep setting. Video and audio recordings captured conversations with and participant observations of children as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities and practices. In response to questions about their classroom activities, and in determining whether an activity was play or work, children drew on their insider knowledge of the classroom setting and oriented to the classroom timetable in their talk about activities. Reflexive practices identified that children only talked about play and work in response to researcher initiated questions, or in the context of the adult-constructed classroom agenda. Children themselves wanted to talk about their agenda; that is 'inside play' - a specific period of time in which they were afforded agency to make decisions about what they did and with whom. Children's participation in activities was influenced by teacher-framed agendas, and the agency afforded to them to engage in self-chosen activities and to design and negotiate their play spaces. For instance, children generally were unenthusiastic about writing activities and called these activities 'work' if they were directed by the teacher, and yet they consistently chose to engage in writing activities during periods of freely chosen activities. The meanings that children ascribed to play illustrated complex understandings of their classroom activities. This study raises questions about what counts as 'play' and 'work' for

children, and generates opportunities for educators to reflect upon ways to enhance children's agency and participation in their practices.

The significance of children's agency and participation in their classroom practices prompted investigation of the factors that supported and facilitated the provision of play-based opportunities in this setting. Paper 2 reports on data collected in conversations with six mothers during the course of fieldwork. Parents were supportive of play-based learning in their child's Prep classroom, and described the significance of play in their child's early learning and development. Parents reflected on play in the context of their child's active engagement in classroom activities, and identified links between their child's play and learning at school. These findings were reflected upon in the context of interview data collected with eight parents of Prep children during a Masters Research study in 2012. While parents in the earlier study broadly valued play as an appropriate learning context for young children, tensions arose for them when play was considered in the formal learning context of Prep. In particular, parents did not support play episodes that afforded children agentic opportunities to exercise decision-making and control. Findings reported in Paper 2 highlight the significance of parent engagement and strong parent-teacher partnerships in helping parents to understand their child's early learning experiences. Such partnerships can foster supportive environments for play pedagogies to be enacted, and provide opportunities for parents to advocate for play in early years settings.

Building on notions of children's competence and participation as key concepts underpinning findings reported in Papers 1 and 2, Paper 3 reports on children's participation in research through co-constructed child-researcher interactions. Framed by the concept of generational relations between children and adults, the paper draws on examples of child-researcher interactions in which I adopted a researcher stance of learner by behaving in ways different to that of a parent or teacher in the setting. A consequence of this stance was that existing child-adult social orders in the setting were disrupted. Within the new social order that was produced, interactional space was created for children to take up stances as expert informants of their practices. As expert informants, children supported me in becoming a member of their classroom by informing me of the school rules, and the behaviours required of me as an adult within existing child-adult social orders. The study highlights children's competence in orienting both to existing child-teacher social orders and the new social order being produced in these child-researcher interactions. Creating space for the co-production of alternate participant stances provides enhanced opportunities for children's participation

as informants in childhood research, and in child-adult interactions more broadly across social structures.

This thesis identifies nuanced and complex understandings of children's perspectives, experiences, agency and participation; in particular, what is important to children in school, and the classroom experiences and activities that they value. This study has implications for educators and policy makers across international early childhood education settings. The thesis identifies practical ways in which children's agency and participation in their practices can be facilitated and supported by teachers, professionals, parents and researchers working with children across social structures.

Manuscripts resulting from the PhD research program

- Breathnach, H., Danby, S., & O’Gorman, L. (2018). Becoming a member of the classroom: Supporting children’s participation as informants in research. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 26(4).
- Breathnach, H., Danby, S., & O’Gorman, L. (2017). ‘Are you working or playing?’ Investigating young children’s perspectives of classroom activities. *International Journal of Early Years Education*. doi: 10.1080/09669760.2017.1316241
- Breathnach, H., O’Gorman, L., & Danby, S. (2016). “Well it depends on what you’d call play”: Parent perspectives on play in Queensland’s Preparatory Year. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 41(2), 77–84.

Presentations resulting from the PhD research program

- Breathnach, H. (2015). Developing your research project: An exemplar on how MEd projects can grow into PhD projects. In *QUT Research and Publication week*. Brisbane, June 29 – July 2, 2015.
- Breathnach, H. (2014). 'Well it depends on what you'd call play': Stakeholder views of play in Queensland's Preparatory Year. In *Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Speaking back through research*. Brisbane, November 30 - December 4, 2014.
- Breathnach, H. (2014). 'Play is just not going to do it, is it': Parent views of play in Queensland's Preparatory Year. In *QUT Exchanging Insights from Education Research*. Brisbane, October 10-11, 2014.

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List of Acronyms

ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
BERA	British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group
DAP	<i>Developmentally appropriate practice</i>
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DETE	Department of Education, Training and Employment
ELR	<i>Early Learning Record</i>
EPPE	<i>The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education</i>
EYCCL	<i>Early Years: Curriculum Continuity for Learning</i>
EYCG	<i>Early Years Curriculum Guidelines</i>
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NAPLAN	<i>National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy</i>
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QCAA	Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
QSA	Queensland Studies Authority
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	<i>United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</i>
ZPD	Zone of proximal development

Statement of original authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

QUT Verified Signature

Signature:

Date: 15th August 2017

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Play keeps us vital and alive. It gives us an enthusiasm for life that is irreplaceable. Without it, life just doesn't taste good.

Lucia Capacchione, art therapist and author

(Personal communication, December 12, 2016)

1.1 Play in children's lives

Play is a fundamental part of the human experience, and has been the cornerstone of early childhood education for almost 200 years. Since Froebel's introduction of *kindergarten* in 1836, play-based learning strategies have underpinned early childhood education frameworks around the world. Still today, play is valued both conceptually and pedagogically (Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009; Fleer, 2013; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008), and its importance in children's lives is widely acknowledged (Cohen, 2012; Fleer, 2013; Moyles, 2010c). Children themselves have positive attitudes about play (Dunphy & Farrell, 2011; Fisher, 2009; Linklater, 2006), often identifying it as the activity they like most at school (Einarsdóttir, 2005b, 2010a).

Whilst the presence of play in early education settings is often taken-for-granted (Fleer, 2013), increasingly its place in such settings is contested (Hyvönen, 2011). So too, children's access to play-based opportunities is ever more constrained and regulated by policy agendas that privilege academic, formalised outcomes over play-based approaches (Anning, 2010; Theobald & Kultti, 2012). In that context, this ethnographic study investigated young children's perspectives of play and their experiences of classroom activities in the Preparatory Year ('Prep'), Queensland's first year of primary school. The children were aged five years, and Prep was their first experience of formal schooling.

The concept of play is synonymous with childhood (Smith, 2016). Defining it, however, can be problematic due to its dynamic and constantly evolving nature, and its contingency upon 'who, when and where' (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010, p. 20). Play cannot

be described simply as a list of activities or actions (Garvey, 1990). While studies have investigated ways in which children categorise and define play and non-play activities in education settings, less is known about the activities that children value at school and the ways in which they engage in these activities. The aim of this study is to address that research gap.

Play in education contexts underpins the concepts of play-based learning and play pedagogies in this thesis, as identified in international early childhood frameworks such as the *Swedish Curriculum for the Preschool Lpfö 98* (Skolverket, 2011), the *Reggio Emilia* approach (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998), *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014), and key Australian early childhood frameworks such as the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), 2006) and *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009). In this regard, the study aligns itself with notions of play in education contexts as representing active, child-responsive practices, the use of concrete materials, opportunities for children to exercise agency and choice, and real-life learning opportunities.

In Australia (Theobald, Danby, & Ailwood, 2011) and internationally (Lundy, 2007; Powell, Graham, Taylor, Newell, & Fitzgerald, 2011), academic, policy and professional agendas increasingly frame children's daily lives (Einarsdóttir, 2005b; Nothard et al., 2015). In Australia, studies of children's perspectives largely have been located in child welfare and research contexts, rather than in education contexts. This study aims to address the current research gap by investigating children's perspectives of play and the activities they value at school in an Australian education context. Investigating this topic from children's perspectives affords children opportunities to have a say on matters of importance to them, and provides an additional lens through which to view the significance of adult agendas on children's daily lives.

In investigating children's perspectives of play, this thesis does not offer definitions or categorisations of play. Rather, in this study, the topic of play is conceptualised based on what it *means* for children rather than what it *is* from an adult's perspective, or might be. To that end, the thesis considers the value of play from children's perspectives, as well as the ways in which they engage in classroom activities. In this thesis, rather, the everyday activities of children in early education contexts are understood as negotiated, co-constructed practices (Rogers, 2010).

This chapter explores the research problem and contexts within which the study resides (Section 1.2). Section 1.3 presents the research questions underpinning the study. Section 1.4 identifies the researcher's standpoint. The significance and timeliness of the study are then discussed (Section 1.5) with the thesis overview providing a synopsis of each chapter (Section 1.6).

1.2 Research problem and context

1.2.1 Children's participation in the research agenda

The importance of seeking children's perspectives on matters that affect them, such as play, is increasingly emphasised in research and practice contexts (Mason & Danby, 2011; Theobald et al., 2011; Theobald et al., 2015). The provision for children's participatory rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) affords children legal rights to make decisions and be active participants on matters affecting their lives. These participatory rights reflect an understanding of children as active members and constructors of their social worlds (Danby & Baker, 1998), as well as the primary source of information about their own lives (Alderson, 2008).

Framed within 'new' sociologies of childhood (Corsaro, 2005; Mayall, 2002; Prout & James, 1997), the theoretical position of this study recognises that children are active, competent agents who participate in the co-construction of experiences in complex social worlds. Notions of children's competence and agency represent an understanding that children form and are part of social groups, and that they make a valuable contribution to society through their involvement in the decision-making process on matters that affect them (Moss, Clark, & Kjørholt, 2005). Agency refers to children as social actors engaging in co-constructing meaning-making and identity work (Fraser & Robinson, 2004). In structural contexts such as the classroom, for example, Siry et al. (2016, p. 13) describe a 'dance of agency and structure'. To elaborate, child agency is afforded by providing opportunities to exercise initiative, decision-making and control in their practices, and by respecting their interests (Smith, 2007). Children, as 'self-determining actors' (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004, p. 8), hold agentic rights which they can choose to assert or not. In the classroom, the 'dance' occurs within a 'locally assembled set of adult-child...social orders' as interactions both orient to, and produce, the context of the classroom (Theobald & Danby, 2016, p. 122). In orienting to child-adult social orders of the classroom, agency is framed through co-constructed interactions between children, and between educators and children. In research

contexts, the co-production of interactions between children and researchers is also framed by everyday generational and classroom social orders. Situating children's participation within these structural contexts makes possible nuanced explorations of the ways in which children participate in their classroom practices, and in research encounters (Punch, 2016).

Despite increasing support for children's participation within policy and research agendas, there has been little advancement of young children's participatory rights in their everyday classroom activities in Australia (Theobald et al., 2011). In that regard, there have been calls for research into young children's experiences at school in order to understand the ways in which children engage in their everyday classroom activities (Theobald et al., 2011), and to understand what is important to them in school (Mason & Danby, 2011). This study seeks to address a gap in the research by providing important understandings of children's perspectives of play, and the activities that they value at school. Researching children's experiences positions them as persons of value within the research agenda (Greene & Hill, 2005; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008) and as active members and constructors of their social worlds (Danby & Farrell, 2004; James & James, 2004; Prout & James, 2000; Theobald et al., 2011).

The second context within which this study resides, the place of play in early childhood settings, is now discussed.

1.2.2 Play in early childhood settings

In early childhood settings, play traditionally has been viewed as a child-initiated and directed activity (Fisher, 2010; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Views on the nature of play, activities that are considered play, and the purpose and roles of play in education contexts, are often very different and at times opposing (e.g. Breathnach, 2013; Einarsdóttir, 2008; Fisher, 2010; Izumi-Taylor, Pramling Samuelsson, & Steele Rogers, 2010). Despite evidence that play can be understood as serious (Cobb-Moore, Danby, & Farrell, 2005; Danby, 2005) and educational (Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009; Brooker & Edwards, 2010), the value of play in education settings is increasingly contested (Einarsdóttir, 2006; Flear, 2013; Hard & O'Gorman, 2007; Hyvönen, 2011). In formal education settings, play often is positioned by adults as a means to an end, such as a reward for the completion of work or as a holding task (Keating, Fabian, Jordan, Mavers, & Roberts, 2000; Moss & Petrie, 2002). The positioning of play in these ways suggests that it may be viewed by early years stakeholders as separate to and less important than learning (Anning, 2010; Hyvönen, 2011; Moyles, 2010c; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008).

Despite traditional constructions of play as the 'holy grail' of early childhood education (Anning, 2010, p. 30), there are tensions for educators in its provision. While the role of educators in supporting and guiding children's learning through play is emphasised (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Thorpe et al., 2005), tensions borne out of differing educational beliefs, practices and orientations can lead to ambiguity as to when and how educators should involve themselves in children's play (Dockett, 2010; Fler, 2013; Wood, 2010). Further complicating understandings of play in education contexts is that educators have quite specific intentions around play in their classrooms (e.g. Einarsdóttir, 2006; Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011). Less well-known is how children understand their everyday classroom experiences, from their own perspectives. Investigating this topic enables considerations of how to support young children's agentic participation in classroom practices.

The place of play in education settings is diverse and shifting. In countries such as China and Hong Kong, which have traditionally favoured more formal teaching approaches, there have been policy shifts towards child-centred, play-based approaches (Education Commission, 1986; Zhu, 2009). Despite these shifts, however, gaps between government policy and the implementation of play pedagogies remain (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Zhu, 2009).

In Western education settings, play is increasingly problematised as learning outcomes are prioritised over play-based pedagogies (Alcock, 2013; Hedges & Cooper, 2014). While Nordic countries historically have placed considerable emphasis on play in early years settings (Wagner & Einarsdóttir, 2008), Einarsdóttir (2006) and Gunnarsdóttir (2014) note that in Iceland there is increasing focus on academic outcomes and shifts away from play-based strategies. In Sweden, Lindstrand and Björk-Willén (2016) note similar trends, identifying shifts away from holistic, child-centred practices to a focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes in the preschool years.

So too in Australia, increasingly, there is a policy shift away from traditional early childhood curricula towards frameworks that privilege learning outcomes both in non-compulsory and primary school settings (Dockett, 2010; Grieshaber, 2010; Hard & O'Gorman, 2007; Petriwskyj, Turunen, & O'Gorman, 2013; Theobald & Kultti, 2012). The socio-political discussion around education in and between Australia's states and territories regarding the development of a national *Australian Curriculum* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), n.d.), numeracy and literacy levels, performance and assessment reporting, and education funding has changed the early

childhood education landscape. In South Australia and New South Wales, teachers identify a perceived lack of parental support for play in the classroom, instead believing that formalised literacy and numeracy activities are privileged by parents (Dockett, 2010; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000). Queensland Prep teachers have raised concerns about trying to substantiate children's learning through play to colleagues and school leaders (O'Gorman & Hard, 2013). In addition to the perceived lack of parental and collegial support for play, teachers have identified heightened expectations related to curriculum and learning outcomes, and formalised assessment and reporting as barriers to play in early childhood education settings (Dockett, 2010).

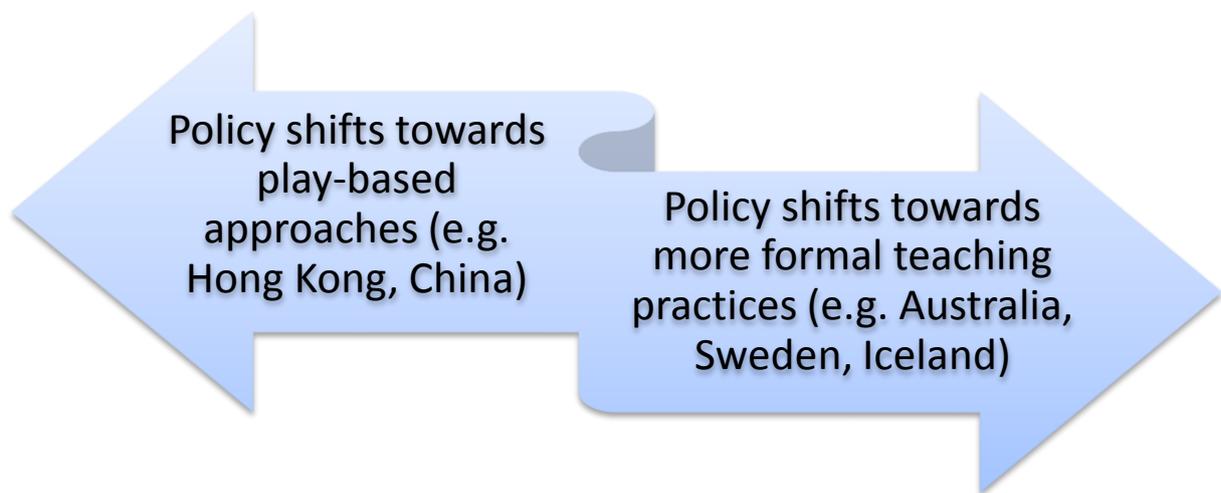


Figure 1.1 Play in education settings

In Queensland, the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) focused on academic outcomes and standardised assessment in the first year of schooling is concomitant with a push-down of formal curriculum into early years settings (Petriwskyj et al., 2013). Changes in the provision of early childhood education in Queensland have created tensions due to the differing pedagogical and curriculum foci of Prep's two curriculum frameworks, the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG)* (QSA, 2006) and the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) (Petriwskyj et al., 2013). While not the focus of this study, consideration of such tensions is important in locating the context of this study and the findings presented in Chapters 6 to 8.

The ethnographic design of this study (discussed in Chapter 4) emphasises the significance of the context of a setting in understanding people's social worlds, experiences and perspectives (O'Reilly, 2009). Individuals' social worlds and peer groups are constructed

through meaning-making in interactions, which themselves are situated within multiple layers of context (Brockmann, 2011; Corsaro, 1985). Play in education contexts is a dynamic concept shaped by biological, social and contextual factors that influence how it is valued, and the ways in which children experience it (Fleer, 2013; Gaskins, Haight, & Lancy, 2007; Göncü & Gaskins, 2007b). In this ethnographic study, one of the factors that might influence how children view, experience and engage in play is the contextual setting of the study in a Queensland Prep classroom. As such, specific consideration of tensions evident in Prep is important in understanding the ways in which such tensions may act as barriers to play thereby shaping children's experiences of play, and their engagement in classroom activities. Tensions evident in Prep, as they relate to the contextual setting of this study, are discussed further in Chapter 2.

The research questions in the study are now presented.

1.3 Research questions

The introduction in Queensland of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) has, arguably, pushed Prep away from the early years philosophy on which it was developed towards more formalised schooling for young children. In the context of mounting challenges and barriers to the provision of play in Prep, this study sought to investigate children's perspectives of play, the activities they value at school and the ways in which they engage in those activities. Investigating children's experiences at this time presented a unique opportunity in that Prep has been a working model since its introduction in 2007, and no research had taken place with children in early primary school regarding their experiences of play during this time. Specifically, children's experiences of Prep had not been investigated since its trialling (Thorpe et al., 2005), suggesting that the findings of previous research had reduced relevance to the current early primary model characterised by increased emphasis on the national curriculum.

The purpose of this study was to investigate children's perspectives of play and to understand the ways in which they engage in classroom activities in Queensland's first year of primary school. The study sought to engage young children as research participants in order to provide opportunities for them, as key stakeholders in early childhood education, to express their views about what is important to them in school.

The ethnographic design of this study (discussed in Chapter 4) foregrounds the relevance of children's broader experiences inside and outside of the setting in the context of their experiences and perspectives of play at school. In this way, a holistic view of the setting is taken to reflect the significance in ethnography of contexts in understanding people's social worlds, experiences and perspectives (Erickson, 2010; O'Reilly, 2009). In seeking to understand holistically the ways in which children viewed, experienced and participated in classroom activities and practices, the research questions were:

1. What are children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences in Prep?
2. What contextual factors support the provision of play-based learning opportunities for children?
3. How can researchers support children's participation in research as informants of their everyday practices?

The evolution and development of these research questions over the course of the study is discussed in Chapter 4.

The researcher's standpoint is now presented.

1.4 Researcher's standpoint

My initial interest in play in Prep stemmed from my post graduate studies in early years education in 2009. My subsequent employment as a Prep teacher in a Queensland state school deepened my interest in, and commitment to play in early childhood education. As a mother, my own children's experiences in Prep have fundamentally shaped my perspectives, and have shed light on an alternate perspective of play in Prep; that of children.

In 2012, I completed a Masters in Education (Research) study that investigated parent views of play in Prep. That study provided a first step in understanding stakeholder perspectives of play. It also gave me insight into children's experiences from the perspective of their parents. What became clear to me in the course of that study was that children's perspectives have become lost in a socio-political education discourse that has been squarely focused on academic performance measures, the *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)* (ACARA, 2016) results and funding concerns.

My contribution to the debate, from the perspective of practitioner-researcher, is to engage with young children in early years settings, as those most impacted by the decisions

of our educators and policy makers, on matters that affect their daily lives. Play is one of those matters.

1.5 The significance and timeliness of this study

The significance and timeliness of this study rest in that more than a decade has passed since the *Preparing for School Trial* (Thorpe et al., 2005) that led to the introduction of Prep in Queensland schools, and the changed curriculum landscape in Queensland. Since then, only a handful of studies have investigated stakeholders' views of Prep; in particular, parents' views (Breathnach, 2013; O'Gorman, 2007), Prep teachers' views (Noel, 2010; O'Gorman & Hard, 2013; Walker et al., 2012), and teacher aides' views (Sonter, 2013).

Research in Australia and internationally has considered children's perspectives of play (e.g. Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2005; Einarsdóttir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009; Lillemyr, Sobstad, Bang, Marder, & Flowerday, 2007; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009; Theobald & Danby, 2014) as well as Prep children's perspectives more generally (Theobald, 2009; Thorpe et al., 2005). There has, however, been a notable absence of research on children's perspectives of play in the context of Queensland's Prep since the *Report of the Queensland Preparing for School Trial 2003/4* (Thorpe et al., 2005). The temporal location within which this study was conducted, together with the context of recent and current curriculum changes in Australia, presents a distinctly different perspective than that of previous studies.

Two Queensland studies that considered Prep parents' perspectives both highlighted the importance and timeliness of a study considering Prep children's perspectives. Parents in O'Gorman's (2007) study of parents' conceptions of Prep considered whether the nature of the program met the current needs of their children. While parents in that study considered Prep from both their and their children's perspectives, it is evident in the findings that parents' expectations of their children's experiences are often very different from their children's actual experiences. One parent, in particular, described how she thought her daughter would enjoy the structured nature of Prep. The lack of choice and perceived adult controlling of play, as recounted by the child to her parent, highlighted, however, that the parent's expectations were very different to the child's experiences (O'Gorman, 2007).

The findings of Breathnach's (2013) study of parents' views of play in Prep suggest that the impact of the changes taking place in Queensland's education landscape may already be evident in Prep classrooms. Parents in that study indicated their belief that the introduction

of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) had and would continue to impact on the provision of play in Prep, and on their children's experiences. In particular, parents noted a lack of opportunity for their children to play, an increased focus on literacy and numeracy learning outcomes, and increased expectations on their children to perform well academically (Breathnach, 2013). While most parents interviewed did not spend time in their children's classrooms, the majority described learning experiences that were structured and teacher-directed rather than play-based. These understandings were based on their children's accounts of their experiences in Prep, on information provided by their children's teacher and on their own personal perspectives on the nature of schooling. Breathnach's (2013) study highlighted parents' recognition of the importance of play in Prep, not least because they believed its presence encouraged their children to want to go to school.

The contextual and temporal changes that have occurred in the education landscape in Queensland and more broadly across Australia, combined with little research with children on this topic, present a timely opportunity to reflect on the current state of play in Queensland's first year of schooling. Such a reflection is, in fact, long overdue. This ethnographic study presents opportunities to investigate different ways to research with children their views of play in school. The findings have theoretical implications for how play can be understood as a nuanced and complex concept and practice, and present practical opportunities for educators to enhance children's agentic classroom agendas in Queensland, and in early childhood contexts more broadly.

1.6 Thesis overview

This document has nine chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the research topic, outlined the research problem, contexts and questions, and identified the significance of this study. The chapter identified gaps in the knowledge base in relation to children's perspectives of play, the activities that they value at school, and the ways in which they engage in those activities in an Australian education context.

Chapter 2 considers the contextual setting of the study in a Queensland Prep classroom. The chapter provides an overview of Prep and its curriculum frameworks. In doing so, this chapter also attends to tensions evident in Prep that may shape children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences.

Chapter 3 provides a review of the literature on play and play pedagogies in early childhood education. The views of early years stakeholders on play, as well as children's participation in the research agenda are also discussed.

Chapter 4 details the study's research design framed within ethnographic and sociology of childhood perspectives. In particular, the chapter describes the context of the study, participants, research setting, and data collection and analysis procedures. The chapter concludes by addressing issues of research rigour in the study.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of three journal papers in this thesis written to report the study's findings. The findings from each paper are briefly outlined.

Chapter 6 presents the first paper of this thesis: '*Are you working or playing?*' *Investigating young children's perspectives of classroom activities* (Breathnach, Danby, & O'Gorman, 2017). This paper is published in the *International Journal of Early Years Education*. The paper reported on children's perspectives of play, and the ways in which they engaged in classroom activities. Conversations with children and observations of them engaged in their classroom practices highlighted that their perspectives and their participation in classroom activities were influenced by adult agendas, and the agency afforded to them to engage in activities. For instance, children generally were unenthusiastic about writing activities and called these activities 'work' if they were directed by the teacher, and yet they consistently chose to engage in writing activities during periods of freely chosen activities. The meanings ascribed by children illustrated complex understandings of classroom activities, and raise questions about what counts as 'play' and 'work'. The findings reported in this paper generate opportunities for educators to reflect upon ways to enhance children's agency.

Chapter 7 presents the second paper of this thesis: "*Well it depends on what you'd call play*": *Parent perspectives on play in Queensland's Preparatory Year* (Breathnach, O'Gorman, & Danby, 2016). This paper is published in the *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. The paper grew from questions that arose from findings reported in Paper 1. In the context of increasing pressure on the provision of play in early childhood education, I wondered what the factors were that supported the provision of agentic play-based opportunities for children in the setting. This paper highlights the significance of strong parent-teacher partnerships in facilitating the provision of play in early childhood settings. Such partnerships also provide opportunities for parents to more fully understand their child's

early childhood program so that they themselves become advocates for play in early years settings.

Chapter 8 presents the third paper of this thesis: *Becoming a member of the classroom: Supporting children's participation as informants in research*. This paper is published in the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. This methodological paper reflects upon ways in which knowledge, identity and meaning-making were interactionally managed and co-constructed in child-researcher interactions. Framed by a generational perspective and sociology of childhood understandings of children's social competence, the paper explores researcher strategies to support children's participation as expert informants of their practices. The paper draws on episodes of child-researcher interactions where everyday child-adult classroom relations were disrupted by my researcher stance as learner. A consequence of this stance was the reshaping of the existing social order to collaboratively produce with children a social order where I was being constructed as a member of the classroom. Creating such interactional spaces provides rich opportunities for children's participation as informants in research, and in child-adult interactions more broadly.

Chapter 9 concludes this thesis and presents the key findings of the study. The significance of the study, and its limitations, are discussed. The chapter also outlines recommendations of the study and identifies future research possibilities.

1.7 Chapter summary

The aim of this study was to investigate children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences in Prep, the first year of primary school in Queensland. This chapter has introduced the research topic, outlined the research problem, contexts and questions, and identified the significance of this study. The chapter identified gaps in the knowledge base in relation to children's perspectives of play, the activities that they value at school, and the ways in which they engage in those activities in an Australian education context. The next chapter locates the contextual setting of the study in a Queensland Prep classroom. In doing so, the specific tensions in Prep that may shape children's perspectives and experiences of play are explored.

Chapter 2: Prep: Contextualising the study

The frame, the definition, is a type of context. And context ... determines the meaning of things. There is no such thing as the view from nowhere, or from everywhere for that matter.

Noam Shpancer, psychologist and author (2010, p. 136)

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to investigate children's perspectives and experiences of play in Queensland Prep. In taking an ethnographic approach, the significance of a setting's context in understanding people's social worlds, experiences and perspectives is emphasised (O'Reilly, 2009). In relation to this study, early childhood programs exist within wider historical, social and political contexts (Farrell, Tayler, & Tennent, 2004; Hard & O'Gorman, 2007). Stakeholders, including school leaders, educators, parents and children, are likely to influence, and to be influenced by, these same contexts (Hard & O'Gorman, 2007; O'Gorman, 2007).

This chapter locates Prep as the setting for the study. The two curriculum frameworks relevant to Prep, the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG)* (QSA, 2006) and the *Australian Curriculum (Version 7.5)* (ACARA, n.d.), are discussed. In particular, attention is drawn to tensions that have emerged between these two frameworks. The chapter considers how such tensions may act as barriers to play, reduce children's agentic participation, and shape children's experiences in Prep.

2.2 The setting: Queensland's Preparatory Year ('Prep')

Prep is the first year of primary school in Queensland. This fulltime program was introduced in all Queensland primary schools in 2007 following the 2003 trialling of the program in 39 Queensland state (public) schools (Hard & O'Gorman, 2007; Thorpe et al., 2005). While Prep

was not a compulsory year of schooling at the time of the study*, it is constructed in a school-like manner (for example, wearing of uniforms, proximity within the school building, inclusion of Prep in whole-of school curriculum, and standardised assessment and reporting of children). Children commencing Prep are typically aged between 4.5 and 5.5 years, with a requirement that children turn four by June 30 in the year prior to enrolment. For the purposes of locating Prep in an international context, Table 1.1 below identifies a number of comparable international early childhood programs attended by children aged between five and six years. A brief description of each program follows.

Table 1.1

International early childhood education programs

Country	Program	Eligible entry age
Sweden	Preschool class	At 6 years
Finland	Preprimary	At 6 years
UK	Reception	To age 5 years
USA	Kindergarten	At 5 years

Sweden

The Swedish 'preschool class' is a transition year between 'preschool' and compulsory primary schooling which begins at seven years. 'Preschool class' is a separate form of school in its own right. Children attend for approximately three hours a day. It is non-compulsory and provided to families free of charge (Skolverket, 2016). Underpinned by principles of creativity and play, the pedagogic approach in 'preschool class' combines teaching and learning methods used in Swedish preschools and compulsory primary schooling (Skolverket, 2011a, 2011b).

Finland

'Preprimary education' is a compulsory year of early childhood education for children aged six years. Children attend 'preprimary' before attending primary schooling (referred to as 'basic education') at age seven. 'Preprimary' is free and provided in day care centres and

* In 2016, the Queensland Government (2016) announced its intention to make Prep a compulsory year of schooling from 2017.

schools. Children must attend for a minimum of 700 hours per year. The *National Core Curriculum* underpinning 'pre-primary emphasises a holistic approach to learning and development through play (Finnish National Board of Education, 2015).

UK

'Reception' is the second and final year of the Foundation Stage of early childhood education in the UK. The program is provided to children aged three years until entry to compulsory primary education (Year 1), which children attend between five and six years. The *Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)*, a mandatory framework for all early years providers in England, emphasises children's learning through play (United Kingdom Government, 2016). However, the *EYFS* also identifies a shift towards the end of Reception to more formal, teacher-directed practices in order to prepare children for the formal learning environment of Year 1 (Department for Education, 2014, p. 9).

USA

'Kindergarten' is an early childhood program for children aged five years. The requirements for children to attend vary by state. In some states, attendance is compulsory, whereas in others there are no requirements for children to attend. The compulsory school starting age also varies by state and ranges from five to eight years (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). While there are no federal guidelines for early childhood education programs in the USA, the curriculum framework of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), known as *developmentally appropriate practice (DAP)* (2009a) represents, in effect, the national early years guidelines (Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010).

The curriculum and pedagogy frameworks relevant to Prep are now discussed.

2.3 Prep's curriculum and pedagogy frameworks

2.3.1 Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG)

The *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG)* (QSA, 2006) are a curriculum and pedagogy framework specifically developed for Queensland's Prep program. The guidelines provide teachers with a framework for interacting with children, and for planning, assessing and reflecting on curriculum. Drawing on the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner, the *EYCG* are framed by a socio-cultural philosophy that acknowledges the relationship between children's learning at home, in communities and in schools. The guidelines are reflective of a child-centred model of early childhood education valuing the use of play-

based, hands-on and child responsive learning (Hard & O’Gorman, 2007). The guidelines also encourage a balance of child and teacher-initiated learning experiences through intentional, focused teaching (Harrod, 2010).

The *EYCG* (QSA, 2006, p. 8) identify five contexts for learning in Prep:

1. play;
2. real-life situations;
3. investigations;
4. routines and transitions; and
5. focused learning and teaching.

Play is acknowledged in the guidelines as a powerful medium through which children develop and actively engage intellectually, physically, socially and emotionally with the world around them (QSA, 2006). The guidelines recognise the important role that adults play in supporting, facilitating and scaffolding play-based learning for children (QSA, 2006). There is also the recognition, however, that play takes many forms and that some children may come from a background where play is valued or understood differently (QSA, 2006). From this perspective, the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) seek to inform and educate parents and educators on the contribution that play can make to children’s intellectual and educational development. The guidelines highlight gender differences in play and acknowledge the need for some children to learn different ways of playing. Pointing to the often inequitable form that play can take, the guidelines work towards a social justice perspective, suggesting that play can provide children with opportunities to challenge bias and address inequities (QSA, 2006).

The *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) was the only curriculum document used in Prep until the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) was rolled out in 2012.

2.3.2 Australian Curriculum

A national *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) was introduced in March 2011. As part of the *Australian Curriculum’s* implementation in Queensland in 2012, Prep was incorporated for the first time into a whole-of-school curriculum and assessment framework for primary and secondary schooling (Petriwskyj et al., 2013).

The rationale for this new curriculum framework was to reduce differences between state-based education systems, and to enact the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals*

for Young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008). In articulating the national purpose and role of Australian schooling for the next 10 years, the declaration noted that a changing global context would require students to have a number of skills and dispositions:

Australia's capacity to provide a high quality of life for all will depend on the ability to compete in the global economy on knowledge and innovation ... [and that] ... schools play a vital role ...in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity. (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4)

The *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) attends exclusively to curriculum content, which it divides into discrete subjects or 'learning areas'. Underpinning the curriculum learning areas are 'general capabilities' that 'encompass the knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that, together with curriculum content..., will assist students to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century' (ACARA, n.d., General capabilities in the Australian Curriculum, para. 3).

In Queensland, implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) has been facilitated through the provision of supporting materials such as planning documents, scripted lesson and unit plans, and assessment materials (Petriwskyj et al., 2013). The division of learning into discrete subjects in the *Australian Curriculum* marks a significant departure for Prep away from the curriculum organisation typical of early childhood settings in Australia and internationally where broader learning areas rather than subjects or disciplines are identified (Bertram & Pascal, 2002).

The *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) does not provide pedagogic guidance for teachers and 'does not specify how the content must be taught' (ACARA, n.d., Student diversity, para. 1). The Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) (2014) has, however, identified a number of appropriate contexts for learning with the *Australian Curriculum* in Prep, almost identical to those outlined in the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006). They are:

1. the teachable moment;
2. investigations;
3. real-life situations;
4. play; and
5. focused teaching and learning.

Since its initial introduction in 2012, the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) has been incrementally rolled out into Queensland schools, while at the same time, the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) have been incrementally phased-out (Queensland Curriculum & Assessment Authority (QCAA), 2015). In 2016, all remaining learning areas in the *Australian Curriculum* were endorsed for use in Queensland primary and secondary schools (QCAA, 2016a). It is anticipated that when Prep is made compulsory in 2017, the *EYCG* will be retired from use but will continue to be made available online as a teacher resource (QCAA, personal communication, December 15, 2016).

A number of tensions are evident in Prep since the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.). These tensions, in the context of their potential impact on children's experiences and perspectives of play, are now discussed.

2.4 Tensions in Prep arising from changing curriculum frameworks

Since its introduction, tensions over state-based interpretations of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.), the positioning of stakeholders, and differing pedagogical and ideological perspectives have emerged (Petriwskyj et al., 2013). In the Queensland context, a number of specific tensions are evident. These relate to a re-framing of children's competence, reduced opportunities for children's agentic participation, the pedagogic approach, and assessment and reporting requirements. These tensions are now discussed.

A re-framing of children's competence

The *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) define children as 'capable' (p. 11) 'initiators' (p. 7) who collaborate in the learning process. Documents concerned with the implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.), however, have re-framed children's competency. *The shape of the Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2012) states that 'the Australian Curriculum helps prepare all young Australians to *become* [emphasis added] competent and contributing members of the community' (p. 10). The use of the word 'become' suggests that children are pre-competent or non-contributing members in the first instance. A focus on education as a means to securing children's *future* participation in the workforce rather than focusing on children's *present* participation in society (James & James, 2004) reflects, what Cromdal (2009) describes as, prevalent perspectives of children as 'pre-competent participants' (p. 1473). Such models of childhood serve to reinforce images of children as 'human becoming' rather than 'human being' (Qvortrup, 2005, p. 5).

The re-framing of children as pre-competent in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) denies their agency as social actors in the present. It also represents a tension in how children are framed in Prep - from a focus on their agency in the present in the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) to a focus on their development for the future in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.).

Reduced opportunities for agentic participation

While the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) advocate active learning experiences for children inside and outside of the classroom, supporting materials and prescribed lesson plans provided to Queensland teachers for the teaching of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) strictly regulate children's learning time. Prescribed content and academic outcomes in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) are intended to account for 80% of the total learning time available with the remaining time available used to support school-based priorities, and provide additional time for teachers to consolidate foundational understandings and skills (QSA, 2014).

A further tension in this area relates to children's agentic participation in classroom practices. The *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) advocate collaborative planning between teachers and children to provide opportunities for children's agentic participation in active learning experiences. The *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.), on the other hand, does not include children as part of the planning process. While Figure 2.1 below positions children at the centre of the *Australian Curriculum's* planning model, planning itself is exclusively undertaken by teachers.

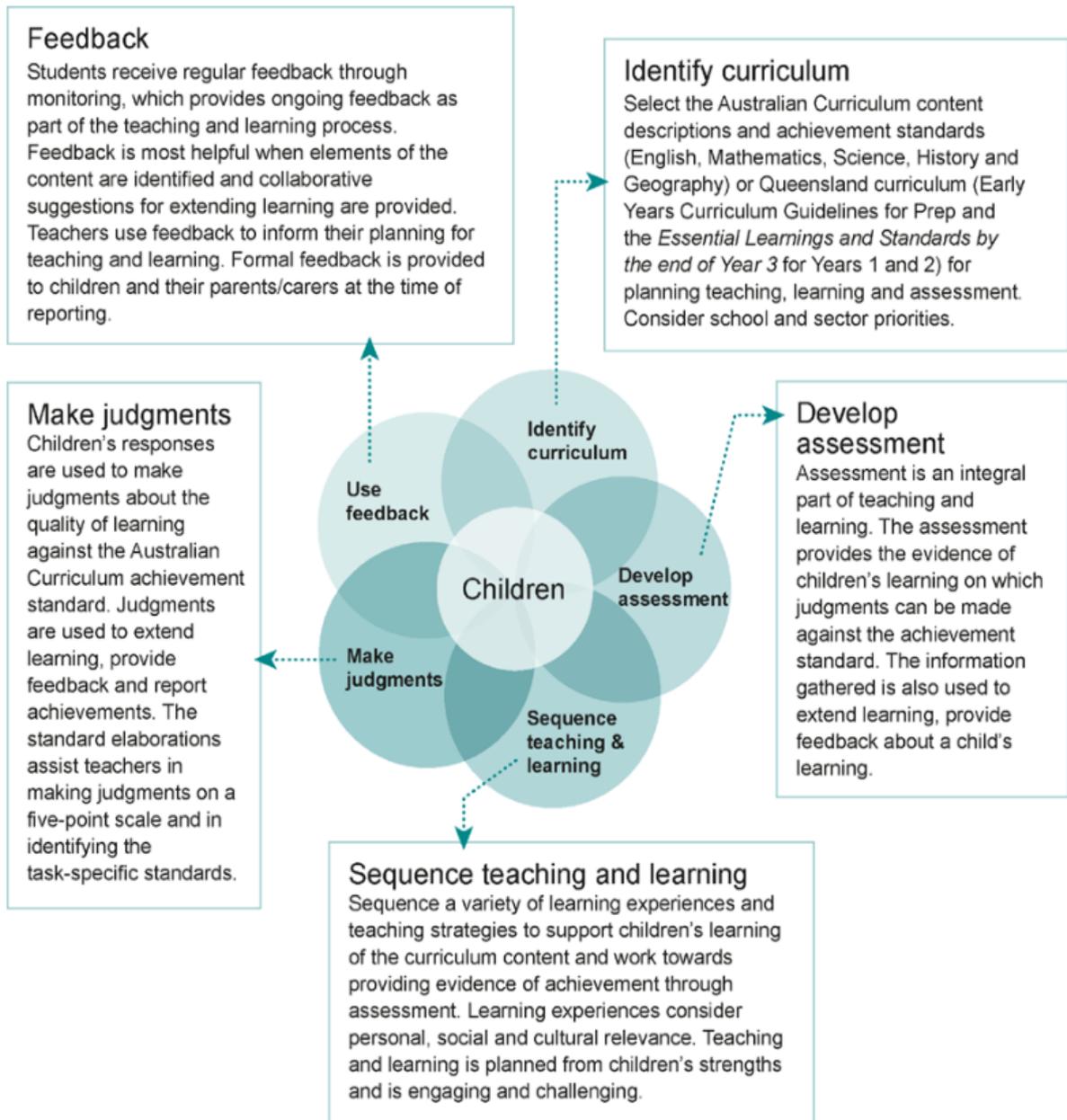


Figure 2.1 Curriculum planning for teaching, learning and assessment in Prep. Adapted from *Elements of planning. P-2 curriculum, assessment and reporting: Advice and guidelines* (QSA, 2014, p. 2)

Reduced opportunities for children to plan collaboratively with teachers may result in contexts for learning that ordinarily involve co-construction with children, such as play, investigations and teachable moments, becoming teacher-directed. The exclusion of children from planning also reduces opportunities for their agentic engagement and participation in activities in meaningful and flexible ways.

A silence on the pedagogic approach

The differing pedagogical and curriculum foci of Prep's two curriculum frameworks have resulted in significant tensions in Prep. For example, the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) discuss both the pedagogy and curriculum of early years, whereas the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) addresses curriculum content only. The focus of the *EYCG* is on play-based pedagogies, strong relationships with children and families, and intentional teaching, whereas the four components of the *Australian Curriculum* focus on curriculum content, general capabilities, cross-curriculum priorities and achievement standards.

While *The shape of the Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2012) identifies play as a context for children's learning, it encourages teachers to use their professional judgement to flexibly apply the principles and practices of early childhood education. Notably, supporting materials provided by the Queensland Department of Education and Training (DET) (2016c) and the federal Department of Education (2016) for the teaching of the *Australian Curriculum* do not engage in the pedagogy of play at all. Instead, the supporting materials address curriculum areas through the provision of lesson plans, content descriptors and achievement standards (DET, 2016b).

The absence of an early years pedagogical framework raises concerns when Prep teachers are not required to hold early childhood qualifications (Hard & O'Gorman, 2007) and so may not be wholly familiar with the principles and practices of early childhood education. During the Prep trial, 45% of Prep teachers identified 'play-based learning' as an important area of professional development (Thorpe et al., 2005, p. 38). These findings are significant in light of the fact that the Prep teachers in the trial were, primarily, experienced specialists in early years education, the majority having come from a preschool background, with many having also taught in Year 1. Perhaps most significantly, the majority of Prep teachers involved in the trial had chosen to teach Prep (Thorpe et al., 2005). Such findings raise questions as to how teachers who may not have early childhood experience and training might apply the principles and practices of early childhood education.

Longitudinal research in the UK (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002) emphasises that effective early childhood education requires teachers to have not only strong curriculum knowledge but also knowledge of how young children learn. As such, it could be suggested that children's experiences of play may be shaped by the ability (or lack thereof) of a teacher to provide agentic play-based opportunities within the context of a formalised and prescribed curriculum framework.

Internationally, there is strong consensus that pedagogy is a vital element in the early years of schooling. Jim Rose (2009), former director of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills in the UK and who later led the independent review of the national primary curriculum in the UK, argues that, in teaching, there must be a focus on *how* children learn as well as *what* is to be learned. The NAEYC in the USA concurs stating that 'curriculum is very important, but what the teacher does is paramount' (2009b, p. 2). Research with early childhood teachers in the UK (Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002; Wood, 2004) highlights that play pedagogies require a high level of skill and ability on the part of teachers. Moyles et al.'s (2002) study of pedagogical effectiveness found that, even where teachers endorsed play pedagogies in early childhood settings, many had difficulties understanding their role in play and assessing the outcomes of play. These findings are mirrored in later studies with primary school teachers (Moyles, 2010b) and student teachers (Brock, 2009), and highlight the potential challenges facing Prep teachers in implementing proactive play pedagogies in the absence of pedagogical guidance in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.).

Changes in assessment and reporting requirements

Prior to the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.), there was no formal requirement for Prep teachers to report on children's academic performance to parents. Prep's *Early Learning Record* (ELR) (QSA, 2006) was used as an internal school mechanism to track and report improvements in children's learning for the purposes of informing the child's next teacher to aid in planning, and to provide a focus for communication with parents and carers. In the *Australian Curriculum*, children's progress is assessed and reported on twice yearly using a five-point grading scale, comprising of reporting descriptors aligned to the requirements of Australian government funding agreements (QSA, 2012).

Identifying literacy and numeracy as the core elements for monitoring children's learning, the QSA (2014) identifies a number of contexts through which children can be assessed in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.). These contexts are almost exclusively focused on formalised assessment, observations of written tasks, child interviews and class discussions, and provide Prep children with opportunities 'to become familiar with assessment techniques' (QSA, 2014, p. 10). The *EYCG* (QSA, 2006), on the other hand, specifically identify separate 'point-in-time assessment tasks external to learning contexts' (p. 14) as unnecessary and inappropriate in Prep because of the affect that unfamiliar language and misunderstandings relating to the assessment can have on young children's performance.

Instead, teachers are encouraged to gather evidence of learning from children's everyday play and learning experiences (QSA, 2006). Such an approach would appear to be more suited to the active learning styles of young children, as identified in both the *Australian Curriculum* and the *EYCG*.

In the context of the challenges they might present to the provision of play pedagogies and children's opportunities for agentic participation, the tensions discussed in this chapter emphasise the timeliness of this study in investigating children's perspectives and experiences in Prep.

2.5 Chapter summary

The parallel use since 2012 of two curriculum frameworks in Prep has given rise to a number of tensions including a re-framing of children's competence, reduced opportunities for children's agentic participation, the absence of a pedagogic approach in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.), and changes in assessment and reporting requirements in Prep. These tensions may act as barriers to the provision of play pedagogies, and reduce opportunities for children's agency in their classroom practices. This chapter considered the significance of this ethnographic study's contextual setting in a Queensland Prep classroom. In particular, this chapter explored how tensions in the setting might affect children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences.

Chapter 3 addresses the literature relating to play and play pedagogies. The research on children's perspectives of play, as well as the perspectives of adult stakeholders, is also discussed.

Chapter 3: Play and the research agenda

We are never more fully alive, more completely ourselves, or more deeply engrossed in anything, than when we are at play.

Charles E. Schaefer, psychologist, (n.d.)

3.1 Introduction

Play is valued as an important way in which children learn and develop. In education settings, significant attention has been given to children's perspectives of play in Australia and internationally (e.g. Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2005a; Einarsdóttir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009; Lillemyr, Sobstad, Bang, Marder, & Flowerday, 2007; Mirkhil, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009; Theobald & Danby, 2014). There has, however, been a paucity of research on children's perspectives of play in the context of formal schooling in Australia, and none in the Queensland context.

This study is located within the context of recent curriculum changes in Australia that have resulted in a repositioning of play in Prep's curriculum frameworks. As research specifically examining children's perspectives of play in Queensland Prep had not been undertaken before, this period of curriculum reform and change in early years education presented a timely opportunity to investigate children's perspectives. Presented in Chapters 6 to 8, findings from this study provide opportunities for dialogue amongst Prep's stakeholders regarding the ways in which children's agency in their classroom practices and participation in the research agenda can contribute to improved outcomes for children in the context of education policy and practice.

This chapter considers the lenses through which play is viewed, and the images of children that are produced in those contexts (Section 3.2). Section 3.3 considers approaches to play pedagogies in early childhood settings. The next section (3.4) discusses stakeholder perspectives of play; in particular, those of principals, teachers, parents and children. Section

3.5 considers children's participation in the research agenda, underlying the premise of this study as one that positions children as competent and active social agents. The final section (3.6) presents a conclusion of the chapter, re-affirming the timeliness of this study.

3.2 Dominant lenses through which play is viewed

With multiple theories of play abounding (Sutton-Smith, 1997), different perspectives of play emerge depending on the lens through which it is viewed. These lenses facilitate different approaches to play in early childhood settings, and produce alternate views of children in play. Psychological understandings of play often focus on the positive emotional feelings that play can foster, promoting a healthy and balanced approach to life (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Developmental psychologists place play at the beginning of the developmental stage for both children and adults; a time of experimentation and exploration before mastery is achieved (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Jenks, 2005). Anthropologists and sociologists consider play with regard to its relationship to cultural practices and customs, and where and how play takes place in society (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Jenks, 2005; Prout & James, 1997).

The dominant lenses that have shaped views of play and children are discussed in this section. While some of these lenses have been more dominant in the past, they continue to remain foundational to contemporary understandings of play and early childhood curriculum frameworks. The many words and phrases used herein to categorise play represent a 'language of play' (Ailwood, 2003, p. 295) that facilitates it being identifiable, understandable and practical. This language also serves, however, to normalise types and phases of play in the context of children's development in order that children in play can be observed and regulated (Ailwood, 2003).

Play through a romantic lens

Through a romantic lens, play is considered a natural element of childhood (Kennedy & Barblett, 2010), which is itself portrayed as a time of innocence (Ailwood, 2003). Such perspectives of play are evident in the Enlightenment and Romantic eras in the writings of, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau who was perhaps the first philosopher to identify the educational significance of play (Cohen, 2006). In his novel *Emile*, he called for the right of children to play and criticised those who tried to force children to grow up too quickly

(Rousseau, 1762/2011). These perspectives are also evident in the writings of Friedrich Froebel (Ailwood, 2003), who founded and established kindergarten in 1837.

In Western cultures, play is valued as a fundamental childhood pursuit by most families (Fleer, 2013), and is seen as something that children need in order to discover more about themselves and the world around them (Fisher, 2010). Play is often associated with notions of nature (Fleer, 2013; Sandberg, 2003). Frequently described elements of play include pleasure, fun, happiness, excitement, imagination and creativity (Bergen, 2009; Huizinga, 1949; Kennedy & Barblett, 2010; Lillemyr, 2009; Moyles, 2010a; Wood, 2009b).

A romantic view of play takes an adult perspective in assuming that all children experience play in positive ways, with negative aspects ignored (Ailwood, 2003). The view ignores the regulatory aspects to play in early childhood settings regarding the governing of children's spaces, and the ways in which children are supervised and monitored during play (Ailwood, 2003, 2004; Anning, 2010; Trawick Smith, 2006). The relative absence of time, space and opportunity for children to play (Wyness, 2000), increasingly evident in early childhood settings (Anning, 2010), suggests that play, as viewed through a romantic lens, is generally unavailable to children (Ailwood, 2003).

Play through a categorisation lens

The view of play through a categorisation lens considers play in terms of children's physical, intellectual, social and emotional development. It reflects the dominance of developmental psychology and its focus, from an adult perspective, on the functions of play, its relevance to children's development, and children's need for play (Ailwood, 2003; Mayall, 2002). Play is typically described as a fun and free activity (Garvey, 1990) involving choice and control on the part of children who are motivated by its intrinsic value (Fisher, 2010; Gray, 2009; Kennedy & Barblett, 2010; Lillemyr, 2009). These understandings of play also link to the romantic view of play as a natural and intrinsic element of childhood. Such views of play are context free, however, and do not reflect the social and cultural contexts of children's lives (Ailwood, 2003). In the context of early childhood settings, this view of play does not take account of the regulatory aspects of children's lives, such as timetabling of the daily school schedule and the physical division of the classroom into different spaces (Ailwood, 2003).

Play through this lens is also characterised according to the type of activity involved. Examples of activities characterised as common for children aged between four and eight years are:

- *Gross motor/active play* – this type of play involves fine motor mastery (such as painting, cutting, pasting, writing, drawing and keyboard use), and gross motor mastery (such as running, climbing, skipping, cycling and sports).
- *Imaginative/dramatic/role play* – this type of play frequently takes place with other children, and involves a high degree of reciprocity, social interaction and collaborative pretence. In their desire for realism and detail, children frequently use props and objects in this type of play.
- *Manipulative/constructive play* – involving experimentation and building with objects, this type of play often involves some form of socio-dramatic play and social collaboration.
- *Creative play* – this type of play may involve arts and crafts, using musical instruments or audio-visual equipment.
- *Rule-based play* – this type of play may involve board or card games, computer or video games, or group games involving strategy and collaboration.
- *Skill-development toys* – this type of play may include educational materials such as microscopes, chemistry sets, binoculars, computer games, clocks and calculators.
- *Books* – books elicit the cognitive play of children in this age group. While younger children enjoy looking through books and older children are capable of choosing and reading their own books, children in this age group also love adults to read books to them.

(Johnson, 2006; Lillemyr, 2009)

Play can also be categorised according to its meaning. While children in play can be understood to be ‘messing around’ (Moyles, 2010a, p. ix) with no particular purpose (Wood & Attfield, 2005), their play can also be viewed as a more serious activity with shifting goals and objectives (Cohen, 2006; Danby, 2005; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Attempts to understand play through its categorisation may, however, limit children’s experiences to something that looks like play (Howard, Bellin, & Rees, 2002); in particular, activities that might look like play through the eyes of an adult (Lillemyr, 2009). Categorising play according to an adult interpretation fails also to recognise the significance of what play might represent for the expressive practices of a child and his or her world (Jenks, 2005), and the ‘serious business’ (Danby, 2005, p. 175) of play in children’s meaning making and construction of social order (Danby, 1998; Huizinga, 1949; Jenks, 2005; Vygotsky, 1966).

Notions of play as a trivial pursuit, rather than as a worthwhile activity in its own right, persist in part due to inherent attitudes as to its value and purpose (Moyles, 2010a; Wood & Attfield, 2005). A view of play as 'non-serious' contributes to the separation of play and childhood from adulthood and maturation (Ailwood, 2003, p. 289). Play, in the context of children, is seen as something fun and easy that they do while waiting to become adults, who themselves are engaged in real and sensible activities (Ailwood, 2003). Through this lens, childhood and adulthood exist as opposites. Likewise, the division of adult play and childhood play ignores any similarities between the two (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Such division also facilitates the continued romanticising of childhood play, and the trivialising of its moral, political and ethical considerations (Ailwood, 2003; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

Play through a development lens

Through a development lens, play is considered in terms of children's development through to adulthood (Lillemyr, 2009; Wood & Attfield, 2005). In the 20th century, children's play was conceptualized by theorists, including Erikson, Bronfenbrenner, Piaget and Vygotsky, in terms of creativity, exploration, experimentation, learning, communication, socialization and mastery as they attempted to understand the reasons why children play (Ashiabi, 2007). In Australia, a development lens has been a dominant one through which play has been viewed in early childhood settings, shaped, in particular, by the theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. These theorists have also influenced New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* program, the *Reggio Emilia* program and the *High Scope* program in the USA (Pound, 2011; Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, & Ingram, 2010). They have also informed the highly influential (Fleer, 1995a) *developmentally appropriate practice (DAP)* (Bredekamp, 1987).

Referencing Piaget's theory of constructivism and stages of cognitive development, play is identified in *DAP* (Bredekamp, 1987) as being the primary vehicle for children's cognitive development. The benefits of play in terms of children's social, emotional and physical development reflect Vygotsky's (1966) view of play as the leading source of development for preschool children. Age appropriateness and individual appropriateness are identified as the two key aspects in developmentally appropriate practices for children in early childhood programs (Bredekamp, Knuth, Kunesh, & Shulman, 1992). Bredekamp et al. (1992) identify age appropriateness as that based on 'universal, predictable sequences of growth and change' (p. 8) in young children, while individual appropriateness considers the unique personality, learning style and background of each child.

The underpinning of early childhood education programs with *DAP* (Bredekamp, 1987) has resulted in much criticism (Fleer, 1995b). In Australia, critics have voiced concerns regarding the apparent lack of consideration given to socially constructed learning, and the role of teachers in children's learning (Dockett, 1995; Fleer, 1995a, 1995b). Concerns have also been raised regarding the apparent white, male, middle-class, Western culture dominant in mainstream developmental psychology underpinning *DAP* (MacNaughton, 1995), and the impact this might have on the socialisation of children towards a monoculture reflective of that dominant culture (Cross, 1995). While *DAP* was developed, in part, in response to a push-down of traditional, academic curriculum and didactic teaching methods in early childhood classrooms (Lee Van Horn & Ramey, 2003), it has been criticised for its overt focus on education methods rather than on curriculum content (Spodek, 1988). In the context of this study, however, that particular criticism has less relevance in light of the roll-out of the content-focused *Australian Curriculum* in Queensland in 2012.

DAP was revised in the 1990s (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), and again in 2009 (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 2009) following intensive debate and consultation in light of changing political contexts and knowledge about child development, and the role of early years education (Walsh et al., 2010). Many of the criticisms targeted at the original 1986 version (Fleer, 1995a, 1995b, 2010) appear, in part, to have been addressed (Aldwinckle, 2001). In particular, the suggestion that *DAP* did not consider the social context and significance of setting has been addressed by the NAEYC (2009a) with the current *DAP* guidelines acknowledging both the cognitive constructivist Piagetian perspective and the socio-cultural context of development recognised by Vygotsky.

Internationally, and in Australia, there has been a notable shift in theoretical perspectives regarding the nature of children's learning, from an 'ages and stages' (Walsh et al., 2010, p. 3) developmental perspective (often associated with Piaget) to an increased understanding of adults' roles in scaffolding and co-constructing learning with children (often associated with Vygotsky) (Walsh et al., 2010). The current NAEYC (2009a) *DAP* guidelines position the role of teachers as challenging children's learning beyond their current level of mastery, and is reflective of the Vygotskian view of scaffolding learning in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) where optimum learning occurs (Walsh et al., 2010). The ZPD represents the distance between what a child knows or can do alone and what they can do or achieve with the help of experienced others. This influence is evident in the Prep's *EYCG*

(QSA, 2006) which identify the importance of scaffolding and co-construction for children's learning and development.

There has also been a shift in the developmental perspective regarding the significance of socio-cultural influences on children's learning (Walsh et al., 2010). From a socio-cultural perspective, play is viewed as a dynamic concept shaped by biological, social and cultural factors that influence its value and the ways it is experienced by children (Fleer, 2013; Gaskins et al., 2007; Göncü & Gaskins, 2007b). Children are understood to create their own practices of play within specific and local contexts (Cohen, 2006; Wood, 2010). Vygotsky's (1966) socio-cultural approaches to play and learning have also had particular implications for early childhood education in Queensland. In particular, Prep's *EYCG* (2006) acknowledge the importance of recognising, valuing, building on children's diverse experiences. The guidelines emphasise the significance of children's community in their play and learning, and advocate collaborative partnership between parents and educators by encouraging shared-decision making, active participation and involvement (QSA, 2006).

Despite these shifts, and the recognition of social and cultural influences on early childhood practices, some of the criticisms levelled at *DAP* from Australian commentators are ongoing (Ailwood, 2003). Commentators from a socio-cultural perspective, including Edwards (2004) and Fleer (2010), challenge Piaget's view that development precedes learning and question the appropriateness of not recognising contextual influences in children's development. In particular, Ailwood (2003) argues that play through a developmental lens continues to produce a view of children as being on an individual and linear developmental path to adulthood with the result that play is understood in a vacuum.

Play through an education lens

In many Western cultures, play is valued pedagogically by teaching professionals and conceptually by academics (Fleer, 2013). There is also an emerging body of work evidencing that play can be understood as serious (Ailwood, 2003; Bodrova, 2008; Cobb-Moore, Danby, & Farrell, 2005; Danby, 1998, 2005) and educational (Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009; Broadhead, 2010; Brooker & Edwards, 2010).

In education settings, play is often considered as a child-initiated activity. Learning, on the other hand, is initiated by adults or is something that occurs as a result of practice (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). While play in non-compulsory settings is considered an important activity (Fleer, 2013), in educational contexts more broadly it may be considered as a means to an end, such as a reward for the completion of tasks, a holding

activity while adults attend to other tasks, or relegated to break time (Breathnach, 2013; Keating et al., 2000; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). The reduction of play to a *sometimes* activity conveys a message that it is different to and less important than learning (Anning, 2010; Keating et al., 2000; Moyles, 2010a; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Such constructions of play are evident in research with educators (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010) and parents (Breathnach, 2013) who, while using terms, such as 'positive', 'valuable' and 'creative' to characterise play, also consider play to be a less academic and serious pursuit when compared to teacher-directed activities.

Constructions of play in early childhood settings can be problematic when 'play' is trivialised and 'work' is privileged. Commentators such as Howard et al. (2002) and Whitehead (2010) advocate distinguishing between play and playfulness when describing activities. They propose that if such a distinction were drawn, then distinctions between 'play' and 'work' would be less prevalent as feelings of playfulness could permeate both types of activities (Howard, 2010b; Howard et al., 2002). Pellegrini and Bjorklund (1998) suggest that the playfulness of children's play activities might be categorised along a continuum from 'pure play' to 'nonplay', rather than trying to define an activity as 'play' or 'not play' (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1998, p. 216). The use of such a continuum, however, may suggest that particular behaviours are specific to play and that playfulness cannot permeate any other activity (Howard et al., 2002). While an activity may be identified as having the defining characteristics of play, the same activity in a different context with a different player may have a different meaning. If one were to compare a professional swimmer to a person who swims in their backyard pool, the former activity in this example loses its play status as work-like characteristics increase. That is not to say, however, that a sense of playfulness may not be retained by the player in that situation but clearly the play, player and playfulness are different (Howard et al., 2002). Further, within the framework of early childhood education, play is not the antithesis of work but rather one way in which children learn (Fromberg, 2002; Wood & Attfield, 2005).

Although certain activities, through an education lens, may appear more play-like than others, without seeking the perspectives of children one can never explicitly know how children experience activities in the classroom. While it may be possible to define or label certain activities as childhood play from the characteristics they display, any such definition would be from an adult's perspective. As the experiences that occur during the activity are

dependent on the perspectives of the player, the construct of playfulness is determined by how the player feels about the activity (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Howard et al., 2002). In this regard, Vygotsky (1966) suggests that attempting to define play on the basis of pleasure alone is inappropriate as there are a number of activities that give children pleasure that are not play, such as sucking a pacifier. Further, activities that look like play may not be considered fun or pleasurable by the children involved (Danby, 1998; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Other activities that could be classified as play, such as sporting games with rules or results, may not be considered pleasurable by the player if they consider the result unfavourable (Vygotsky, 1966).

The consequences of defining play in a 'non-serious' (Ailwood, 2003, p. 289) way are also evident where children's own perspectives of their classroom activities are influenced by the classroom environment, and outcomes endorsed by other stakeholders (Georgeson & Payler, 2010; Howard et al., 2002; Keating et al., 2000; McInnes, Howard, Miles, & Crowley, 2011; Patte, 2009; Wood & Attfield, 2005). These views are evident particularly when children transition from non-compulsory settings. In compulsory, formal settings, socio-cultural expectations demand a change in children's activities from those focused on play to those focused on learning (Fleer, 2013; Manning & Sharp, 1977; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008).

Through an education lens, children's perspectives of their activities and what it means to be 'school children' (Fleer, 2013, p. 91) may be influenced by the privileging of academic skills and learning outcomes. In the Queensland context, for example, there has been an endorsement by the wider community of formal academic skills, such as literacy and numeracy, over other skills, such as those involving play (Breathnach, 2013; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). A focus on Queensland children's apparent poor academic performance in national, standardised assessments is also evident in sustained commentary from the Australian media (e.g. Brennan, Killoran, & Vogler, 2014; Chilcott, 2013a, 2013b; Hinchliffe, 2016; Jensen, 2013; Martyn-Jones, 2016; Morton, 2013), and government sources (e.g. Premier Anna Bligh, personal communication, n.d.; Gillard, 2012; Newman, n.d., 2012, 2013; Pyne, 2014). Such commentary has persisted within the context of education policy and agendas that have privileged literacy and numeracy outcomes above all else.

Play through a critical lens

The characterisation of play as fun, free and intrinsic can neglect the contextual and social factors influencing play (Ailwood, 2003), and is in contrast to an image of play as an activity

immersed in political relations and power (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; MacNaughton, 2001; Sumsion et al., 2009). As with all human interactions, play is subject to unequal power relations that often are determined by the cultural capital of the dominant culture, resulting in some children marginalised and others privileged (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Meadmore, 2004). In particular, the moral, political and ethical considerations of play suggest that it is not always fun (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010) with romantic discourses of play in early childhood education failing to address the negative aspects of play (Ailwood, 2003, 2010). Play activities may *look like* fun from an adult perspective but may not *be* fun for the children involved (Danby, 1998; Flear, 2013; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

Viewing play through a critical lens allows for binary frameworks, such as play/work, girls/boys or good/bad, to be challenged and rejected (Ailwood, 2010; Blaise, 2010; Flear, 2013; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Through a poststructuralist lens, play in early childhood settings is viewed, not as naturally produced, but rather as constructed and regulated by adult stakeholders (Ailwood, 2003; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Play is also understood in the context of children's lived experiences, and is constructed within and by the historical and socio-cultural experiences of the community (Flear, 2013). Poststructuralist and feminist poststructuralist approaches seek to disrupt common assumptions or expectations regarding research with children (Flear, 2013), and the ways in which play is viewed. In particular, poststructuralist approaches consider how political relations and power are produced and reproduced through play. In prioritising social justice, these approaches enable exclusionary practices to be contested (Flear, 2013). This lens is evident in Prep's *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) which acknowledges the social and cultural biases that may exist in the classroom, serving as barriers to children's participation. The guidelines also acknowledge that play can be detrimental to children's developing identities, in particular where gender stereotypes and power relations are reinforced (QSA, 2006). Conversely, play can provide opportunities for children to explore different ways of being, and provide meaningful contexts for children to examine sensitive issues, such as prejudice, injustice and inequity (Corsaro, 2005; Hartrup & Abecasis, 2002; QSA, 2006; Sumsion et al., 2009; Trawick Smith, 2006).

Play through a gender lens

Play through this lens is considered in terms of how gender identity and gender labelling influence constructions of play and the play choices that children make (Ayres & Leve, 2006; Gaskins et al., 2007). Because of the influence of gender on play, it is problematic to presume that the provision of free and equal opportunities for play will result in similar experiences

for children, or homogenous constructions of play (MacNaughton, 2000). A South Australian research study has highlighted that gender influences the spaces in which boys and girls play, and the types of play in which they engage (MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007). For example, higher levels of noise and aggression are more prevalent in boys' play than in girls' (Danby, 1998; MacNaughton, 2000; Power, 2010). Thus, concerns regarding the potential influence of gender on play, and the ways in which such forms of play can be detrimental to children's developing identities by reinforcing inappropriate stereotypes, are also reflected in Prep's *EYCG* (QSA, 2006).

Research with kindergarten children in South Australia (MacNaughton et al., 2007) and preschool children in the USA (Pellegrini, Long, Roseth, Bohn, & Van Ryzin, 2007) highlights that, through their 'real-life work' (Danby, 1998, p. 178), children shape social orders of gender and age (Danby, 1998). Prep's *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) also acknowledge the role of play for children as they make meaning of their social worlds and negotiate peer relationships.

Play through a policy lens

It was not until the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) and *General Comment No. 7* (United Nations, 2005) that notions of children as capable and competent agents emerged. For the first time, children were formally recognised as being capable of forming their own views, and their rights to freedom of expression and to participate in decision making in matters of consequence to them were acknowledged (Danby & Farrell, 2004; Harcourt & Einarsdóttir, 2011; United Nations, 1989). The rights of children to play and engage in recreational activities were also acknowledged (United Nations, 1989). In particular, the UNCRC has considered participation and consultation for school-aged children with regard to play-time, and has issued recommendations in support of initiatives that promote and facilitate play at school (Hartas, 2008).

Shifts in the positioning of children's agency provided the foundation for the development of a sociology of childhood in Britain in the 1990s (Prout & James, 1997). This perspective has further championed children as capable and competent social actors whose perspectives are of interest in their own right. These influences are evident in Prep's *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) in its positioning of children as capable and competent learners. In the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) children's agentic participation in the co-construction of knowledge, learning and decision-making is also recognised.

This section has considered the different lenses through which play is viewed, and the views of children produced through those lenses. These lenses shape early childhood pedagogical approaches, the pedagogical orientations of educators, and views of children as learners. Play pedagogy in the context of early childhood settings is now discussed.

3.3 Play and play pedagogy

This section considers the concepts of play and pedagogy in early childhood settings. Consideration of contemporary approaches to play pedagogies in early childhood education settings serves to frame discussion of stakeholder perspectives of play later in this chapter.

3.3.1 Constructions of play and play pedagogy

Non-compulsory education is often viewed as a context in which children develop the skills and aptitudes necessary for a successful transition to formal schooling (Dockett & Perry, 2007) - a time when play is still considered by adults as an important and appropriate activity (Cooney, 2004; Einarsdóttir, 2008; Flear, 2013; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Play is considered in many quarters a hallowed philosophy in the education of young children (Ailwood, 2003), and is emphasised as fundamental in children's early learning and development (McInnes, Howard, Miles, & Crowley, 2011; Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993). While there are suggestions that curriculum content should be informed by children's interests, (British Educational Research Association Early Years Special Interest Group (BERA), 2003), Wood (2007) cautions against privileging one type of play over another to ensure that children are not disadvantaged from experiencing a wide range of activities that they may not, as yet, have expressed an interest in, and to ensure that meaningful connections are made between learning and experiences.

The construction of play pedagogy is often considered to be the 'holy grail' (Anning, 2010, p. 30) of early childhood education, and its importance is widely acknowledged by academics and educators (Anning, 2010; Fisher, 2010; Flear, 2013; QSA, 2006; Scott, 2010; Wood, 2009a; Wood & Attfield, 2005). In the context of this study, play pedagogy is taken to mean learning through play, rather than learning disguised as play (Howard, 2010b) and reflects a negotiated, co-constructed practice between children and adults (Moss & Petrie, 2002; Rogers, 2010). In this thesis, it is this notion of play pedagogy that underpins the concepts of 'play-based' and 'playful' learning in early childhood settings.

3.3.2 Challenges to play and play pedagogy

The significance and importance of play in Prep specifically (ACARA, 2012; QSA, 2006), as well as in Australian early childhood settings more generally, is recognised (DEEWR, 2009; Fleer, 2013; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Wood, 2007, 2009). Despite such recognition, there are a number of challenges to the provision of play in the early years of schooling (Moyle, 2010a). One of these relates to the historical view of teaching as a formal activity by parents, educators and policy makers (Moyle, 2010a) where play provision remains a challenge while adult-led activities dominate (Howard, 2010a). Other challenges relate to the push-down of formalised pedagogical approaches in the early years of schooling (Aubrey, 2004; Cochran, 2011; Hard & O’Gorman, 2007; O’Gorman, 2008). The prioritising of more traditional subjects such as literacy and numeracy and a focus on deliverable outcomes with standardised testing and reporting (Yelland, 2010), as evidenced in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) introduced in Queensland in 2012, points to the increasing trend of constructing curriculum focused on outcomes-based learning in contrast to child-responsive practices common in non-compulsory settings in the past (Aubrey, 2004).

The traditional pedagogical approach evident in education settings in many English speaking countries is typically formal and didactic with a focus on the mind (Moss & Petrie, 2002; OECD, 2006). Concerned that didactic approaches are ill-suited to the natural learning strategies and psychology of young children, the OECD (2006), in its report, *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, suggests that the integrated approach of social pedagogy facilitates young children to grow and develop at an appropriate rate. A social pedagogy approach views children holistically, focusing on the mind, body, creativity, emotions, and socio-cultural identity (Moss & Petrie, 2002). Such an approach is reflective of the Nordic social pedagogical approach to early childhood education as the foundation of lifelong learning and preparation for life (OECD, 2006). Despite the historical emphasis on play in the Nordic social pedagogical approach (Wagner & Einarsdóttir, 2008), recent developments in Iceland (Gunnarsdottir, 2014) and Sweden (Lindstrand & Björk-Willén, 2016) reflect the shift, internationally and in Australia, away from play-based, child-centred practices towards formal, explicit teaching and emphasis on formal academic outcomes.

The net effect of the challenges to the provision of play has resulted in the devaluing of play pedagogies (Fleer, 2000; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Keating et al., 2000), and an increased demand for formal learning practices (Hard & O’Gorman, 2007; O’Gorman, 2007). In the Queensland Prep trial, the program was seen by parents as offering more formalised

learning opportunities than the previous preschool program, even though both programs were play-based (Thorpe et al., 2005). Research with parents since its subsequent roll-out in 2007 has highlighted a continuing preference for more structured and formalised teaching and learning strategies (Breathnach, 2013; O’Gorman, 2007).

3.3.3 Child-centred approaches to play and play pedagogy

In conceptualising the adult perspective of play – that is, what play does for children - Wood (2010) describes the ‘outside-in perspective, which derives from the cultural transmission/directive approach’ (2010, p. 11). This approach privileges adult interpretations of play in the context of educational outcomes. Conceptualising children’s perspectives of play – that is, what play means for children - Wood (2010) describes the ‘inside-out perspective which derives from the emergent/responsive approach’ (2010, p. 11). This approach, which privileges children’s cultural practices and their interpretations and meanings of play, is important in the context of this study as one that positions children as agentic participants in the research agenda. While these approaches are not mutually exclusive, and both perspectives are equally important in understanding play, problems arise when the former dominates (Wood, 2010). In particular, the provision of integrated play pedagogies challenges educators to ensure that they are providing genuine opportunities for play that extends and develops children’s thinking rather than adult-led instruction disguised as play (Brooker, 2010). The apparent conflict of interest between children’s play and adults’ pedagogy requires an alternate view of play pedagogy. This view would not consider play solely as a vehicle for curriculum delivery, under the guise of play-based learning, but would, instead, consider the value of play from children’s perspectives, as well as valuing the different ways in which children play.

In early years settings, a direct relationship between play and learning is sometimes assumed (David, 2003; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). However, play pedagogies that encompass a range of deeper and more integrated approaches to facilitate learning and education for young children in the 21st century are required (Moyles, 2010d; Walsh et al., 2006; Whitehead, 2010). The holistic pedagogical approach (Moss & Petrie, 2002) outlined in Prep’s *EYCG* (QSA, 2006a) advocates reciprocal adult-child relationships, where children, as competent agents in their learning, are actively supported by adults in the acquisition and development of deeper knowledge and mature concepts. Such an approach, while informed by children’s

perspectives, acknowledges the important role of adults in actively supporting cognition in children's play and learning (Fleer & Raban, 2007), and provides opportunities for children to engage with and develop mature concepts (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, & Fleer, 2009).

The effectiveness of integrated approaches for instructive learning, and the role of adults in supporting children's learning through play has been also highlighted in international research such as *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project (EPPE Project)* (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004), and Bertram and Pascal's (2002) international review of appropriate pedagogical approaches. The *EPPE Project*, involving over 3,000 children aged between three and seven years in the UK, examined the impact of pre-school quality and effective pedagogy on children's development (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2004). While the study found that there was no 'one effective pedagogy' (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004), the most effective type of pedagogy is that, which has at its centre, instructive practice (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). In such settings, children have agentic opportunities to engage in freely chosen play within an instructive learning environment. Adult intervention through modelling, open-ended questioning, reinforcement, encouragement, interaction and discussion assists in the development of a child's metacognitive skills, and children's learning is supported through play with peers and extended conversations with adults (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Sylva et al., 2004; Walsh et al., 2006; Wood, 2007). Opportunities for playful learning build on children's interests, and motivate and challenge them to extend their skills and knowledge through exploratory learning (Leech, 2009; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002).

International consensus on appropriate pedagogies in early childhood settings, mirroring the findings of the *EPPE Project*, has been identified by Bertram and Pascal (2002) in their review of the practices of 20 countries across the world (Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, Hungary, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Wales, and Hong Kong). Notwithstanding differences in the curriculum models in each country, the overwhelming consensus in Bertram and Pascal's (2002) review is that appropriate pedagogical approaches in non-compulsory settings for children aged up to six years ought to reflect:

- an emphasis on interactional pedagogy, where children and adults operate in reciprocity with one another;

- an encouragement of play-based, first-hand, exploratory experiences that provide children with opportunities to talk and interact;
- the provision of agentic opportunities for children to self-manage and self-direct their learning; and
- an emphasis on collaborative, peer group learning, with whole class teaching or circle time being used selectively to support this.

Specifically, the key theme emerging from both the *EPPE Project* (Sylva et al., 2004) and Bertram and Pascal's (2002) review is the significance of children's agentic participation in their practices.

3.3.4 The role of adults in play

Despite evidence suggesting the significance of adults in children's play, the role that they should take continues to be debated (e.g. Ashiabi, 2007; BERA, 2003; David, 2003; Hyvönen, 2011; Leaupepe, 2010; Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Tensions borne out of differing educational beliefs, practices and orientations (Wood, 2010) result in teachers' ambiguity as to when and how they should involve themselves in children's play (Fleer, 2013; Wood, 2010). As a result, teachers face the dichotomy of trying to challenge and develop children's conceptual understandings while, at the same time, maintaining a largely observational role with minimum input (Fleer, 1995a). Further complicating this are understandings of play as a 'child chosen' (Wood & Attfield, 2005, p. 4) activity in which children should be given time and space to immerse themselves in their play using resources of their choosing. Concomitant with this idea is a view that the most significant aspect of play is the absence of direct teacher involvement, and that an activity ceases to be play once there is an intended outcome for the teacher (Broadhead, 2010; Fisher, 2010). Commentators from this perspective suggest that, while adult-initiated, play-based activities are potentially valuable, they deprive children of opportunities to explore, experiment and create in the same way that play does (Fisher, 2010). Such perspectives may, however, contribute to devaluing of teachers supporting children's play and learning (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008).

International research, such as the *EPPE Project* (Sylva et al., 2004) highlights the beneficial effects of adult involvement in children's play. The findings of the study demonstrated that children's cognitive outcomes directly relate to the quantity and quality of

teacher planned and initiated activities, recommending that settings should aim for an equal balance of child and adult initiated activities (Sylva et al., 2004). In particular, Bertram and Pascal's (2002) review suggests that flexible teaching and learning strategies are necessary to facilitate and support children's learning through guided interaction. The teacher's role in guiding and enriching play (Ashiabi, 2007; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012) or 'teaching through play' (Hedges, 2000, p. 20) may be considered alongside the notion of 'learning through play' (Hedges, 2000, p. 20). The concept of 'learning through play' (Hedges, 2000, p. 20), while an established concept in educational contexts, may, however, be more difficult to translate into practice, particularly where competing pedagogies exist between free (or child-led) play and formal (or teacher-led) activities (Aubrey, 2004). As such, contemporary views of play pedagogies suggest a more integrated approach to pedagogy is necessary and appropriate in early years settings (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004; Wood, 2007, 2009a).

The importance of early years teachers in enriching play and guiding learning through play is also echoed in studies in Australia (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2009; Lillemyr et al., 2007; Thorpe et al., 2005). Thorpe et al.'s (2005) Queensland study identified that effective teachers make a difference in Prep by facilitating play-based learning through the setting of clear and focused goals, primarily through child-initiated learning. In particular, Cutter Mackenzie et al.'s (2009) study in Australian kindergartens identified the importance of extended and co-constructed interactions with children and educators within play-based learning episodes to develop children's conceptual knowledge. International commentators concur with Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) advocating the importance of co-construction for play and learning to be effective in early years education.

The notion of 'sustained shared thinking', where adults and children work together simultaneously in a process of co-construction, and where a central role of the adult is the scaffolding of learning, has been identified as a pre-requisite for quality early childhood programs and most likely to occur in excellent settings (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 10). The active involvement of children and their mutual engagement with adults is critical to the co-construction of meaning-making processes in early childhood settings (Jordan, 2009; Wood & Attfield, 2005), and is of particular importance for this study as one that positions children as active agents in their social worlds. The notion of co-construction positions children as active, powerful and competent in their learning, and emphasises teachers and children working together in meaning-making, interpreting and understanding processes

(Jordan, 2009). Co-construction requires teachers to become aware of children's views, knowledge and understandings in order to engage with them (Jordan, 2009). As such, children's perspectives are considered equally as valid as that of adults (Mayall, 2002; Prout & James, 1997). Co-construction between teachers and children results in higher order thinking for children because authentic learning activities are based on the children's own interests and experiences (Jordan, 2009), and is reflective of a pedagogical approach informed by children's perspectives (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2009; McInnes et al., 2011; Wood, 2010). Further, where co-construction is used effectively, children's perspectives of play are less likely to be influenced by the adults in the setting because of the choice and control children are afforded in such settings (Howard et al., 2002; McInnes et al., 2011).

While the holistic, integrated pedagogical approaches discussed in this section are recognised as appropriate in Australian and international early childhood settings, the disparity in expert views on the nature and value of play may present challenges for Prep teachers working with curriculum frameworks where activities are planned within the context of content learning (QSA, 2014) but where teachers are also expected to provide opportunities for children to explore, experiment and create (DET, 2016; QSA, 2006). Further, questions regarding the role of teachers in play, whether play can or should be used for educational purposes, the power structure of play, and the intentions or outcomes of play continue to be posed and debated (e.g. Baker, 2014; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Hard & O'Gorman, 2007; Hunkin, 2014; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Ranz-Smith, 2007). These debates are framed within the wider context of challenges to the status quo of practice and theory in early childhood education that have seen the previously accepted dominant perspective of Bredekamp's (1987) *DAP* challenged (Fleer, Tonyan, Mantilla, & Rivalland, 2009). In line with the direction of early childhood education internationally, socio-cultural theory has led to the re-conceptualisation of children's development as being inseparable from social, cultural, historical and political contexts, with a resultant trend towards developing pedagogies in Australia based on critical and socio-cultural theories (Fleer et al., 2009; Wood, 2007, 2009a).

This section has considered play pedagogies and play-based learning in the context of early childhood settings. As discussed, the provision of play pedagogies in early years' settings is contingent upon many factors, including the classroom teacher's philosophy and practices, and the perceived support for play-based learning from school leadership and

parents. In the following section, stakeholder views on play and play-based learning is discussed.

3.4 Stakeholder perspectives of play

This chapter has considered broadly the constructions of play in the research literature. Such constructions consider not only what play *does* for children, but also what play might *mean* for children. The latter point is of particular relevance in the context of this study in its positioning of children as the central focus of the study, and as active participants in the research agenda. Stakeholder perspectives on the nature and value, or otherwise, of play in early childhood settings shape teachers' practices (Wood, 2010) which, in turn, impact on children's experiences and perspectives. As such, it is important to consider, as key stakeholders in Prep, the perspectives of principals, teachers and parents of play in early childhood education.

3.4.1 Principals and their stakeholder views

As school leaders in their community, principals' perspectives of play are important in framing children's perspectives and experiences in Prep. Further, as front-line representatives of state and federal education departments, principals' perspectives also are important in understanding teachers' perspectives of play, discussed later in this section.

Two key studies in Queensland provide insight into principals' perspectives of play in Prep. Principals (n=39) involved in the *Report of the Queensland Preparing for School Trial 2003/4* (Thorpe et al., 2005) supported Prep's play-based curriculum and noted improved developmental outcomes for children enrolled in the program at their schools. In particular, one principal commented that play pedagogy should be extended further into the early years of primary school in an attempt to combat a perception of children as 'adult-type learners' (Thorpe et al., 2005, p. 95). One principal involved in a small focus group in Thorpe et al.'s (2005) study voiced concerns, in particular, regarding the push-down of formalised explicit learning in early childhood education. This tension was echoed by half of the principals interviewed who cited balancing focused and play-based learning as a major challenge in schools.

A study in three Prep classrooms in Queensland schools (Grieshaber, 2004) highlights that, while principals support and value play, they believe young children are not provided with sufficient opportunity for unstructured free play. The principals' interpretations of play,

ranging from 'unstructured' to a 'professionally guided strategy to achieve an end that allows students to engage more deeply with a task' (Grieshaber, 2004, p. 10), are reflective of the broad constructions of play and perspectives on its value and purpose as discussed earlier in this chapter. Notably, one principal suggested that the word 'play' itself had negative connotations, which sentiments are common amongst educators more generally (McInnes et al., 2011; O'Gorman & Hard, 2013; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). Such constructions of play highlight a necessity for conversations regarding the provision of play and play pedagogies (Fisher et al., 2008; O'Gorman & Hard, 2013) that include the perspectives of children, particularly during this period of significant education reform.

3.4.2 Teachers and their stakeholder views

In the context of Prep specifically, formative research (Thorpe et al., 2005) on the perspectives of 139 teachers across 39 Prep sites during its trial in 2003 found that teachers supported Prep's play-based curriculum framework, *The Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG)* (QSA, 2006). Identifying an increase in child-initiated activities and a reduction in teacher-directed activities as compared with the previous preschool program or Year 1 classes, the teachers in the study commented that the nature of the Prep program fitted with their beliefs about early childhood education (Thorpe et al., 2005). Similarly, O'Gorman and Hard's (2013) study documenting the reflections of 13 Prep teachers on their experiences both during and after the Prep trial also indicated teachers' commitment to the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) as a framework reflective of their teaching values, which included opportunities for play in Prep.

Despite most of the Prep teachers in its 2003 trial being experienced early years educators, skills and knowledge specific to early childhood education, and understanding play-based learning were identified by almost half of the respondents in Thorpe et al.'s (2005) study as important professional development requirements. While the principals in Thorpe et al.'s (2005) study emphasised the importance of teachers having early childhood qualifications, the teachers in Hard and O'Gorman's (2013) study emphasised the importance of principals having an early years philosophy so as to provide distributed leadership opportunities for teachers, and support them in their role as early childhood educators. These sentiments were echoed by teachers in the *Early Years: Curriculum Continuity for Learning (EYCCCL)* project in South Australia (Dockett, 2010). That study, which considered teachers' perspectives of play and play pedagogies in the early years of schooling, indicates that

teachers consider that only some school leaders are supportive of play pedagogies, and that this impacts on teachers' pedagogical approaches (Dockett, 2010).

In communicating with parents and colleagues, Prep teachers emphasise the importance of de-constructing their practices for others and placing emphasis 'on the *how* rather than the *what*' (O'Gorman & Hard, 2013, p. 82). While teachers point to the importance of co-construction with children in Prep and of play as an enabler in children's learning, there is also a recognition that the terms 'play' and 'play-based' pose difficulties in the context of the language of primary schools, requiring teachers to adopt alternate terminology such as 'active learning' to validate their practices (O'Gorman & Hard, 2013, p. 83).

Research in early childhood settings in Australia (Dockett, 2010; Fler, 2000; O'Gorman & Hard, 2013) and internationally (Aubrey, 2004; Keating et al., 2000; Moyles, 2010b) also reflects that teachers experience difficulties when trying to substantiate to other adult stakeholders children's learning where play and play pedagogies are used in early childhood classrooms. These studies indicate that, while early childhood teachers believe play to be a powerful pedagogical tool, its provision, together with increasing curriculum demands and parental expectations, places added pressure on teachers to produce evidence of children's learning for parents and colleagues (Aubrey, 2004; Dockett, 2010; Fler, 2000; Keating et al., 2000; Moyles, 2010b). Such pressure creates tensions for teachers as to whether to facilitate and encourage learning through integrated play pedagogies or to opt for more formal learning activities in order to provide easily attainable, but potentially unreliable, sources of evidence (Keating et al., 2000). These tensions are influenced by the weight often given by adult stakeholders to teacher-initiated activities, as well as ambiguity as to the teacher's role in play, and a belief that *real* learning does not take place in child-initiated activities (e.g. Breathnach, 2013; Breathnach, O'Gorman, & Danby, 2016; Brock, 2009; Dockett, 2010; Leaupepe, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010).

Teachers in both non-compulsory and compulsory settings in the *EYCCL* study (Dockett, 2010) identified play pedagogy as a priority. The teachers in compulsory settings also specifically identified the role of the teacher to support and scaffold play (Dockett, 2010). Despite their recognition of the importance of play, teachers in both settings acknowledged that, in the first years of school, activities tended to be more formal and work-based rather than play-based (Dockett, 2010). In this regard, teachers also identified that children's play choices in the first year of schooling were limited to opportunities provided

by the teacher, and by the demands of the curriculum (Dockett, 2010). Teachers cited parental expectations (often fuelled by the media), curriculum pressures and a push-down of formalised learning with particular emphasis on literacy and numeracy as barriers to the provision of play pedagogy (Dockett, 2010). The concerns raised by teachers in Dockett's (2010) study are reflected in other Australian studies (O'Gorman & Hard, 2013) and internationally (Aubrey, 2004; Moyles, 2010b; Rogers & Evans, 2008), suggesting a shift in the construction of the first year of school from a transitional year to one with specific academic outcomes (Breathnach, 2013).

The potential consequences for early years settings of the tensions outlined above are that teachers adopt more formal and didactic teaching practices resulting in negative outcomes for children's cognitive and social development (Fleer, 2000). As discussed earlier, the privileging of literacy and numeracy in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) indicates a departure in Prep from the *EYGC's* (QSA, 2006) positioning of children's cognitive and social development as complementary and of equal importance. Of relevance in this context is international research with Swedish preschool teachers that highlights the importance of play in children's social and personal development to enable them cope with the stresses of modern life (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2007). So too, research with Australian teachers in early years settings reports their understanding of the significance of play in children's social and personal development (Dockett, 2010). The findings highlight that teachers identify links between play and children's learning of specific academic skills such as literacy and numeracy (Dockett, 2010).

The studies discussed herein highlight that balancing learning outcomes, the provision of play pedagogies, and managing stakeholder expectations (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012) are amongst the many 'competing discourses' facing early childhood teachers (McArdle, 2006, p. 58). The need for further research with stakeholders regarding the provision of play pedagogies in schools to better inform effective teaching and learning practices has been noted (Fleer, 2000). So too, the *Cambridge Primary Review* (Hofkins & Northen, 2009) in England identified the need for early years pedagogies to be informed by research on children's needs and capabilities. In that respect, this study makes an important contribution to research on play and children's experiences by considering, holistically, the perspectives of children, as well as the perspectives of parents and the classroom teacher in the setting.

3.4.3 Parents and their stakeholder views

While research on the theory and practice of play pedagogies supports its role in children's academic and social development (e.g. Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2009; Fisher et al., 2008; Fleer, 2013; Sylva et al., 2004; Wood, 2007, 2009), consideration of parents' perspectives of play in the early years of schooling is important in framing children's perspectives later in this study.

Parents have varying constructions of what play is, means and does for children. In Australia, Breathnach's (2013) exploratory case study of eight parents with children enrolled in Queensland Prep highlighted their understanding of Prep as a 'play-based program'. This understanding is consistent with the federal government's description of early childhood education during the launch of its education reform in 2008 (Rudd, 2008). The parents in the study described play as fun, and involving choice and freedom. While parents did not support the idea of young children sitting at desks to learn, they suggested that play in Prep should be limited to options provided by the teacher or left until break time in the playground (Breathnach, 2013).

Parents in Breathnach's (2013) study and O'Gorman's (2007) phenomenographic study of 26 parents' conceptions of the Prep year expressed the view that play was an appropriate learning strategy for young children. Similar views were expressed by parents in the *Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum* (Rose, 2009) in the UK. In the survey of 952 parents, 90% stated that young children should learn through play in primary school (Rose, 2009). The parents in Breathnach's (2013) study suggested, however, that play in the classroom requires adult direction and control to ensure its manageability so that learning outcomes are met. In that regard, parents' interpretations of play and play-based learning in Prep appear to be influenced by their construction of Prep as a formal and compulsory year of schooling (Breathnach, 2013).

Research with parents of Prep children indicates that they value the role of play in their children's social development, and believe that play can make learning fun (Breathnach, 2013; O'Gorman, 2007). Nonetheless, parents in Breathnach's (2013) study also suggested that too much emphasis on socialisation could be detrimental to children capable of achieving more academically. Such perspectives suggest a view of play and socialisation at one end of a development continuum with academic learning at the other. Consistent with the positioning of literacy and numeracy in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) and the discussion regarding Queensland children's academic performance in the media (e.g. Caldwell &

Chilcott, 2012; Chilcott, 2011b, 2013a; Jensen, 2013), parents in Breathnach's (2013) study identified learning as almost exclusively related to literacy and numeracy. Reflective of the socio-political discourse regarding play and learning in Australia at this time (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012), the parents also drew a distinction between play and learning, suggesting that creative endeavours, such as art, represent examples of play, while literacy and numeracy represent examples of learning (Breathnach, 2013).

The *Report of the Queensland Preparing for School Trial 2003/4* (Thorpe et al., 2005) considered parent expectations of and satisfaction with Prep. Parents indicated that they were significantly more satisfied with the Prep program when compared with preschool and Year 1 programs. In particular, they were significantly more satisfied with the amount of play in the Prep program. The parents in O'Gorman's (2007) study also considered whether the nature of Prep met the current needs of their child. Despite considering Prep from both theirs and their child's perspectives, the findings indicate that parents' expectations of their children's experiences are often very different from their children's actual experiences. One parent, in particular, described how she thought her daughter would enjoy the structured nature of Prep. The lack of choice and perceived adult control of play as later recounted by the child to her parent highlighted, however, that the parent's expectations were very different to the child's experiences (O'Gorman, 2007). The recounted experience of the child in O'Gorman's (2007) study regarding the structured nature of Prep is reflected in the findings of Breathnach's (2013) study of parent views of play in Prep. While many of the parents in Breathnach's (2013) study indicated that they did not spend time in their child's classroom, they provided descriptions of learning experiences in Prep that were structured and teacher-directed rather than play-based. Parents' knowledge of learning experiences in Prep were based on their children's accounts of their experiences, on information provided by their child's teacher, and on their own expectations of Prep (Breathnach, 2013).

Reflecting concerns raised by parents of children in early years settings in the UK (Keating et al., 2000), the parents in Breathnach's (2013) Prep study also noted a lack of opportunity for their child to play, an increased focus on learning outcomes particularly for literacy and numeracy, and increased expectations for children to perform well academically. Such findings suggest that the effects of the changes taking place in Queensland's education landscape are already evident in Prep classrooms, with parents in Breathnach's (2013) study indicating that the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* had and would continue to impact on play in Prep and on their children's experiences.

Breathnach's (2013) study highlight that while parents recognise the importance of play in Prep, not least because they believe its provision encourages their children to want to go to school, they are unsure of its relevance as a learning strategy, expressing, instead, a preference for learning that is teacher or outcome directed. Consistent with O'Gorman's findings (2007), parents' accounts of their children's experiences of play were, primarily, from an adult perspective (Breathnach, 2013). The interviewing of parents in this thesis (discussed in Chapter 7) also contributes to understandings of parent perspectives by illuminating their perspectives of play in Prep, adding rich data to the discussion on play in early childhood settings.

In the broader Australian context, there have been a small number of studies investigating parent views of play. Research with Indigenous Australian parents regarding their attitudes to play within Indigenous-specific early childhood programs in Australia found that they placed a high value on play, especially that which featured Indigenous content (Windisch, Jenvey, & Drysdale, 2003). While Olsen and Sumsion's (2000) study exploring the use of dramatic play in early childhood classrooms did not directly investigate parent perspectives of play, the teachers in the study indicated a belief that parents were unsupportive of play. Similar parental attitudes to play are reported by teachers in Dockett's (2010) study. In that study, parents' perceived valuing of literacy and numeracy focused activities over play was considered by teachers a barrier to play in the early years of schooling (Dockett, 2010). The *Starting School Research Project* (Dockett & Perry, 2002a, 2002b, 2004a, 2004b, 2007) in New South Wales, which considered transition to school from the perspectives of parents, children and teachers, also highlights parents' views regarding academic progress, particularly in reading and writing, as a measure of their child's successful transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2004a).

Internationally, Einarsdóttir's (2010b) qualitative study of parent views of play in Icelandic playschools found that parents placed a high value on play and child-initiated activities. In particular, parents suggested children should have ample opportunity for outdoor play. The identification of outdoor play as being particularly important (Einarsdóttir, 2010b) may reflect play as a culturally valued aspect of early childhood programs in Iceland. It may also reflect the influence of socio-cultural contexts on stakeholder perspectives of play as suggested in research literature (Göncü, Jain, & Tuermer, 2007; Leaupepe, 2010; Podmore, Sauvao, & Mapa, 2003; Vandermaas-Peeler, 2002). Cooney's (2004) cross-cultural survey of Guatemalan parents found that they too valued play-based learning strategies. Further, they

considered such strategies as important and appropriate methods for the academic and social development of their children. These findings are supported by Fogle and Mendez (2006) whose quantitative study of African-American mothers in the USA identified a generally positive view of play. While many of the mothers valued play in terms of their children's development, others did not necessarily view it as the most appropriate learning method for academic development.

Parmar et al.'s (2004) cross-cultural study of Asian and Euro-American parents of children attending preschools in the USA also highlights the influence of culture on stakeholder constructions of play. The study found that Euro-American parents placed a high value on play pedagogy, considering it important for both academic and social development. Asian parents, however, did not value play for their child's development. Instead, they identified cognitive development as the most important aspect of early childhood education, believing that such development is not promoted through play (Parmar et al., 2004).

Studies in the USA suggest that parents in higher socio-economic groups tend to be more involved in their child's play (Vandermaas-Peeler, 2002; Vandermaas-Peeler, Way, & Umpleby, 2003), and be more supportive of play-based learning (Fogle & Mendez, 2006). Conversely, parents with lower education levels or with low status occupations preferred more didactic and academically focused teaching methods (Fogle & Mendez, 2006). Research with parents in the USA also suggests their constructions of play largely depend on their own personal experiences of play, influenced by cultural values and norms (Fisher et al., 2008). These findings are echoed in Breathnach's (2013) study of parent views of play in Prep, and Leaupepe's (2010) study of Samoan and Tongan student teachers' views of play.

Fisher et al.'s (2008) study with mothers and child care professionals in the USA points to a disparity between how parents and experts define structured and unstructured play, and its perceived academic value. Despite a consensus that play is fundamental for future academic learning, mothers in the study defined a much broader conceptualisation of play (Fisher et al., 2008). Such findings are particularly relevant for this study in the context of the influence that adult constructions of play have on children's constructions of play (Fleer, 2013; Leaupepe, 2010).

3.4.4 Children and their stakeholder views

Studies with children on their perspectives of play in the context of early childhood settings suggest a number of emergent and consistent themes, which are now discussed.

Play is enjoyable

A frequent theme in studies with children regarding their perspectives is that play is enjoyable. The overwhelming response from children in Dunphy and Farrell's (2011) study of four to six year olds in a primary school in Dublin is that play is fun. The children suggested that not only is the process of playing fun but also that they get to have fun with others while engaged in play (Dunphy & Farrell, 2011). Children interviewed in early childhood classrooms in Sweden (Vickerius & Sandberg, 2006) also identified play as a fun activity. Activities they perceived as boring were not considered play (Vickerius & Sandberg, 2006). Similar responses were given by children transitioning from Foundation to Year 1 classrooms in the UK (Fisher, 2010). In that study, the children contrasted the 'funner' (p. 92) Foundation year and its play-based environment with the more formal Year 1 environment (Fisher, 2010).

While the literature suggests that play in Australian classrooms is rare (Lillemyr et al., 2007), a cross-cultural study on Indigenous Australian and Anglo-Australian primary school children's views of play and learning found that the children identified play as making learning easier, being fun and something they enjoyed doing at break time with friends. While few of the children in Pearce and Bailey's (2011) study in a London primary school explicitly cited 'fun' as a reason to play, they described instead opportunities for physical, outdoor play to make them healthy and active (Pearce & Bailey, 2011). Similar views regarding outdoor play were expressed by children involved in focus group interviews during the Prep trial (Thorpe et al., 2005). The findings of the study indicated that children most enjoyed outdoor physical activity and social play, reflecting suggestions in the literature that children's preference for play-based activities is linked to the opportunities they have to make choices about what activity they do and who they do it with (Broadhead, 2004; Thorpe et al., 2005). Wiltz and Klein's (2001) study of four and five year olds attending preschool programs in the USA concurs, reporting that activities that interrupted play as those the children least liked.

Play and friends

A number of studies reporting children's perspectives on play note the importance children place on friendships. The children in Dunphy and Farrell's (2011) and Pearce and Bailey's (2011) studies indicated that their choice of play was largely determined by who was involved in the play rather than the activity itself. Being with friends proved to be the greatest influence on the children's participation in play (Dunphy & Farrell, 2011). The children in

Einarsdóttir's (2005b) study of Icelandic children's views of play indicated that positive relationships with their peers and the presence of friends were what made play attractive to them. Fleet and Britt's (2011) case study in New South Wales investigating 12 year old children's memories of places and space from their kindergarten year also identified friendships as a key element of children's play. These findings reflect the suggestion that children's desire to be with others takes precedence over the nature and context of the play activity (Rogers & Evans, 2006), and that friendships are an integral part of children's activities (Broadhead, 2004; Pearce & Bailey, 2011).

Play and work

Children's views of play often are considered in relation to their views of what constitutes work in their everyday activities. In their formative piece, *The Project on Structuring Play* based in infant schools in England and Wales, Manning and Sharp (1977) suggest that young children do not distinguish between work and play – that playing is, in fact, working and learning. Contemporary research suggests, however, that children have very clear and differing perspectives on work and play (Einarsdóttir, 2010a; Keating et al., 2000; Patte, 2009; Wood & Attfield, 2005).

The views of children transitioning to the first year of primary school suggest that school is a place of work rather than play (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Einarsdóttir, 2010a; Keating et al., 2000). UK studies investigating the ways in which young children categorise play and work in early years settings suggests that the position and nature of the activity, space and constraint, and adult presence are used by children in their categorisations of activities (Howard, 2002; Thomas, Howard, & Miles, 2006). In particular, children categorised images of activities taking place with an adult at a desk as work. Images that featured children engaged in activities without an adult present were categorised as play.

Keating et al.'s (2000) study in a UK Reception class found that children differentiated between what they perceived as work and play activities, although they displayed no negativity in their attitudes to 'work' – it was simply something they had to do. The children identified work as sitting at a table with a pen and pencil, writing and reading. While they attributed more importance to work activities, they could also identify learning in play and were able to draw distinctions between levels of learning in play. Children aged six years in Chapparo and Hooper's (2002) Australian study also identified writing and reading as work, which they described as being boring, difficult, obligatory, teacher-directed and typically indoors.

While some activities are more easily identifiable as work or play for children, others can be more complex. Research conducted in early childhood settings in the USA found that children were sometimes confused about using the labels of work and play, and often attempted to label different parts of the activity as either work or play depending on the context (Patte, 2009; Wing, 1995). The absence of choice and control over the direction of the activity aided children in determining the activity to be work (Wing, 1995).

Children attending playschool (the equivalent to preschool programs in Australia) in Iceland, when asked about their views of playschool, placed a high value on play and child-initiated activities with the majority identifying play as the activity they liked best at school (Einarsdóttir, 2005b). The children in that study contrasted play with activities they liked least - sitting still during group time, not being able to choose activities and following adult instruction (Einarsdóttir, 2005b). Likewise, children interviewed in the Reception year in the UK (Linklater, 2006) also identified play as a predominantly outdoors activity involving fun, choice and freedom, in contrast to 'boring' classroom 'work' (Linklater, 2006, p. 97).

This section has considered early years stakeholder perspectives on the nature and value, or otherwise, of play in early childhood settings. Children's competent participation in the research agenda is now discussed.

3.5 Children and the research agenda

An examination of the research that has been conducted on and with children highlights the historical predominant emphasis on children as research objects rather than research subjects, on child-focused outcomes rather than child-related processes, and on child variables rather than on children as persons (Greene & Hill, 2005). Over the past two decades, childhood research has undergone a significant paradigm shift (Mason & Danby, 2011) with a change in focus from children as *objects* to research with children as *subjects* and *actors* (James & Prout, 1997; Mason & Danby, 2011; Mason & Hood, 2011; O'Kane, 2008). This paradigm shift reflects an acknowledgement of children's participatory rights as provided for in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) as well as an acknowledgement of children's social agency (Mason & Hood, 2011; Prout & James, 1997). Children as social agents are recognised as contributors to social interactions, whose contributions impact on how social assumptions are understood (Mayall, 2002).

Methodological shifts in research reflect a transition from the dominant tradition of social research (Mason & Hood, 2011) which views children as 'objects of concern' to one

that engages children as 'active participants' (O'Kane, 2008, p. 125). Such a transition also reflects an understanding that children are the primary source of information about their own lives (Alderson, 2008). The paradigm shift acknowledges that children are social actors in research about and with them (Mason & Hood, 2011), and that understanding childhood requires analysis of actual participant experiences (Cromdal, 2009).

Researching children's experiences positions them as persons of value within the research agenda (Greene & Hill, 2005; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008), and as active members and constructors of their social worlds (Danby & Farrell, 2004; James & James, 2004; Prout & James, 2000; Theobald et al., 2011). Mason and Danby (2011) call for research focusing on the perspectives of children as researchers to explore what is important to them in school. Seeking children's perspectives facilitates deeper understandings of how children experience play in school, what motivates them in their play, how they develop relationships with others in their play, and how play shapes their worlds (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2009; Fleer, 2013; Göncü et al., 2007).

The emergence of 'new' paradigms for the study of childhood (Corsaro, 2005; Mayall, 2002; Prout & James, 1997) has provided a theoretical conceptualisation and reconstruction of childhood (Mason & Hood, 2011). The sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 1997) seeks to explore the perspectives of children as a social group (Mayall, 2008) in their own right. The ideological and theoretical reconstruction of children as competent and active participants in their social worlds creates an obligation to seek their perspectives and accounts of their experiences (Eide & Winger, 2005). While children's perspectives have historically been explored through the eyes of their adult caregivers (Christensen & James, 2008), these reconstructions of children imply that they have their own contribution to make, and that there is value in that contribution (Eide & Winger, 2005). This study contributes to the growing body of work concerned with children's participation and their perspectives on matters that affect their daily lives, such as play and their classroom experiences.

While other stakeholder views, such as those of researchers, teachers and parents contribute to our understanding of children's perspectives, it is children themselves who are the primary commentators on their own experiences (Smith, Duncan, & Marshall, 2005). Given the current context of transition in both state and federal policy and curricula, it is vital that all key stakeholders in early childhood education have genuine and ongoing opportunities to work together collaboratively in an environment where diversity of opinion is respected (O'Gorman, 2007). Without the active participation of stakeholders who

represent the diversity of the population, there is a risk, particularly during these times of significant change, of implementing policies that may have negative consequences for the education of young children in Queensland (O’Gorman, 2007). As such, this study has particular relevance given the changes to the Prep program concomitant with the ongoing implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) in Queensland. Studies such as this offer opportunities to re-consider the relationship between play, learning and pedagogy (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2009; Grieshaber & Ryan, 2006), and identify opportunities for children’s agentic participation in their classroom practices and research contexts.

3.6 Chapter summary

This chapter has considered different ways in which play and play pedagogy are constructed. Existing research on stakeholder perspectives of play and the specific place of children in the research agenda has also been presented. It is apparent from a review of the literature that children’s perspectives in the context of Prep have long been unheard. The failure of the research agenda to consider the perspectives of children, as a key stakeholder, has resulted in an incomplete account of what play and learning looks like in this early childhood setting, demonstrating the timeliness of this study.

The following chapter provides an overview of the theoretical orientation of this study and, in particular, the research methodology and design.

Chapter 4: Research methodology and design

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?

James P. Spradley, ethnographer (1979, p. 34)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the study's theoretical and methodological approaches of classroom ethnography and the sociology of childhood. Aspects of the research design, including the research techniques used in fieldwork, recruitment of participants, data analysis and ethical considerations, are discussed in this chapter.

4.2 Ethnography

4.2.1 The origins of ethnography

Early understandings of 'ethnography' were associated primarily with British anthropology, originating in the 19th century to refer to the descriptive accounts of the lives of non-Western people (Erickson, 2010) who were typically considered primitive (Walford, 2008). At that time, the ethnographic approach of writing about how people in a particular place and time viewed and experienced the world was used alongside the methodological approach of ethnology, which comparatively studied differing patterns and customs across cultures using ethnographic case studies (Erickson, 2010). Over time, the term 'ethnology' was replaced

with the term 'ethnography' to define theoretical interpretations of cultures based on the firsthand investigations of anthropologists and social scientists (Hammersley, 2010).

Ethnography is defined traditionally according to one of two approaches: 'etic' and 'emic'. These terms derive from the words 'phonetic' and 'phonemic' and reflect the ethnographic and ethnological origins of the tradition (Wolcott, 2008). With an etic approach, the ethnographer, as an outsider, examines concepts and categories meaningful to the scientific observer (Wolcott, 2008). This *comparable* approach is where, typically, the lives of others are presented in contrast to Western societies, data are presented as accurate and objective facts, and the social scientist is presented as one who can judge the validity of an etic account (Erickson, 2010). With an emic approach, the ethnographer is an insider, focusing on the cultural distinctions meaningful to the members of that culture. This *descriptive* emic approach aims to present another's perspective or story, the validity of which rests with the native members of that culture (Wolcott, 2008). Such was the distinction between the two approaches up to the 1960s that Wolcott (2008) likens the labelling of oneself as either 'etic' or 'emic' as akin to being identified as 'a friend of the bride' or 'a friend of the groom' at a wedding.

While ethnographic writings date back to the ancient Greek world of Herodotus in the fifth century (Erickson, 2010), William DuBois' (1899) study of an African-American neighbourhood was the first urban, sociological monograph representative of modern ethnography (Erickson, 2010). DuBois, a sociologist, historian and civil rights activist, geared his writing to make visible the lives of people who had previously been unseen, for the purposes of refuting the myths of racial inferiority, and securing equal treatment for African-Americans (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, 2016). Similar narrative descriptions published by Charles Booth (1895) reported the experiences and lives of working-class people in East London, and Jacob Riis (1890) described the experiences of immigrants in New York City. As with DuBois' writing, these accounts were not only for descriptive purposes; both Booth and Riis were social reformers attempting to advocate for and inform social change through their descriptive accounts (Erickson, 2010). These descriptions, however, did not endeavour to portray the points of view of those who lived their experiences, and were reflective of the etic approach common in the late 19th century.

The shift towards an emic, interpretive, ethnographic approach (Erickson, 2010) is credited to Bronislaw Malinowski. Living as a native amongst natives on the Trobriand Islands in the Western Pacific, Malinowski (1922) suggested that the goal of the ethnographer

is to reflect the 'native's point of view, his relation to life' (p. 25). This move towards participant observation in ethnography requires that the researcher does not pre-theorise or pre-label research participants, contexts or settings (Malinowski, 1922).

In the USA, Franz Boas adopted a similar approach to Malinowski but placed a stronger emphasis on theory development (Walford, 2008). One of Boas' students, Margaret Mead, is credited with developing the technique of participant observation in her fieldwork with the people of Samoa (Walford, 2008). The main foci in ethnographic studies of childhood and children at this time were the historic roots of Western civilisation, and the study of broader social values (James, 2001). Rather than articulating children's own perspectives, these studies employed ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, to observe how children, in everyday life, were taught the core social values of their society (Mead, 1928). This approach became a key characteristic of what became known as the culture and personality school of American anthropology in the 1930s and 1940s, represented by the work of Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict (James, 2001). Participant observation is associated also with the sociology movement of the Chicago School, an influential and unique strand of ethnography developed in the latter part of the 20th century (Walford, 2008). In general, these studies generated a picture of everyday modern lives, typically in urban settings (Deegan, 2001), and represented a shift away from exotic ethnographies in distant lands.

While the traditional etic and emic labels remain in contemporary ethnographic research, the division between them is less clearly drawn, with Wolcott (2008) proposing that it would be difficult to conduct ethnographic research without using both approaches. It is by telling the ethnographer's version of another's point of view that emic ethnography is achieved (Wolcott, 2008). Ethnography is most suited to investigating the complex world of children's play in this study as it facilitates understanding from an emic perspective; that is, it presents themes originating from children's perspectives (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007a). Etic organisers, such as context, social structure or institution can also be used to structure the data, and aid in analysis to make data workable from an ethnographic point of view. These organisers characterise the work as ethnographic, making it 'look like what it is supposed to look like' (Wolcott, 2006, p. 29). The differences in the two approaches might now best be described in terms of the ethnographer's orientation to (rather than membership of) the group - where an emic approach represents an insider's view while an etic approach represents an outsider's view (Wolcott, 2008). Regardless of the approach taken, the goal of ethnography is

to present the point of view of the insider as understood and conveyed by the ethnographer, while at the same time recognising multiple insider *and* outsider views (Brockmann, 2011; Wolcott, 2008). The ways in which the ethnographer might explicate participant views are now discussed.

4.2.2 Doing ethnographic research

The aim of this study is to present an interpretive account of children's experiences and perspectives of play in the first year of primary school in Queensland. In the context of this study, young children's perspectives of play are influenced by the communities of which the children are a part, both inside and outside the classroom. Within these communities, there are a number of factors and contexts that may influence children's perspectives including, but not limited to, the classroom setting, resources allocated for play, opportunities for play, the positioning of play in Prep's curriculum frameworks and other stakeholder attitudes to play.

Ethnography itself has a double meaning, referring to a research methodology that encompasses a theoretical perspective, and to the product of that research (Hammersley, 2010). The product is an interpretive monograph or published narrative description of cultural patterning or social meaning of human behaviour (Hammersley, 2010).

Ethnography, as a distinct methodological orientation, recognises people's social worlds as emerging and varied, rather than structured or fixed. In this regard, the approach considers the influence of society and contexts, both within and among communities, on people's behaviours and perspectives (Hammersley, 2010; Walford, 2008). Individuals' social worlds are constructed through meaning-making in interactions, which themselves are situated within multiple layers of context (Brockmann, 2011).

Ethnography as a research methodology involves studying people's actions and listening to their accounts in the field (Hammersley, 2010). The most prominent features of an ethnographic approach are developing and maintaining a personal connection with participants, positioning oneself as close as possible to the context and the participants, and returning a number of times to the field (Walford, 2008). An essential element of this activity is 'being there' (Trondman, 2008, p. 117) to move amongst those who inhabit a particular chosen setting.

While many anthropologists previously spent extended periods, often many years, living amongst 'the natives', this is often not practicable or desirable in contemporary

Western urban settings such as schools or family settings (Forsey, 2010). Contemporary ethnography typically is defined more specifically in terms of its methodology, which involves a range of data collection methods that define and distinguish the approach (Caines, 2010; Hammersley, 2010; O'Reilly, 2009). These methods include direct participant observation, interviewing in the field, audio visual recordings, and the collection of documents and artefacts (Caines, 2010; Pink, 2007; Trondman, 2008). The use of such data collection methods alone does not mean, however, that a study is ethnographic (Forsey, 2008; Trondman, 2008). Ethnography requires that the researcher be present in a particular chosen setting with appropriate data collection methods (Trondman, 2008). Active participation of the researcher in the field raises potential issues, however, regarding subjectivity and reflexivity. These issues are discussed later in this chapter.

An ethnographic approach emphasises the active participation of the researcher in the field as a research 'instrument' (Caines, 2010, p. 432; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 17); in other words, placing the researcher in a position where meaning is continually constructed and reconstructed in interactions with members in a cultural setting (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Brockmann, 2011) provides the ethnographer with firsthand socio-cultural experiences (Trondman, 2008; Wolcott, 2006). An ethnographic approach typically focuses on a small number of cases, such as a single setting or cultural group (Hammersley, 2010). This aspect of the ethnographic approach made it particularly appropriate for a study in the localised context of one Prep classroom.

Ethnographic data collection is typically unstructured, in that the research design is not fixed at the beginning, and categories used for interpretation are not identified prior to data collection. As an inductive science (Blommaert & Jie, 2010), ethnography involves the construction of themes and categories during the course of a study (Hammersley, 2010). Data collection repeated over a period of time, through an interpretive lens, provides ways of seeing as the ethnographer becomes immersed in a process of experiencing, enquiring and examining (Wolcott, 2008). While Hammersley (2010) suggests that definitions of key concepts often are missing from ethnographic work, Erickson (2010) emphasises the importance of defining the meaning perspectives and the systems that are real in the particular setting. In the context of this study, one might argue that, on reading the research literature, children identify activities that take place at desks in the presence of a teacher as work, and activities that take place without an adult present as play. During data collection and analysis, however, alternate and more complex perspectives emerged from the children

and other stakeholders in this study, explicating their realities in the setting. This is discussed further in Chapters 6 to 8.

Clifford Geertz (1973) uses the concept of thick description to illustrate the analyses of data, and development of theories for the purposes of understanding people's actions and perspectives during the course of ethnographic research. Citing an example of a wink and a twitch to highlight how similar physical actions can have very different meanings, Geertz (1973) uses thick description to analyse the differences between the two actions: one intentional and communicative - a behavioural gesture, the other unintentional and meaningless. In contrast to thick description is thin description, which merely describes what is observed (Geertz, 1973). Geertz's (1973) analogy highlights that physical actions may mean little in the absence of an interpretative lens – or in the absence of thinking and reflecting. It is these meanings or ways of seeing derived from fieldwork that illuminate the ethnographer's way of seeing (Geertz, 2000; Wolcott, 2008). The product of this analysis is what Geertz (1973, p. 29) describes as a 'refinement of debate'. As such, the ethnographer does not claim to be presenting a definitive picture but rather a refined picture of the perspectives of a particular group that have been constructed and reconstructed over time and across space (Caines, 2010; Hammersley, 2010).

In the context of this study, a 'purely' observational account of children's play would consider, from the researcher's perspective, whether or not play was experienced by children in the setting. Such an account would be framed by the researcher's construction of what play looks like and whether or not play, from the researcher's perspective, was observed. Alternatively, such a study might focus on talk between children about their experiences or perspectives of play. This, however, would require children to be actively engaging in conversations about play, and there are no guarantees that this would occur. Combining methods of observation, conversation and active participant observation (that is, engaging with the children in their practices) facilitates opportunities for broader understandings (Gobo & Marciniak, 2016) of children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences. In this way, children themselves describe, explain, interpret and represent their emic perspectives in a context where assumed meanings can be challenged, and knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and the participants.

The contextual setting of this study within the Prep classroom warranted consideration of a particular ethnographic approach. Specifically, classroom ethnography guided this interpretive investigation.

4.2.3 Classroom ethnography

Anthropologists George and Louise Spindler (Spindler & Spindler, 2009), and Louis Smith and William Geoffrey (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968) conducted ethnographic studies in American classrooms in the 1950s and 1960s. However, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that developments in a new sociology of education led to studies focused on teacher and student perspectives in classroom contexts (Hammersley, 2010; Walford, 2008) in the UK (e.g. Prout, 1986; Stanley, 1986; Willis, 1977; Woods, 1979) and in Australia (e.g. Davis, 1983; Stevens, 1982). Participation in research typically involved older children and young people (Hogan, 2005; Moss et al., 2005), while younger children's lives and experiences were traditionally interpreted from adult perspectives (Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2001; James, 2005a; Theobald et al., 2011). The upshot is that there has been limited ethnographic research (e.g. Corsaro, Molinari, & Rosier, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2005b; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Lappalainen, 2008; Rogers & Evans, 2007) carried out with young children as key informants.

While classic ethnographic research is typically undertaken by an outsider, classroom ethnography often involves research undertaken by an insider, such as a teacher or someone familiar with the setting (Erickson, 2010). Classroom ethnography can also be a useful methodology for those who have prior life experience in a particular setting (Erickson, 2010). My prior experience teaching in Prep classrooms, together with my Masters Research thesis on Prep parents' views of play, highlighted the suitability of classroom ethnography for this study, and for me as an 'insider' in Prep, although not in the specific classroom that was the focus of the study.

Classroom ethnography retains many key features of classic ethnography such as the use of fieldwork, including long-term, close observation and participation, and a multi-method approach to data collection. Both official and unofficial aspects of everyday practices in the classroom, the perspectives that underlie those practices, together with the manifest and hidden curricula must also be considered (Erickson, 2010). While some classroom ethnographies focus specifically on working collaboratively with teachers, promoting radical educational and social change, and exploring and documenting school life largely for its own sake, most studies adopt a mix of approaches (Hammersley, 1990).

In contrast to early exotic ethnography that sought to make the strange familiar, domestic classroom ethnography seeks to make the 'familiar strange' (Erickson, 2010, p. 322) so that the daily practices and habits of the classroom, which have been partly or wholly

invisible, are explicated (Erickson, 2010). The notion of making the 'familiar strange' (Erickson, 2010, p. 322) has particular relevance for this study. Because we have all been children, our familiarity with the concept of being a child necessitates making the 'familiar strange' (Erickson, 2010, p. 322) in order that we interrogate the concepts and beliefs we hold true of childhood (Danby, 1997).

Classrooms represent a social world or community understood by the children and teachers in those classrooms. As such, the importance of context should not be underestimated. Context facilitates phenomena to be considered in reference to their setting, connecting them in such a way as to cause them to illuminate each other (Geertz, 2000). In the classroom, there is a 'locally assembled set of adult-child...social orders' (Theobald & Danby, 2016, p. 122) to which participants orient. Such social orders may clash with the communities that children inhabit outside of the classroom, such as in family or peer groups (Walford, 2008). An ethnographic approach to classroom research enables aspects of the setting, such as children's experiences and perspectives of play, be explicated when the researcher spends time with the participants in the setting.

Ethnography takes a holistic view of the learning environment as a socio-culturally constructed setting, recognising that the classroom has multiple and interconnected components (Erickson, 2010). When one aspect of the ecosystem changes, such as classroom practices, other changes, such as children's opportunities for agentic engagement, are likely to occur. Viewing the learning environment as a particular local and social construction recognises possibilities for continued reconstruction and change (Erickson, 2010). The notion of the classroom as a local socio-culturally constructed ecosystem has particular relevance for this study. Changes to practices in Prep arising from the ongoing implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.), and phasing out of the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006, 2014) may shape the provision of play and children's experiences in Prep. The ways in which such changes in early years settings have influenced children's experiences of play and school in Australia (e.g. Hard & O'Gorman, 2007; Petriwskyj et al., 2013) and internationally (e.g. Gunnarsdottir, 2014; Lindstrand & Willen, 2016) are evident. The changes occurring in the Queensland education context presented a unique and timely opportunity to investigate children's experiences and perspectives of play using an ethnographic approach.

The ethnographic approach adopted by Smith and Geoffrey (1968) in their formative work in a seventh grade classroom in the USA guided this study. Louis Smith's initial foray

into classroom ethnography began in 1968 when he and William Geoffrey (a previous graduate student of Smith's) conducted a research investigation into how Geoffrey, as a middle class teacher, coped with seventh grade students living in an urban slum (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968). With their goal to provide a descriptive narrative of what life was really like in the classroom, and to provide a model for future classroom investigations, Smith (1969) describes the study as one of 'participant observation, classroom micro-ethnography, or field work' (p. 3).

Ethnography requires the researcher to gain a multi-dimensional understanding of the setting through the use of multiple methods of data collection (Walford, 2008). Such a focus is critical in classroom ethnography (Erikson, 2010). Taking a multi-method, multi-variable, multi-person and multi-situational approach, Smith and Geoffrey (1968) used a number of data collection techniques such as observations, interviews and collecting of written documentation. Rather than focusing on one specific classroom practice, Smith and Geoffrey (1968) investigated a range of classroom practices in order to gain a holistic view of the learning environment. A range of participants were involved in the study including students, teachers and principals. Data collection took place inside and outside of the classroom, both with and without teachers present (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968).

Smith (1990) emphasises classroom ethnographic research with a 'natural' or 'intact' group (p. 11) rather than with a sampled set of participants in order that integrated theorising, within and between the group and its environment, can be achieved. So too, identifying all of the members in the setting, as well as relationships between them, are important in illuminating aspects such as power and authority (Erickson, 2010). In this study, this important aspect of ethnography was foregrounded when the relationships between parents and teachers were identified as key to the provision of agentic play-based opportunities for children in the classroom. This is discussed further in Chapter 7.

The significance of relationships also has particular relevance for this study with children as research participants. Conducting research with children, rather than on them, necessitated consideration of theoretical, methodological and ethical issues, such as child-adult power relations, and power relations between children (O'Kane, 2008). For example, the ways in which child-researcher interactions are co-produced within situational and relational contexts, such as adult-child relations, are discussed further in Chapter 8. Another consideration was whether the research methodologies to be used in the study, often

designed for adults, were suitable for researching with children. Such issues are discussed more specifically later in this chapter.

While the intention of ethnography is to understand the perspectives of others, the ethnographer can never completely discover another's perspective, nor portray a single vision to represent a group's perspectives (Hammersley, 2010). Advocating a 'magpie' approach to information, Walford (2008) advocates picking up or focusing on anything that looks interesting to generate enough data to gain 'a valid picture' (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968, p. 14) of what is going on. In that regard, Geertz (1973, p. 20) comments that 'it is not necessary to know everything in order to understand something'. The application of these principles in the study led to a broadening of the research gaze (discussed later in this chapter) to create 'a valid picture' (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968, p. 14) of the setting.

There are many elements of classroom ethnography that deemed it an appropriate and suitable methodology to investigate children's experiences and perspectives of play. Classroom ethnography can investigate fruitful but unexplored questions, facilitating the generation of concepts and hypotheses, opening them up for further investigation and analysis. Early childhood classrooms, such as Queensland's Prep, are especially suited to ethnography's holistic approach because of the intimacy of acquaintance in a setting where young children and teachers are together for most of the school day (Erickson, 2010).

The focus on bringing familiar day-to-day activities to the fore also had particular relevance in this study. Breathnach's (2013) study of parent views of play indicated that most parents assumed that play was a part of their child's experiences in Prep. Their assumptions stemmed from common language used in print media and government literature to describe Prep, from artefacts they had seen in their children's classrooms, and from conversations with their children's teachers. While the presence of play in Prep and other early childhood settings appears often to be taken for granted by adult stakeholders (Breathnach, 2013; Flear, 2013), these assumptions may not reflect children's lived realities or their expectations that play is not a feature of formal schooling (Fisher, 2010). There has been little empirical evidence of children's experiences and perspectives of play in early education settings in Australia. Thus, investigating children's perspectives of play within the localised context of Prep required consideration of the setting as a multi-layered context with aspects that were manifest and hidden (Erickson, 2010; Geertz, 2000; Smith, 1969).

Classroom ethnography, as a methodological approach, is used to explicate people's perspectives. Its focus on making visible the accounts of others deemed it a suitable

methodological approach to investigate and explicate young children's experiences and perspectives of play in the first year of primary school. The construction of play as a natural element of childhood (Ailwood, 2003) together with the complex constructions of Queensland's first year of primary school required a methodological approach that facilitated making the 'familiar strange' (Erickson, 2010, p. 322), in order that young children's experiences, previously invisible to outsiders, were made visible. Ethnography can amplify others' voices, in particular those belonging to low status or marginalised groups (Prout & James, 1997). Young children are often marginalised because of their age (Hill, Davis, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004), and their participation in decision making on matters affecting them in the context of early childhood education has been limited (Theobald et al., 2011). Within the boundaries of any situated interpretation, the application of classroom ethnography as a theoretical, interpretive approach can facilitate previously unreported or unexplored aspects of childhood (Prout & James, 1997), such as children's perspectives of play in early years settings, to be illuminated for stakeholders and the broader community. In the process, the perspectives of children, which have been silent, are heard (Prout & James, 1997).

The theoretical paradigm of the sociology of childhood framing this ethnographic study of children's perspectives is now discussed.

4.3 Sociology of childhood

This study recognises that children and their perspectives are worthy of study in their own right (Prout & James, 1997). The institution of childhood, itself a social construction (Solberg, 1997), provides an interpretive frame for understanding children's lives (Prout & James, 1997).

Sociology of childhood frameworks bring together a range of theoretical positions that have, as their central organising frame, the recognition that children are active, competent agents who participate in the construction of experiences in complex social worlds (Christensen & Prout, 2005; Corsaro, 2005; Jenks, 2005; Mayall, 2002; Prout & James, 1997; Smith, 2007). While the sociological perspective has long had an interest in children (Prout & James, 1997), what has not been evident is the representation of children's perspectives (Theobald et al., 2011). Notions of children's competence and agency represent, in this study, an understanding that children form and are part of social groups, and that they make a valuable contribution to society through their involvement in the decision-making process on matters affecting their lives (Moss et al., 2005). Agency refers to children, as social actors,

engaging in constructing meaning-making and identity work (Fraser & Robinson, 2004). Such reconstructions of children challenge the construction of them as passive agents in socialisation, and as relatively incompetent members of society (Smith et al., 2005). The sociology of childhood framework, as discussed by Prout and James (1997), together with the compatibility of the framework with ethnography, is now outlined. Taken together, these form the theoretical orientation of this study.

An emergent view of children as capable and competent social actors has undoubtedly been aided by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) and *General Comment No. 7* (United Nations, 2005) that specifically highlight the rights of young children to participate in decision making in matters of consequence to them (Danby & Farrell, 2005; Harcourt & Einarsdóttir, 2011). James and James (2004) note, however, a continued reference to 'the child' as a sort of umbrella term for *all* children. Such categorisation ignores socio-cultural constructions of childhood, disregards children's individuality and dismisses their agency. Rather, the term 'the child' is a descriptive one, referring to a young person's developmental position in life and their membership of a collective category (James & James, 2004). While *one* child does tell us something, they do not tell us everything about *all* children.

Childhood, as an institution of social construction, provides an interpretive framework for understanding children's lives and experiences (Prout & James, 1997), and exists independent of individual children or adults (James & James, 2004). The institution of childhood itself varies cross-culturally (Prout & James, 1997). Different social-cultural practices produce different childhoods, each of which are real within their own socio-cultural setting. As such, there can never be one, authentic version of childhood (Prout & James, 1997). Childhood, as a social variable, can never be totally separate from other variables such as gender, class or ethnicity (Prout & James, 1997), and children's social constructions of childhood experiences are not homogenous, but rather heterogeneous 'childhoods' or experiences (J. Einarsdóttir, personal communication, March 26, 2013; James & James, 2004; James & Prout, 1997; Prout & James, 1997).

Despite the widely held research and human rights position that children should have a say in matters that are of consequence to them and related calls for increased child participation, agency and voice in research (Danby & Farrell, 2004; Danby, 2002; Harcourt & Einarsdóttir, 2011; Theobald et al., 2011; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008), the research agenda in Australia continues to be framed by academic, policy or professional agendas rather than

by child-focused agendas (Theobald et al., 2011; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). Pointing to a lack of statistical data about the lives of children, Qvortrup (1997) suggests that children's lives and perspectives are typically represented by other agencies, such as the family or welfare system. As a result, children's daily experiences are considered secondary to their age, which renders them dependent upon adults (Qvortrup, 1997).

Traditional developmental models of childhood have driven a dominant image of children as 'human becoming' rather than 'human being' (Qvortrup, 2005, p. 5) where less credence and importance is assigned, in particular, to the experiences and perspectives of younger children (James, 2005). While contentious interpretations of 'being' and 'becoming' in the context of children and their journey through childhood are evident in Queensland's early years curriculum frameworks (ACARA, 2012, p. 10), Uprichard (2008) calls for the consideration of childhood from the temporal perspective of the past, present and future, where children biologically develop and 'become' adults. This perspective of childhood is in contrast to the perspective of children as 'becoming' competent and skilled the closer they get to adulthood. Such a perspective frames competency as a grown-up characteristic and something that young children, in particular, cannot possess (James, 2005a, 2005b; Uprichard, 2008).

Time is a central concept (James & Prout, 1997) when considering the age-based power inequalities that marginalise and constrain children in their everyday lives and in the research agenda (Mason & Hood, 2011; Mayall, 2002, 2008). 'Time in childhood' (James & Prout, 1997, p. 231), referring to children's daily life experiences, considers the ways in which children's lives are controlled, produced and ordered by time. Thus, age fixes the limits and boundaries of Western conceptions of childhood (James & Prout, 1997). The concept of time has particular relevance for this study when, as discussed in Chapter 2, there is a conflicting view of children presented in state and federal curriculum documents: a view of children as 'pre-competent' (in the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, 2012, p. 10)) versus a view of children as 'capable' (in the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006, p. 11)).

A focus on the importance of the future in childhood positions children's daily lived experiences as secondary, and denies their childhoods in the present. Such a focus suggests that it is in the future, rather than in the present, that children will be important (James & Prout, 1997). Traditionally, children's lives and experiences are not considered in the present, relegated instead to the past or the future (James & Prout, 1997). While acknowledging the importance of investigating temporal reference points in the past and the future, the absence

of focus on childhood in the present tense, as well as on the presence of children in the research agenda, renders childhood incomplete (Prout & James, 1997). This study sought to address both of these issues, by seeking the presence of children as participants when considering their present experiences.

Age is used by adults in determining what is expected of children, and what they are and are not allowed to do (Solberg, 1997). Particularly evident in children's school lives, age determines the level and type of school work that children are expected to do, as well as their rights, duties and privileges at school (James & Prout, 1997). The implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) in Prep provides an example of how age may impact upon young children's experiences of play. While the *EYCG's* (QSA, 2006) active learning strategy approach, which includes play, was intended to be used from Prep to Year 3 (QSA, 2013), the implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* in Queensland classrooms has meant that the inclusion of such strategies is now intended only for Prep to Year 2 (QSA, 2015). Breathnach's (2013) study of parent views of play in Queensland's Prep highlighted that age was a consideration for parents, with a number of parents indicating that Prep aged children were too young to be in a formal learning environment, and that a play-based environment was more suitable for young children.

The importance of seeking children's perspectives on matters that affect them, such as play, is increasingly emphasised in the research agenda (Mason & Danby, 2011; Theobald et al., 2015, 2011). So too is the importance of a theoretical space for considering childhood as a socially constructed institution, and the activities of children within that social institution (Prout & James, 1997). Despite recent advances in the acknowledgement of children's agency, children continue to have little input into the political, educational, legal and administrative processes that profoundly affect them (Theobald et al., 2011). In particular, young children's participation in the decision-making agenda has not been a feature of early childhood education in Australia (Theobald et al., 2011). Researching children's experiences of play in Queensland's first year of primary school positions them as persons of value within the research agenda (Greene & Hill, 2005) and asserts a view of them as active members and constructors of their social worlds (Danby & Farrell, 2004; Theobald et al., 2011). This view represents a shift in perspective by emphasising the experiences of childhood and the lives of children as matters of interest in their own right (Clark & Moss, 2011; Mayall, 2002; Prout & James, 1997). This ethnographic study with young children, as social agents constrained by

and acting within the structure of childhood, illuminates their perspectives of play and classroom experiences at this particular time and place.

4.4 Ethnographic studies informed by the sociology of childhood

There is a shift from a view of children as objects to being subjects in the research process (James, 2001), and a trend towards the use of ethnography in social studies of childhood (Qvortrup, 2008). The use of ethnography as a research methodology has facilitated a view of children as capable research participants, and interpreters of their own, and others' lives and experiences (Danby & Farrell, 2005; James, 2001; Prout & James, 1997). In this regard, contemporary research has illuminated different aspects of children's lives by reporting on children's perspectives of their own experiences (James, 2001).

James (2001) suggests that the sociological study of childhood has only been made possible through the use of ethnography as it permits a view of children as competent interpreters of their social worlds. Such a view has encouraged a shift towards children as contributors to the research process, and has increasingly steered research towards working with children, rather than on children (Alderson, 2008). While there are many methodologies for studying children and childhood (Qvortrup, 2008), it is ethnography's commitment to an interpretative approach that facilitates the illumination of children's perspectives and experiences, which are then made accessible to adults and other children (James, 2001).

An ethnographic approach has been used as a means to gain insight into children's lives in the developing world since the early part of the 20th century. Rather than articulating children's own perspectives, the focus of early studies, like many to follow, was on other matters such as the historic roots of Western civilisation and the study of social values (James, 2001). The emphasis placed on children's perspectives was little when compared with contemporary ethnographic studies as the interpretations put forward originated largely from adult accounts, and the observation of adult-child interactions (James, 2001). These studies did, however, through their use of ethnography as a research methodology, provide a basis upon which to challenge the homogenous view of childhood and children's development (James, 2001). In demonstrating the quality and significance of data gathered from participant observation, the earlier ethnographic studies paved the way for an emergent paradigm for childhood studies in the 1970s. While research practices in developmental psychology continue to work within traditional scientific paradigms, there has been a trend towards the inclusion of qualitative approaches, such as ethnography, that emphasise children

as social and cultural actors, and that enrich understandings of childhood and children's issues (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008).

Central to the sociology of childhood framework is a commitment to understanding children's social worlds and engaging with them as social actors. Ethnography as a methodology acknowledges the cultural construction of childhood, and the place of children as social actors who actively shape their own childhoods (James, 2001; James & Prout, 1997). Increasingly, the sociology of childhood provides a lens through which early childhood ethnographic studies are conducted (e.g. Corsaro et al., 2002; Ghiso, 2011; Gustafson, 2009; Huf, 2013; Madrid & Kantor, 2009; Richards, 2011; Seele, 2012; Smith et al., 2005). A commonality shared by these studies is their reference to ethnography's suitability for the active engagement of children in the research process, and the access it provides to children's social worlds (Greene & Hill, 2005; James, 2001). This selection of studies also highlights that there are various data collection methods used by ethnographers in the field, as well as different ways in which researchers engage with children.

Corsaro, Molinary and Rosier's (2002) comparative ethnography examined the transition experiences of two young children from preschool to elementary school in the USA and Italy using observation of the children as a data collection method. While there appears to have been some flexibility as to the active participation of the researcher when one of the children endeavoured to include the researcher in her jokes, interviews were used only with the children's parents and teachers.

Madrid and Kantor (2009) used participant observation as the data collection method in their ethnographic study of children's peer cultures in a preschool classroom in the USA. Their approach involved video and audio recordings, conversations with children and teachers, and field notes. Other ethnographic studies with young children have also used participation observation in combination with other data collection methods. Huf's (2013) comparative ethnographic study of children's peer culture in their transition from non-compulsory to compulsory schooling in the UK and Germany, Gustafson's (2009) ethnographic study of social identity constructions of Swedish children in the school yard and Smith et al.'s (2005) ethnographic study in New Zealand of young children's learning experiences used observation of children's activities, informal conversation, and collection of the children's artefacts (such as photos, maps, paintings and writings).

Despite a strong tradition amongst practitioners of equating ethnography with participant observation (e.g. Crang & Cook, 2007; Delamont, 2004; O'Reilly, 2009), the

meaning of the term is not homogenous, with varying views as to what participant observation should involve (Forsey, 2010). While Walford (2008) is ambivalent as to whether participation is necessary or not, Powell (2006) suggests that, of the phrase, the word 'participant' is a highly contentious one, calling into question the role and position of the researcher. Therefore, the explicit labelling of ethnographic activities, as discussed in this context of this study later in this chapter, provides the researcher with a firmer platform upon which to present the case for researcher reflexivity (Powell, 2006).

Of education ethnographies in particular, Powell (2006) contends that most researchers use observational methods, with participation taking the form of interviews, informal conversations and interactions with participants. Other researchers in the field suggest that observation involves a mixture of watching, listening and asking questions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In ethnographic studies where interviews are used for data collection, Forsey (2010) emphasises the importance of participant listening, suggesting that what ethnographers are actually involved in is a process of engaged listening. Advocating the validity of participant listening as an ethnographic approach, Forsey (2010) suggests that not all research topics are suited to observation as a data collection method. Drawing on his own research experiences, Forsey (2010) cites his interview-based research on educational choices in an Australian capital city as one not conducive to observation, noting that the best way to capture the information was to meet and talk with the participants.

In the context of this study, as one researching with young children, the process of listening is understood as a political endeavour that enables children's participation in society (Te One, 2008, 2010). Listening to young children requires consideration of the many ways in which children express themselves (Clark & Moss, 2011). It provides a context within which children feel they can legitimately express their perspectives (Rinaldi, 2005) and can be understood in a context broader than that of the spoken and written word (Clark & Moss, 2011). Undertaking ethnographic research with children draws attention to the role of the researcher as one of extending beyond listening (as a technique) to that of 'making a common cause with the children' (Warming, 2005, p. 53). Listening in this way requires acknowledgement of meaning as co-constructed between the speaker and the listener. Such listening requires researchers to reflect upon their own opinions, and revise their practices in light of what children have to say (Brooker, 2011).

Prout and James' (1997) sociology of childhood, which acknowledges the multiplicity of socio-culturally constructed childhoods and the competency of children as social actors

within those childhoods, provided the lens through which data were interpreted in this study. The use of ethnography as a research methodology was particularly suited to investigate children's perspectives as lived experiences through the development of deep contact between the researcher and participants. Adopting the perspective that children are a heterogeneous group (Emond, 2005) demanded a research approach that facilitated their participation in a variety of ways (Greene & Hill, 2005) and provided opportunities for the co-construction of meanings (Clark & Moss, 2011). The research questions central to this study regarding young children's experiences and perspectives of play required deep engagement with children in order to explicate those perspectives. The methods used to explore children's perspectives and experiences in this study, together with considerations when researching with children, are now discussed.

4.5 Research method and design

The purpose of this study was to investigate children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences in the first year of primary school in Queensland. The study also sought to engage young children as research participants in order to provide a platform for them, as key stakeholders in early childhood education, to express their views about what is important to them in school.

In the design phase of the study, the research questions focused on:

1. What are children's accounts of their experiences in Prep?
2. To what extent is play an aspect of children's described experiences in Prep?
3. What are the implications of investigating children's accounts of play for early childhood education?

The ethnographic design of this study foregrounds the relevance of children's broader experiences inside and outside of the setting in the context of their experiences and perspectives of play at school. Thus, a holistic view of the setting was taken to reflect the significance in ethnography of contexts in understanding people's social worlds, experiences and perspectives (Erickson, 2010; O'Reilly, 2009). Once data collection began and I had immersed myself in the setting, it became apparent, however, that the initial research questions did not provide sufficient scope to reflect upon the ways in which aspects of the setting may have influenced children's perspectives of play and their experiences in school.

Reflexivity in the ethnographic approach also raised additional questions, outside of the original scope of this study, as to how children had co-constructed knowledge and meaning with members in their setting. In particular, children's participation in research encounters, and the impact of these co-constructed encounters on data collection and analysis, had not originally been considered. Reflexive practices, as a critical aspect of ethnographic research, also significantly shaped the ways in which the research questions were reflected upon.

The process of reviewing the research questions speaks to the 'messiness' (Spyrou 2011, 162) of doing rigorous research. Reviewing the research questions also speaks to the importance in ethnography of engaged listening, and a commitment in this study to elevating what the participants were saying over a research agenda that may be not representative of children's experiences and perspectives. The broadening of the scope of the study involved talking a multi-method, multi-variable, multi-person and multi-situational focus (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968). As a result, the research questions were revised as follows:

1. What are children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences in Prep?
2. What contextual factors support the provision of play-based learning opportunities for children?
3. How can researchers support children's participation in research as informants of their everyday practices?

These questions and their related findings are attended to in Chapters 6 to 8. The research site and participants are now discussed.

4.5.1 Research site and participants

The research site was a Prep classroom in a large state primary school situated in suburban Brisbane. Over 80% of the population in the suburb identify as being Australian born, with 6% being from a non-English speaking background. 15% of households are identified as high income, while almost 20% are identified as low income households (.idcommunity, n.d.).

The Prep classroom had one qualified primary school teacher and two qualified part-time teacher assistants. While not early childhood qualified, the teacher had taught Prep since its introduction in 2007, and had taught a play-based preschool program at the school for ten years prior to that. There were 25 children in the class: 13 girls and 12 boys. Children had a diverse range of academic abilities and social skills. At the time of the study, one child had been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder and had a dedicated part-time teacher aide

to assist with his needs in the classroom. Three other children demonstrated specific learning, social and sensory difficulties. Such information is provided here only because it is known. No categorisations in respect of children's diagnoses or abilities were considered in the collection and analysis of data.

While the primary focus of this study was on the experiences and perspectives of children, the ethnographic nature of the study recognises that children are part of communities of which other stakeholders are also a part. So too, the ethnographic view of the research setting as a holistic one with different stakeholder members required an open-mindedness as to the data, if any, I might gather from other members in the setting. As such, parents, siblings, other children and staff members at the school were also considered as potential participants in the study. In this regard, a number of ethical considerations were pertinent. These are now discussed.

4.5.2 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought and approved for this study from Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) University Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC). The study was also conducted in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007* (Australian Government, 2015). QUT Ethical Clearance-Level 1 (Low Risk) Approval no 1400000238 was granted on 2nd April 2014 from UHREC (Appendix A). Ethical approval was also sought from Queensland's Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE), and approval no 550/27/1454 was granted on 13th June 2014 (Appendix B).

Understandings of research with children and the ethics of research with children are embedded in one's view of children and childhood (Farrell, 2005; James & James, 2004). While ethical considerations, such as access, consent and power relations are relevant in all research, these considerations are amplified in research with children (Christensen & James, 2008; Einarsdóttir, 2007). These key ethical considerations are now discussed.

Access

In the absence of consent, there is no access for researchers to research participants. Thus, the process of negotiating access acts as a gatekeeping mechanism for participants' involvement in research (Dalli & Stephenson, 2010). The classroom teacher was identified as a potential participant by a member of the supervisory team, who then made informal contact with the teacher to gauge her interest in participating in the study. In this way, the teacher acted as an

initial gatekeeper in the research process. Following confirmation of the teacher's interest in participating, email correspondence was sent to the school principal outlining the scope of the study and a likely timeline for its completion. Once ethical approvals were sought and granted by QUT and DETE, a face-to-face meeting was arranged with the classroom teacher. At this meeting, teacher/teacher assistant (Appendix C) and principal (Appendix D) information and consent forms were provided to her for distribution to relevant staff members. Information and consent forms for parents (Appendix E) and children (Appendix F) were also provided for distribution to families.

Parents and children were invited to opt-in to the study by providing their written consent. In this way, privacy and free choice for participants and non-participants were respected (Alderson, 2004). The process of gaining consent prior to access also provided a gate-keeping mechanism (Alderson, 2004; Dalli & Stephenson, 2010; Powell & Smith, 2009). All 25 children and their parents provided their written consent.

As noted earlier, other adults (such as teachers, other staff members and visiting adults) and other children (such children from other classes) indirectly participated in the study by virtue of their presence in and around the classroom during data collection. Where appropriate, individuals were provided with information on the study and asked to provide their consent to participate. For example, a preservice teacher was present in the classroom on a number of occasions during fieldwork and so I sought her consent to participate. On another occasion, I sought the consent of a relief teacher to participate when the classroom teacher was absent for the day.

To ensure the manageability of data collection and the protection of participant confidentiality and privacy, video recordings were not made in open areas, such as the playground at busy times (for example at morning tea) where significant numbers of children from across the school community congregated. In such situations, audio recordings of participants were used instead. In the absence of written consent, handwritten field notes were used to record relevant general encounters with children from other classes without using their data or identifying them in any way.

The teacher was provided with copies of an information poster containing my photograph and information about me and the study to display in the classroom (Appendix G). The poster was designed to create a sense of familiarity for children and parents before the study commenced. The display of posters around the classroom coincided with two further visits to the class (once in the morning at drop-off time and once in the afternoon at

pick-up time), arranged so that parents and children could meet me prior to the study commencing.

Consent

The principles of respect and justice are central to the ethical consideration of child consent (Alderson, 2004). Thus, the notion of opting-in to the research process and activities underpinned the basis upon which children were asked to consent to participate in this study. Alderson's (2004) and Danby and Farrell's (2005) recommendations on leaflets for children guided the format. The child-friendly consent form used text and images to describe the study, my researcher role and activities, and how data would be used. Parents were asked to read the child consent form with their child before asking them to write their name or make their mark if they wished to participate. In anticipation that children may decide, following initial consent, to opt-out of the study, they were asked to reaffirm their verbal consent throughout the study, and were reminded that they could choose not to participate and stop the recording at any time. A number of children exercised this right during the study. Thus, the children also acted as gatekeepers in the research process (Danby & Farrell, 2005).

In order not to privilege the written or spoken word, and in recognition of children's 'hundred languages' (Rinaldi, 2005, p. 20), it was acknowledged that the decision to opt-out of activities may not be explicitly voiced by a child and may instead be indicated by a child's unwillingness to participate or by their lack of response (Alderson, 2005; Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2012; Morrow, 2005). I was also aware that, in some instances, some children may feel uncomfortable in refusing to participate (Alderson, 2004). Relationships with myself, teachers, peers and family members were also acknowledged as potential influences on a child's decision to participate or not in research (Dockett et al., 2012). To address such issues demanded an awareness on my part to watch for cues (Alderson, 2005), as well as reflexivity and a sensitivity to the impact of relationships on children's decisions (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; Gallagher, Haywood, Jones, & Milne, 2010).

Consideration of child consent highlights the power differential in adult-child relationships, now discussed.

Power relations

When children are involved as research participants, the relationship between them and the researcher may be more complicated and the power differential elevated. Language is an important factor when considering the power differential between adults and children. When the written and spoken word is privileged, children are rarely empowered (Clark, 2005b).

This study sought to address such issues by taking a multi-sensory approach to data collection that provided different ways for children to communicate their perspectives.

The power differential between adults and children can be amplified in an interview situation (Clark, 2005a) because children may not be used to adults seeking their views and they may see the adult as operating in surveillance mode (Einarsdóttir, 2007). Children may also be inclined to answer in a way that they think will please the adult or may feel uncomfortable refusing to participate for fear of upsetting the adult (Einarsdóttir, 2007). In consideration of these issues, one key characteristic of this ethnographic study was the close relationship developed over a period of time between myself and the children for the purposes of building trust and rapport, which was achieved by spending extended periods of time with the children in their everyday spaces. I also sought to address such issues by reminding children that they could choose not to participate at any time, for any reason, without question.

Two approaches typically have existed in the adult-child research relationship – the first, which assumes the superiority of adult knowledge, and the second, which questions the first approach and attempts to dilute the power relationship to the extent that children view the adult as one of themselves (Mayall, 2008). As noted by Mayall (2008), however, in situations where the researcher is not regarded as a typical adult, children may not recognise the adult position of power occupied by the researcher. While it may be impossible for adults to go physically unnoticed by children in a research setting (Greene & Hill, 2005; James, 2001), some ethnographers have attempted to take an atypical adult role by entering children's play spaces and engaging with them (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008; Corsaro, 2005). This method of not acting like an adult (Graue & Walsh, 1998) enables the researcher to successfully negotiate a 'least adult' space between that of an adult in a position of authority and the children themselves (Christensen, 2004; Mayall, 2008; Thorne, 1993; Warming, 2005). Crucial to the negotiation of this space is the development of a familiarity between the children and the researcher, as well as the researcher being familiar with the local practices and language of the setting (Christensen & James, 2008; Graue & Walsh, 1998). Regardless of the space negotiated, the researcher can, however, always revert to their adult role and it is for this reason that power relations are considered a central issue (James, 2001). It is the recognition and acceptance of the inevitability of a power differential that allows this aspect of child-adult research to be effectively addressed (Einarsdóttir, 2007; James, 2001; Mayall, 2002). These issues are addressed further in Chapter 8.

In this study, I adopted an approach advocated by Mayall (2008) that neither assumes adult superiority nor discounts child-adult power relations in co-constructed research encounters. In conversations with children, and in response to their questions about who I was and what I was doing in their classroom, I emphasised my role as being to find out from children what they thought about Prep, what they did in Prep, what they enjoyed doing and why. Children were positioned as 'experts' (Clark & Moss, 2011, p. 35) about their school experiences and practices, while I positioned myself as a learner (Einarsdóttir 2007; Graue and Walsh 1998; Mayall 2008; Danby 1997) investigating the unique knowledge that children have about their experiences and practices. I sought to emphasise my positioning or stance as a learner by behaving in ways that were not typical of the everyday child-adult social orders of the setting. The purpose of this was to encourage children to interact with me as someone who was learning about what happens in their classroom, rather than as a teacher or parent. The ways in which children's participation as expert informants was co-constructed in child-researcher interactions is discussed further in Chapter 8.

The existence of a power differential between myself as an adult researcher and the children brought added responsibility (Greene & Hill, 2005; James, 2001). In particular, there is a risk in group conversations that the voices of shy or quieter children might be marginalised. While placing a responsibility on me to ensure I provided opportunities for all children to be heard, this was balanced against the right of children to remain silent if they wished (Dockett & Perry, 2005a). In this regard, children's right to privacy superseded the benefit of any data that might be collected in this study (Einarsdóttir, 2007). In particular, participants' anonymity was assured through the use of pseudonyms in the reported data. Participants' and the school's anonymity was also a condition of DETE's ethics approval (Appendix B).

4.5.3 Data collection

During the initial visit to the school, a fieldwork timetable was negotiated with the classroom teacher. In negotiating visits to the classroom, the classroom teacher suggested a schedule that would provide me with opportunities to observe teacher-directed episodes, child-initiated episodes, spend morning tea and lunch time with the children, and accompany the children to specialist lessons (such as Science, Music and Physical Education). It was agreed that I would visit the classroom on Tuesdays and Fridays between 10.00am and 1.30pm. The schedule was flexible enough for me to spend longer periods of time in the classroom and attend on other

days as necessary. Visits began at the start of Term 3 (July) and continued through until the end of Term 4 (December) in 2014.

The Mosaic approach, developed by Alison Clarke and Peter Moss as a framework for listening to young children in early childhood settings (Clark, 2005b; Clark & Moss, 2011), guided this study. Building on traditional ethnographic data collection methods of participant observation and interviews (Clark, 2005b), the approach provides a flexible, multi-sensory portfolio of participatory research tools for working with young children that can be adapted to reflect the skills, strengths and interests of research participants. Reflecting the ways in which children might choose to express themselves with friends and family, opportunities to talk, walk, make and review offer children a range of ways in which to interact in research (Clark & Moss, 2011). In not privileging the written or spoken word, the approach is reflective of the 'hundred languages' (Rinaldi, 2005, p. 20) of children.

The approach emphasises a view of children as 'experts in their own lives' (Clark & Moss, 2011, p. 35) who, through the use of creative and participatory research tools, can express their perspectives with confidence. Such a view of children is aligned with Prout and James' (1997) sociology of childhood that frames children as competent and active meaning-makers. The approach is also aligned with the ethnographic tradition in its view of research with children as a process of meaning-making and construction, where data are co-produced between the researcher and the participants (Christensen, 2004; Clark & Moss, 2011; Clark, 2011). The Mosaic approach has been applied in a number of ethnographic studies with young children (e.g. Alcock, 2007; Blaisdell, 2012; Christensen, 2004; Clark, McQuail, & Moss, 2003; Clark, 2004, 2011; Richards, 2009; Smith et al., 2005), and in other qualitative research studies (Einarsdóttir, 2005b, 2008, 2010a; Einarsdóttir et al., 2009).

The specific research tools used in this study were:

- video recorded participant observation;
- video and audio recorded conversations with a purpose; and
- children's drawings.

Each research tool is now discussed in turn.

Video recorded participant observation

The first step in the observation process involved observing and recording key facts about the setting. The process of recording ethnographic field notes was guided by Delamont's (2008) recommendations underpinning good ethnographic work. Field notes included recording the

layout of the classroom and the children's spaces, noting displays on the walls, the location and layout of the furniture, and sounds and smells. A combination of video recordings, photographs and hand-written field notes was used to record this type of information. Handwritten field notes were used to record my thoughts and observations during participant observation, or as soon as possible thereafter to avoid the loss of detail (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). They were used also to record my thoughts and 'hunches' (Delamont, 2002, p. 77). Observations contributed to making children's lives visible, and provided a platform from which to engage with the children and other adults in the setting (such as the teacher, teacher aides and parents) in discussions throughout the fieldwork process (Clark & Moss, 2011).

My initial visits to the setting provided opportunities to become familiar with and comfortable in the setting, and develop an understanding of social orders of the classroom. Participant observation in this study was an important first step in getting to know the children, and provided preliminary data to guide later conversations with them (Clark & Moss, 2011; Silverman, 2009). The children in the study were positioned as 'experts in their own lives' (Clark & Moss, 2011, p. 35; Langsted, 1994, p. 35) while I presented myself as a learner wanting to find out from children what school was like for them.

In my initial visits as a participant observer, I engaged with the children in informal conversations, often in their spaces at their invitation, for the purposes of establishing relationships with them, and also to establish with them who I was and why I was in their classroom. My aim, in developing rapport and relationships with the children, was to create a feeling of familiarity with them (Danby, Ewing, & Thorpe, 2011; Smith et al., 2005), and to build trust and respect (Dockett & Perry, 2005a) so that they felt comfortable in my presence. While children's spaces may be adult constructed and governed (Ailwood, 2003; Moss & Petrie, 2002), they are not typically occupied by adults. In particular, Corsaro (1985) suggests, in his study of peer culture in a nursery school in the USA, that playing in the sandpit with the children, rather than observing from a distance in a typical adult fashion, provided him opportunities to engage with the children in their play spaces as an atypical adult. As such, my engaging with the children in their play spaces was done in an attempt to present myself as an atypical adult (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008). In their own spaces, children were more likely to approach me and engage me in their activities (Corsaro, 2005). In initial visits, their approaches were often to try and identify the category to which I belonged (Danby, 1997).

Listening to children in this study represented more than hearing their perspectives. Listening respects both what children have to say and their silences. In this way, listening is an active process that also involves co-constructing meaning, interpreting and responding to what children say. Watching and engaging with children during their activities provided opportunities for listening to their accounts, observing interactions and engagement in activities, as well as opportunities to 'listen' to the children's body language (Clark & Moss, 2011, p. 17). Episodes of participant observation with the children were video recorded to capture non-verbal communication and body language (Danby et al., 2011) and conversations were later transcribed. Video recordings of children's classroom practices represented 'that moment in which ways of knowing about another person's experience and the particular experiences of the ethnographer actually emerge' (SAGE Methodspace, 2009, 3:26). As such, these recordings were particularly useful in enabling me to take myself 'back into the research situation' (SAGE Methodspace, 2009, 3:35) at later stages in the research process.

Of the three possible levels of child participation in research, that is *unknowing objects*, *aware subjects* and *active participants* (Alderson, 2005), this study involved children as active participants. Adopting a researcher stance as learner facilitated space for children to take up positions in child-researcher interactions as expert informants of their practices.

I sought opportunities in child-researcher interactions to pass the agenda to children so that they controlled the pace and direction of the conversation (Mayall, 2008). The passing of the agenda to children was evident in the ways in which the research questions evolved over the course of the study. Conversations with children and observations of their engagement in activities led to a reflexive broadening of gaze beyond my researcher questions to illuminate the children's agenda. Listening to all that they said (and did not say), rather than focusing on their responses to specific research questions facilitated more nuanced and rich accounts of their perspectives.

Video and audio recorded conversations with a purpose

This study adopted an informal, conversational approach to interview, or a 'conversation with a purpose' (Berg, 2009, p. 89), with the participants in this study. Conversations were audio and video recorded and later transcribed. Audio recording was used primarily as a backup measure against recording failure. It also enabled the use of a transcription pedal for the playback of dictation. Outside the classroom, audio recording was used to record participant observations and conversations in open spaces such as the playground to avoid capturing images of children who were not part of the study. Handwritten field notes recorded and

reflected my observations and thoughts before, during and after conversations took place. Handwritten field notes were also used to record relevant general encounters with children from other classes without using their data.

The purpose of conversations with children was to investigate their perspectives and experiences within the contextual setting of the classroom. During initial visits, I undertook conversations with the children in 'safe spaces' (MacNaughton & Smith, 2005, p. 114) where the children felt at ease. These conversations occurred at the children's invitation, and often in their activity spaces in the classroom and in the playground. Relationships developed with most of the children and, as I became a familiar and expected presence in the classroom, conversations and interactions occurred with the ease, frequency and normalcy that one would expect with friends and acquaintances. That said, I was always conscious of not interrupting the natural flow of children's activities and conversations, and so incorporated movement into our conversations to ensure that I could 'go with the flow'. Particularly useful was the 'walking interview' (Langsted, 1994, p. 35; Pink, 2010) or 'tours' (Clark & Moss, 2011, p. 28) with children who found it difficult to sit still. In many instances, children initiated the 'walking interview' themselves under the guise that they needed to show me something important, away from the rest of the group. Often, however, I suspect the 'walking interview' was initiated by those children because of their preference for one-on-one conversations. Having opportunities for those children to speak with me on their own gave them the time and space to talk and engage with me without the need to vie for opportunities to be adequately heard in group conversations. As with participant observations, conversations in the classroom were video recorded to enable the capturing of non-verbal communication and body language (Danby et al., 2011). The use of video recording also served to address any potential difficulties that might have been associated with differentiating between children's voices (Smith et al., 2005).

The broadening of my gaze in this study resulted in the teacher and parents also participating in informal conversations. With the teacher, informal conversations occurred on a continuous basis. However, on one occasion mid-way through data collection and on another occasion towards the end of data collection, I arranged to sit down with the classroom teacher for the purposes of a more focused conversation, away from distractions of the classroom, to follow up on questions and points of clarification regarding events that I had observed. These two conversations were audio and video recorded and later transcribed in full.

So too, conversations with parents occurred on a continuous basis and were often quite general in nature. A number of parents, however, displayed a keen interest in the study and discussed the focus of the study in the context of their child's experiences at school. As a result, I invited six parents (mothers) to participate in more formal conversations. All but one of the conversations took place in quiet spots in the school grounds, and had all of the distractions normally associated with a school environment. These included school bells ringing, and children and adults passing by and stopping to say hello. These conversations were audio recorded. The other conversation took place over Skype™ and was simultaneously recorded using Audacity®. Younger siblings were present for a number of the conversations.

A list of question prompts was used as a conversation guide (Appendix H) with parents. These question prompts were used in my Masters Research study of parent views of play in Prep (Breathnach, 2013). Notwithstanding the standalone significance of parent data in this study, it was hoped that data collected with parents could also be used to reflect again on the data collected with parents in my earlier project. In this regard, the question prompts served as a useful guide.

Conversations with parents ranged between 20 and 45 minutes in length. Because of the relationships I had developed with them, the conversations were informal in nature. Parents asked me questions about the study, and discussed matters regarding their families and personal circumstances that were outside the scope of the study. So too, I shared with them my personal experiences in the classroom, and talked about my own children in the context of Prep.

Children's drawings

I had identified the use of children's drawings as a tool to ground conversations in the children's personal experiences (Smith et al., 2005), and facilitate discussion of the children's perspectives (Clark, 2005a; Einarsdóttir et al., 2009; Veale, 2005; Wright, 2010). So as not to influence the children's possible interpretation of the drawing activity as a classroom task (Einarsdóttir et al., 2009), I introduced the drawing activity to the children in small groups of three or four, away from the main proceedings in the classroom in a quiet space outside. Group conversations with friends can be dynamic encounters as children introduce topics of relevance and interest to those involved in the conversation, discuss questions and topics together, help each other with answering and remind each other about the details (Dockett & Perry, 2005a; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Graue & Walsh, 1998). In having opportunities to ask

questions, children can adopt, in a sense, the role of interviewer (Einarsdóttir, 2007) as they clarify their understandings of the study (Danby & Farrell, 2005). Through this process, the children co-constructed the conversation with me (Danby & Farrell, 2005).

Felt pens and paper were made available for children who wanted to draw about their experiences at school while they were talking. I anticipated that the activity would provide opportunities for children to reflect on previous conversations, and that conversation during the drawing activity would provide opportunities for the children to discuss, describe and elaborate on their drawings. Flexibility was an important element of activity, which was influenced by the needs of the children involved, and the classroom routines and activities (Clark & Moss, 2011; Einarsdóttir, 2005b; Mayall, 2008). The children were video recorded as they drew to capture their body language and non-verbal communication, and to locate each child's conversation to their drawing. Conversations were later transcribed.

The use of drawings shifts the focus away from the written and spoken word to a visual or multi-sensory approach (Clark et al., 2003). Drawing activities provided children with a relatively open-ended experience in which to communicate their thoughts and feelings (Wright, 2010). The activity also provided the children with meaningful opportunities, using familiar resources (Clark, 2005a), to engage in the production of data over which they have an element of control (Einarsdóttir et al., 2009). Recognising that meaning-making takes time, the use of drawings in this study encouraged the children to take their time in responding and be reflexive as they draw. I engaged the children in conversation while they were drawing, and noted their interpretations of their drawings on the back of their individual works.

It could be argued that a possible disadvantage of the drawing activity may be that some of children imitate the drawings of other children (Einarsdóttir, 2007). As the children drew in the presence of me and other children, what they drew and the meanings given to those drawings were influenced and co-constructed by those in their presence. However, the conversations that the children engaged in while drawing, and the questions they asked each other about their pictures contributed greatly to my understanding of their 'words about pictures' (Veale, 2005, p. 265). This talk was critical in gaining a rich understanding of the children's mean-meaning process (Smith et al., 2005), rather than relying on the finished product alone (Clark, 2005a; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Einarsdóttir et al., 2009). Following Dockett and Perry's (2005a) recommendations, a colour copy was made of the children's drawings so

that the children were not expected to part with something that they had spent time and effort creating.

The use of drawing as a research tool did not require children to maintain eye contact with me and, as such, provided the children with a less confrontational environment in which to engage in data production (Dockett & Perry, 2005a; Einarsdóttir et al., 2009). It is noted, however, that while drawing may be regarded as a pleasurable activity for many children (Einarsdóttir et al., 2009) and some children find it helpful to be doing something with their hands while they talk (Cameron, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2005a), there may be others who will not want to draw or who may feel that they cannot draw (Einarsdóttir et al., 2009). In this study, the timing of drawing activities was a significant influencing factor in children's decisions to 'opt-in' (Alderson, 2004, p. 105) to the activity. Due to the timing of classroom activities, and in order not to disrupt the children's schedule, drawing activities were organised during 'inside play' time. It was during 'inside play' that children had opportunities to engage in freely chosen activities. Faced with the choice of sitting down drawing with me or engaging in an activity with their friends, many children chose the latter. In some instances, children chose to opt-out of drawing shortly after starting in order to join their friends in another activity. It was really only those children with whom I had developed close relationships or those who actively chose to draw pictures during 'inside play' that showed an interest in participating in drawing activities with me. While the volume of drawings produced was quite low, the conversations that occurred as a result of the activity were rich and insightful, and produced important data which are reported in Chapter 6.

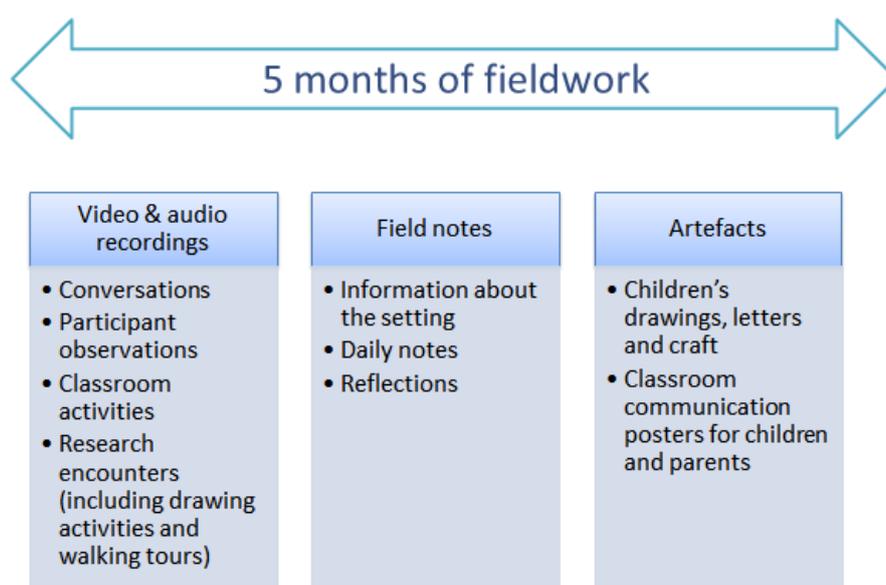


Figure 4.1 Fieldwork and data collection.

4.5.4 Data analysis

An ethnographic analytic approach cannot be encapsulated in a list of linear steps (Rapley, 2016) because the study had, in effect, been in progress since its inception. The aim of the approach was instead 'a working, hands-on, empirical, tacit knowledge' (Rapley, 2011, p. 274) of the data. Preliminary data analysis focused on primary data (such as field notes and other data collected on each visit on site), and secondary data consisting of pre- and post-fieldwork research (such as reviews of themes evident in childhood research and curriculum documents).

Data analysis began with my first field notes on my initial visit to the setting (Delamont, 2008; Silverman, 2009). Organising and reflecting on my observations and thoughts during data collection, as well as on observations of and interactions with the children, facilitated the generation of preliminary codes, patterns and themes to be used in later stages of analysis (Corwin & Clemens, 2012; Madden, 2010; Rapley, 2016; Silverman, 2009).

Video and audio recorded conversations were transcribed as soon as possible after conversations took place in order to manage the volume of transcription work. Self-transcription of interviews is an integral part of getting to know the data, and this can be achieved more fully than through reading transcripts prepared by another person (Forsey, 2008). This close connection with the data also facilitated later summary of the material. As a research apprentice, self-transcription of data was also an important part in the learning process of dealing with the significant amounts of data generated in a study (Forsey, 2008).

There were three key steps in data analysis. Step 1 involved immersing myself in the data by reading over my field notes and conversation transcripts, watching the video recordings and reflecting on children's drawings and writing a number of times, all the while making notes of my thoughts and observations (Spindler, 2006), and the phrases, ideas or concepts that emerged.

For filing purposes, data were collated into Microsoft OneNote™. This research 'notebook' was used to store all of the data collected, as well as ancillary data such as participant lists, contact details and pseudonyms. For every site visit, a descriptor page was created and named according to the date of that visit. On each descriptor page, I included all of the data collected on that particular day, such as handwritten field notes (denoted by a  symbol), transcriptions of audio recordings (and links to the original file) (denoted by a  symbol), photographic stills from video recordings (and links to the original file) (denoted by

a 📄 symbol), photographic images (denoted by a 📷 symbol), questions or points to follow up on (denoted by a 💡 symbol) and copies of artefacts (such as children's drawings) (Appendix I).

Step 2 involved looking across the data to identify common ideas or concepts and broad themes (Madden, 2010). This also involved noting concepts or categories used by the children and adult participants in the setting (Silverman, 2009). Initially, my analysis of data focused on deriving emic themes and concepts that the children, in particular, used in their talk. Analysis of the data through the lens of the sociology of childhood with a focus on emic themes facilitated in making visible the children's everyday lives in the classroom (Prout, 2003; Prout & James, 1997).

Step 3 involved shifting to a concept-driven approach where I organised the data in congruence with etic concepts and themes (Corwin & Clemens, 2012; Gough & Scott, 2000) evident in the relevant literature (such as play, children's perspectives, children's agency and participation, and early childhood curriculum documents). During this stage, concepts and themes not considered previously emerged, particularly in the context of the revised research questions. This required a further review of the research and theory literature. Despite being outlined here as separate stages, emic and etic coding are not discreet stages but rather an iterative process (Corwin & Clemens, 2012). This iterative process demands continuous review, reflection and refining of codes and themes that have been used, and the relationships between them (Rapley, 2016).

During this phase of the analysis, I created a separate 'theme page' for each theme in my research 'notebook'. Each theme page was filed according to its code word/phrase. Data segments relating to each theme were copied from their descriptor pages into the corresponding theme page. Hyperlinks were used to connect theme pages to the descriptor pages from where the data had originally been filed, and also back to the original data source (such as a video file or conversation transcript).

Once the data from the descriptor pages were coded, a spreadsheet was created to capture the 41 code words/phrases that were identified. Returning to the data, the next step was to identify specific quotes, events or artefacts in the data to support the codes. This method of data reduction facilitated the collation and aggregation of codes to form and identify the main themes that represented important and patterned ideas in relation to the research questions.

Considering the perspectives of young children through the lens of the sociology of childhood allows for multiple views and contexts to be reflected upon during the collection and analysis of ethnographic data. Interpretive analysis of the data collected considers the meanings and functions of participant actions and, often, how these connect with local and wider contexts (Geertz, 2000; Hammersley, 2010). The location of the study within wider social, cultural, historical and political contexts and the influence of those contexts on children's mean-making, is a key element of ethnography (Erickson, 2010; Geertz, 2000) and the sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 1997). In particular, the framing of children's experiences and perspectives of play in Prep within the context of its curriculum frameworks, current socio-political education debates, and the ways in which play and Prep are constructed formed a critical part of the interpretive analysis of the data. As all meaning is context related, and context itself multi-layered, the identification of context is essential to explicate meaning (Moerman, 1988). In this regard, my field notes and reflections also formed a critical data source. These field notes provided an important lens through which the data was analysed; in particular, my reflexive considerations of how data were collected, and how the relationships developed in the setting influenced not only the research questions but all aspects of the study (Buscatto, 2016).

Adopting the characteristic 'funnel' approach to ethnographic research and analysis, the aim was to progressively clarify and define the scope of the research questions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 160). As discussed earlier, this process began in the data collection phase of the study as a result of my experiences in the setting, and in order to ensure that the children's agendas were reflected in the research product. The final written ethnographic accounts presented in Chapters 6 to 8 include 'verbal descriptions, explanations, and theories' (Hammersley, 2010, p. 387) to make visible for the reader the previously unexplored topic of children's experiences and perspectives of play in Queensland Prep. With a central focus on children's participation in the research agenda, the descriptions, explanations and theories are supported by vignettes from participant conversations, episodes of participant observation and self-reflexive analysis of field notes. Findings presented as journal papers in Chapters 6 to 8 provide a rich description of the setting and participants, with organisation of the data along thematic lines and the representation of those themes within a broader theoretical framework.

4.5.5 Researcher reflexivity

As a part of research activity, the ethnographer is a primary source of data (Walford, 2008) in their role as a research 'instrument' (Caines, 2010, p. 432; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 17), and as a methodological interpreter (Madden, 2010). Further, notions of interpreted and co-constructed meanings, together with the active participation of the researcher, point to the inevitability of subjective engagement in ethnographic research (Maso, 2008; Walford, 2008).

Analysis of categories and themes used by children rather than working from a perspective of pre-identified adult categories and themes is a key element of reflexive practice (Silverman, 2009), and essential to remaining faithful to the central tenets of the sociology of childhood. While one cannot be value free, developing a strong sense of identity facilitates the researcher in recognising prior assumptions (Graue & Walsh, 1998). In my own case, my professional background and experiences as a Prep teacher, my personal experiences as a mother of two children who have attended Prep in Queensland, and my academic background in researching parent views of play in Prep points to the subjective nature of my engagement with this topic. My reflections on my role as an ethnographer in this study, in light of my subjective attachments to the topic, suggest that 'the objective researcher is a myth' (Greene & Hill, 2005, p. 8). Reflecting on the subjective elements of my approach in this study required a balance between the suspension of preconceived ideas, and the application of my understanding and knowledge to analyse ethnographic data (Walford, 2008).

My reflexive turn centred around the notion of getting to know 'me' better so that I understood my influence on the research, and so that I could write a more authentic and reliable representation of 'them, the participants' (Madden, 2010, p. 23). In acknowledging myself as the primary research 'instrument' (Caines, 2010, p. 432; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 17), my active participation in the co-construction of meaning with the children in the study and the politics of the location demanded reflexivity regarding my influence on the study, and the final ethnographic product (Davis, Watson, & Cunningham-Burley, 2008; Finlay & Gough, 2008; Madden, 2010; Maso, 2008; Prout & James, 1997; Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2010).

Reflecting on my own perspectives of play and children also highlights the social, cultural and political nature of research (Hammersley, 2010; Miller, 1998). Dealing with these aspects of the local setting and the 'bias' within (Forsey, 2012) required me to review

and reflect on my values, presumptions and prejudices as well as the process of meaning-making as one that is situational and co-constructed with others in social settings (Ybema et al., 2010). As such, reflexivity should not be seen as something exclusive to ethnography or requiring remedy (Buscatto, 2016; Watson, 1987). Instead, the study provided me with opportunities to productively engage with reflexivity, rather than trying to manage it (Madden, 2010). I, like those who participated in my study, took a position reflective of my history. My reflexive practices required that I conceptualised my own behaviours, actions and interactions with the same theoretical concepts I used to conceptualise the behaviours, actions and interactions of the research participants (Smith, 1990). In order to ensure 'critical self-reflection' (Finlay & Gough, 2008, p. ix), iterative reflexivity before, during and after data collection was necessary to recognise, address and understand the influence of the assumptions I held (Davis et al., 2008; Madden, 2010; Walford, 2008). Being reflexive about the life experiences and interests that influenced my decision to investigate this topic was an important and inevitable part of the research process (Madden, 2010), and also underpinned the processes, purpose and ethics of ethnography (Walford, 2008).

Identifying the relationships between myself, as a researcher, teacher and parent, and my representation of children's accounts was to be a key element in a continuum of reflexive practice in this study. Reflexivity regarding the types of questions that I asked the children, whether or not I asked them to elaborate on a response or whether I privileged certain responses was important in understanding my influence on the study (Danby et al., 2011). An example of reflexivity involved reflecting upon the types of questions that I asked the children, in particular my use of the terms 'play' and 'work'. As the study progressed, I realised that children did not initiate or engage in conversations about play and work among themselves. My initial assumptions about the ways children understood and participated in their everyday worlds of play and work had been framed through my researcher's lens, and did not reflect the ways in which the children themselves framed their activities.

While ethnographic accounts represent participant perspectives, ultimately the ethnographer retains the authority to select the data to be used in constructing the final account (Walford, 2008). Meaning-making and interpretation began the moment that field notes were taken because, from that point, I was making decisions about what to include, or not include. The themes I used to code my field notes also reflected my decisions informed by the events and people I encountered and the interpretations that emerged as I reflected on those episodes. Viewing the process as an unfolding and ongoing process of refinement,

rather than a singular act, provided opportunity for a continuum of reflexive practice (Davis et al., 2008; Madden, 2010). Reviewing audio visual records of children's practices, participant observations and conversations at later stages in the research process provided further opportunities for my reflexive turn. Reviewing these recordings facilitates the 'production of memories and re-thinking about how you felt when you were there and what you learned (SAGE Methodspace, 2009, 3:45) thereby enabling the ethnographer to 're-experience and re-think' (3:54) the research encounter. In such reflexive turns, we find opportunities to become aware of 'things that we didn't realise in that particular very brief kind of moment of doing research' (SAGE Methodspace, 2009, 3:47).

4.5.6 Research rigour

The term 'research rigour' encapsulates notions of reliability and validity (Theobald et al., 2015) against which the quality of this study can be judged. Research rigour refers to the process where others viewing the data may understand how the researcher arrived at those themes and perhaps identify similar themes (Theobald et al., 2015). Reliability involves transparency of the representation (e.g. field notes) and data analysis (e.g. making explicit the analytic approach) (Peräkylä, 2010). In particular, positioning data extracts within the context from which they arose, identifying the researcher's questions and the talk that follows contribute to reliability and validity of these findings (Silverman 2006). Data extracts also serve to illustrate, substantiate and provide understanding (Patton, 2002) of children's perspectives within the context of the local setting.

Notions of reliability and validity refer also to the quality of the field notes, and the inclusion of conversation transcripts, children's artefacts and video recorded observations that contribute to thick description of the setting (Geertz, 1973). Thick description, forming 'the bedrock of all qualitative reporting' (Patton, 2002, p. 438), facilitates an understanding and interpretation of the researched phenomenon, and enables the reader to experience the setting through rich description (Geertz, 1973). Pink (in SAGE Methodspace, 2009) suggests that, in particular, the use of visual material contributes to research rigour by

'invit[ing] you to imagine the embodied experiences of the person that you are viewing. So even if you weren't the researcher it can take you or invite you to visit or imagine yourself in that place that is represented on video (5:18).

Researcher reflexivity illuminates the researcher's subjectivities and, as such, is critical in ensuring rigour in the research process (Delamont, 2004). An important element of such

reflexive practice is reflection on the relationships between the researcher and participants, and the researcher's representations of the accounts of others (Buscatto, 2016; Davis et al., 2008). Ensuring fairness to all stakeholders through the representation of their views, perspectives and voices contributes to the quality of this research, and confirms rigour in the research process (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The importance of taking a multi-method approach to provide different ways for children to communicate their perspectives has been noted earlier (Clark & Moss, 2011). From a methodological perspective, this study's multi-method ethnographic approach presented opportunities for generating data in different ways, and looking at those data in different ways (Walford, 2008; Wolcott, 2008), thereby contributing to rigour (Graue & Walsh, 1998). For example, the collection of field notes contributed to reliability of the data by providing a method of checking their credibility with video recordings, conversations transcripts and children's drawings (Corwin & Clemens, 2012). Random data analysis and interpretation by the supervisory team also contributed to the study's reliability and validity.

4.6 Chapter summary

The aim of this study was to investigate children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences in Queensland's first year of primary school. This ethnographic study, framed by Prout and James' (1997) sociology of childhood, used a multi-method approach to explicate the perspectives of children attending Prep in 2014. An ethnographic investigation of children's perspectives of play through the lens of the sociology of childhood, which views children as strong and resourceful, and as active participants working with adults in problem-solving and creating solutions (Alderson, 2005), is pertinent at this particular juncture in Queensland. In particular, changes in Prep's curriculum frameworks suggest a reconstruction of children's agency towards one of incompetency. This ethnographic study through the lens of the sociology of childhood repositions children as competent members whose agency resides in the present.

The following chapter provides an overview of three journal papers that present the findings in this study in Chapters 6 to 8.

Chapter 5: Overview of journal papers

Anthropology demands an open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder at that which one would not have been able to guess.

Margaret Mead, anthropologist (1977, p. ix)

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to investigate young children's perspectives of play in Prep, Queensland's first year of primary school. Asking children their views on matters of importance to them places them at the centre of the research agenda, and recognises their competence and agency as social actors.

Children are the primary source of information about their own lives. Investigating children's perspectives of play and the activities that they value at school makes possible considerations of how to support young children's agentic participation in their learning. However, in order that agentic opportunities can be made available to children, barriers to play, and the ways in which those barriers might be overcome, require attention. In the immediacy of a classroom setting, parental support for play is critical. Understanding how teachers foster such parental support has implications for children's agency in their classroom practices. With increasing emphasis placed on engaging with children as research participations, it is important also to consider ways in which researchers can support children's participation in research as informants of their practices. These topics are addressed in the three publications in this thesis.

This chapter provides an overview of three journal papers in this thesis, presented in Chapters 6 to 8, that have been published or are under review. The first of these papers is now introduced.

5.2 Overview of Paper 1

Play has long formed the basis of early childhood frameworks, and its significance in children's learning and development is widely acknowledged. Despite being valued conceptually and pedagogically (Fleer, 2013), play is under increasing pressure in early childhood classrooms (Hyvönen, 2011). Shifts in education policy agendas and curriculum frameworks frequently prioritise academic learning outcomes over play-based pedagogies (Alcock, 2013; Lindstrand & Björk-Willén, 2016). In Queensland, tensions evident since the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) include reduced opportunities for children's agentic engagement in classroom activities, and the backgrounding of play pedagogies (Ewing, 2012). I sought to understand the ways in which young children accounted for and engaged in classroom activities within this new education agenda. Investigating this topic enables considerations of how to support young children's agency and engagement in classroom activities.

The first paper of this thesis is entitled '*Are you working or playing?*' *Investigating young children's perspectives of classroom activities* (Breathnach et al., 2017). This paper is published in the *International Journal of Early Years Education*. The paper reports on data collected over five months of fieldwork with children in the Prep setting. Video and audio recordings captured conversations with and participant observations of children as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities and practices. In conversations with children, I asked them about what constituted play and work in the classroom, what they enjoyed and why. The findings revealed that children framed their activities within the adult-constructed classroom agenda. The children did not draw on cues, such as the presence of an adult, or the nature or location of an activity (as identified in other childhood research (e.g. Howard, 2002; Thomas, Howard, & Miles, 2006) to determine whether an activity was play or work. Rather, children drew on their insider knowledge of the classroom setting and oriented to the classroom timetable in their talk about activities.

My reflexive turn identified that children were not talking about play or work amongst themselves. Instead, conversations about play and work occurred only in response to my questions (the researcher's agenda), or in the context of the adult-constructed classroom agenda. What children themselves wanted to talk about (their agenda) was 'inside play'. 'Inside play' represented for the children a specific period of time in which they were afforded agency to make decisions about what they did and with whom. Opportunities for children's agency had particular significance for

children's engagement with practices that they identified as 'work'. Writing, in particular, was described by the children as an unenjoyable 'work' activity. However, during 'inside play' the children engaged in self-chosen and meaningful writing practices. In this way, the children incorporated their 'work' practices into their 'play' experiences.

In the context of the increasing pressure on play in early childhood settings, I wondered what factors supported children's agentic participation in classroom practices and facilitated the provision of play-based opportunities in this setting. Paper 2 considers that question.

5.3 Overview of Paper 2

Shifts in policy and curriculum frameworks both in Australia and internationally lean increasingly towards academic, formalised outcomes over play-based outcomes (e.g. Gunnarsdottir, 2014; Petriwskyj, Turunen, & O'Gorman, 2013). These changes have implications and produce tensions for educators, such as how they frame academic and play activities in their classrooms (Dockett, 2010; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). A perceived lack of support for play from colleagues, school leaders and parents also impacts on educators' pedagogic practices (Dockett, 2010; O'Gorman & Hard, 2013).

The second paper in this thesis is entitled '*Well it depends on what you'd call play*': *Parent perspectives on play in Queensland's Preparatory Year* (Breathnach et al., 2016). This paper is published in the *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. Arising from findings reported in Paper 1, this paper reports on data collected in conversations with six mothers during the course of fieldwork at the setting. Findings highlighted that these parents were supportive of play-based learning in their child's Prep classroom, and that they understood the significance of play in their child's early learning and development. Parents reflected on play in the context of their child's active engagement in classroom activities, and identified links between their child's play and learning at school.

I reflected upon these conversations in the context of a Masters Research study I conducted with eight parents of children attending Prep in Queensland in 2012. While the parents in that study broadly valued play as an appropriate learning context for young children, tensions arose for them when play was considered in the formal learning context of Prep. In the context of Prep, parents in the earlier study identified play as potentially detrimental to learning. In particular, parents did not support play episodes that afforded children agentic opportunities to exercise decision-making and control. Instead, they

preferenced teacher-directed play in order that academic learning outcomes be met. In the context of such views, I wondered why it was that parents in the current setting were supportive of play in their child's classroom. What experiences had shaped these parents' views to the extent that they were so different to the views of parents in my Masters Research study? In attempting to answer that question, conversations with the six mothers in the setting were contrasted with conversations from the parents who participated in my earlier study.

The findings reported in Paper 2 highlight the significance of parent engagement and strong parent-teacher partnerships in helping parents to understand their child's early learning experiences. Such partnerships can foster supportive environments for play pedagogies to be enacted, and provide opportunities for parents to advocate for play in early years settings. There are also implications for teachers in fostering environments that support children's participation in their classroom practices in order to engage and motivate children in their learning. In turn, this also has significant implications for how children themselves experience classroom activities, itself the primary focus of this thesis.

The practical implications of children being afforded agentic opportunities for participation in classroom activities are outlined in Papers 1 and 2. There are also practical and methodological implications for researchers in supporting children's participation as informants in research. This topic is discussed in Paper 3.

5.4 Overview of Paper 3

The theoretical position of this study is that children are competent agents who actively participate in the construction and co-construction of their experiences in complex social worlds. The term 'participation' in this study recognises that children actively engage in co-constructing knowledge, identity and meaning-making, and this has both practical and methodological implications for researchers. The positionings and stances that a researcher adopts in child-researcher interactions are also important in supporting children's participation in research as informants of their practices.

The third paper in this thesis is entitled *Becoming a member of the classroom: Supporting children's participation as informants in research* (Breathnach, Danby, & O'Gorman, 2018). This paper is published in the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. Arising from reflexive practices during fieldwork and analysis, this methodological paper reflects upon the complex ways in which children and researchers co-constructed knowledge, identity and meaning-making in research encounters. Framed by a

generational perspective, the paper explored ways in which children's participation was interactionally managed and co-constructed in child-researcher interactions.

The paper draws on four episodes of child-research interactions in the setting to show how participant stances were produced and co-constructed. Analysis of the episodes revealed the ways in which children oriented to and managed my disruption of the everyday generational order of child-adult classroom relations. As I adopted a stance of researcher as learner, interactional space was created for the co-production of children as expert informants of their practices. Creating interactional spaces provides enhanced opportunities for children's participation as informants in research, and in child-adult interactions more broadly across social structures.

Papers 1, 2 and 3 are now presented in turn.

Chapter 6: Paper 1

A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and his play; his labor and his leisure; his mind and his body; his education and his recreation. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing, and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself, he always seems to be doing both.

Lawrence Pearsall Jacks, educator and philosopher (1932, p. 1–2)

The authors listed below have certified* that:

1. they meet the criteria for authorship in that they have participated in the conception, execution, or interpretation, of at least that part of the publication in their field of expertise;
2. they take public responsibility for their part of the publication, except for the responsible author who accepts overall responsibility for the publication;
3. there are no other authors of the publication according to these criteria;
4. potential conflicts of interest have been disclosed to (a) granting bodies, (b) the editor or publisher of journals or other publications, and (c) the head of the responsible academic unit, and
5. they agree to the use of the publication in the student's thesis and its publication on the Australasian Research Online database consistent with any limitations set by publisher requirements.

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Helen Breathnach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collected data • analysed data • conceptualised and designed the paper • selected data for inclusion in the paper • undertook a literature review • drafted the manuscript • revised manuscript based on recommendations from co-authors and journal reviewers
Susan Danby	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provided analytic support when needed • provided conceptual advice • critically reviewed the manuscript
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Date

'Are you working or playing?'

Investigating young children's perspectives of classroom activities

Play is valued conceptually and pedagogically, although its place in early years settings is under increasing pressure. Framed by the sociology of childhood and understandings of children's agency, this article reports on an ethnographic study with children aged five years in the first year of primary school in Australia. The study investigated children's understandings of play in classroom activities involving different periods of teacher-framed and child-selected activities. Drawing on children's accounts and video-recorded observations, the study found that children's participation was influenced by teacher-framed agendas, and the agency afforded to them to engage in self-chosen activities and to design and negotiate their play spaces. For instance, children generally were unenthusiastic about writing activities and called these activities 'work' if they were directed by the teacher, and yet they consistently chose to engage in writing activities during periods of freely chosen activities. The findings raise questions about what counts as 'play' and 'work' for children, and the important function of play and free choice to mobilise participation in foundational academic activities such as writing. These understandings generate opportunities for educators to reflect upon ways to enhance children's participation in everyday play activities in the classroom as supporting foundational academic activities.

Keywords: Children's perspectives, early childhood education, play and work, children's agency, sociology of childhood, ethnography

Introduction

The importance of play in children's lives is widely acknowledged (Cohen 2012; Moyles 2010b; Wood 2014b). Synonymous with childhood, play cannot be described simply as a list of activities or actions, but rather in a multitude of ways, from fun and trivial to complex and involving peer tensions (Garvey 1990; Grieshaber and McArdle 2010; Moyles 2010a). Defining play is problematic due to its dynamic and constantly evolving nature, and its contingency upon aspects including who the participants are, when and where it takes place,

and with whom (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010). Further complicating understandings of play in education settings is that educators have differing interpretations of play, and differing pedagogic beliefs and values around the role of play in supporting children's learning (e.g. Einarsdóttir 2006; Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis 2011; Wood 2014b). Less well-known is how children understand their everyday classroom experiences, from their own perspectives. Investigating how children understand and enact play activities enables considerations of how to support young children's agency and engagement in classroom activities.

In the early years, play is valued conceptually and pedagogically (Björk-Willén & Cromdal 2009; Fleer 2013) although, increasingly, academic learning outcomes are prioritised over play-based pedagogies (Alcock 2013; Hedges and Cooper 2014; Hyvönen 2011). While Nordic countries historically have placed considerable emphasis on play pedagogies (Wagner and Einarsdóttir 2008), Gunnarsdóttir (2014) notes that in Iceland there is increasing focus on academic outcomes and shifts away from play-based strategies. In Sweden, Lindstrand and Björk Willén (2016) note similar trends, identifying a shift away from holistic, child-centred practices to a focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes in the preschool years.

Similarly, in Australia, there has been a policy shift towards frameworks that privilege academic learning outcomes both in preschool and early primary settings (Dockett 2010; Grieshaber 2010; Hard and O'Gorman 2007). The recent introduction of a national *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) focused on academic outcomes and standardised assessment in the first year of schooling reflects a pushdown of formal curriculum into early years settings (Petriwskyj, Turunen, and O'Gorman 2013). These changes have implications and produce tensions for educators, such as how they frame academic and play activities in their classrooms (Dockett 2010; O'Gorman and Ailwood 2012). Further, perceived lack of support for play from colleagues and school leaders has an impact on educators' pedagogic practices (Dockett 2010; O'Gorman and Hard 2013). These differing understandings and valuing of play in education contexts warrant consideration of how children view and experience play in early years settings.

Children's views of play and agency

Children's views on play are diverse and encompass a range of perspectives (Glenn et al. 2012). Despite suggestions that children may be marginalised or isolated by the reproduction of power relations or where race or gender are used to exclude peers during play (Grieshaber

and McArdle 2010), children themselves often describe play as a fun activity (e.g. Dunphy and Farrell 2011; Fisher 2010; Linklater 2006). Children emphasise the importance of friends and social interactions, as well opportunities for choice in play (Dunphy and Farrell 2011; Einarsdóttir 2005, 2011; Pearce and Bailey 2011; Vickerius and Sandberg 2006).

Children's views of play often are considered in relation to their views of what constitutes work in their everyday activities. The views of children transitioning to the first year of primary school suggest that school is a place of work rather than play (Corsaro and Molinari 2000; Einarsdóttir 2010; Keating et al. 2000). Studies in the UK and Australia that investigate the ways in which young children categorise play and work in preschool and primary school settings suggest that the position and nature of the activity, space and constraint, and adult presence are used by children in their categorisations of activities (Howard 2002; Howard, Jenvey and Hill 2006). In particular, children categorised images of activities taking place with an adult at a desk as work (Howard 2002). Images that featured children engaged in activities on the floor without an adult present were categorised as play (Howard 2002; Howard, Jenvey and Hill 2006). Children aged four years in Keating et al.'s (2000) UK study and aged six years in Chapparo and Hooper's (2002) Australian study specifically identified writing and reading activities as work, which they described as being boring, difficult, obligatory, teacher-directed and typically indoors.

While studies have investigated children's categorisations and definitions of play and work, less is known about the activities that children value at school and how they engage in these activities. In Australia (Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood 2011) and internationally (Lundy 2007; Powell et al. 2011), academic, policy and professional agendas, rather than child-focused agendas frame children's daily lives (Einarsdóttir 2005; Nothard et al. 2015). In Australia, children's perspectives largely have been located in child welfare contexts, rather than in education contexts (Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood 2011).

Seeking children's perspectives on matters that affect them, such as play, is increasingly emphasised in research and practice contexts (Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood 2011; Theobald et al. 2015). The provision for children's participatory rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) acknowledges children's social agency, and reflects an understanding of children as active members and constructors of their social worlds (Danby and Baker 1998; Prout and James 1997), as well as the primary source of information about their lives (Alderson 2005). Framed within 'new' sociologies of childhood (Corsaro 2005; Mayall 2002; Prout and James 1997), the theoretical position of

this study recognises that children are competent agents who actively participate in the construction and co-construction of their experiences in complex social worlds. The concept of children's competence and agency represent, in this study, an understanding that children are members of social groups, and that they make valuable contributions to society through their involvement in the decision-making process on matters of importance to them (Moss, Clark, and Kjørholt 2005). The term 'agency' recognises that children, as social actors, actively engage in constructing meaning-making and identity work (Fraser and Robinson 2004).

Educators afford children agency by providing them opportunities to exercise initiative, decision-making and control in their practices, and by respecting their interests (Smith 2007). Siry et al. (2016, 13) describe the 'dance of agency and structure' in the classroom context. In orienting to the social order of the classroom, agency is framed through co-constructed interactions between educators and children. Children, as 'self-determining actors' (Pufall and Unsworth 2004, 8), hold agentic rights that they choose to assert, or not. In the classroom, the 'dance' occurs within a 'locally assembled set of adult-child...social orders' (Theobald and Danby 2016, 122). Agency is not a static concept, but dynamic and unfolding through the actions of the participants.

This study sought to explore children's perspectives by asking them about the activities they value at school. Researchers' questions to children often are not reported or made explicit in the research product (e.g. Linklater 2006; Vickerius and Sandberg 2006). Studies that do report their use of 'play' or 'work' in questions with children (e.g. Chapparo and Hooper 2002; Glenn et al. 2012; Keating et al. 2000), often do not report whether such terms might have an assumed meaning, or how the researcher's talk might form part of children's co-constructed understandings. Undertaking ethnographic research with children draws attention to the role of the researcher as one of extending beyond listening (as a technique) to that of 'making a common cause with the children' Warming (2005, 53). Listening in this way requires acknowledgement of meaning as co-constructed between the speaker and the listener. Such listening requires researchers to reflect upon their own opinions, and revise their practices in light of what children have to say (Brooker 2011). In this article, we show how children demonstrate their competence in orienting to the adult agendas in the classroom, while at the same time finding their own spaces to initiate and undertake activities of their choice.

The study

Taking an ethnographic approach, this study took place in a Preparatory Year (Prep) classroom in 2014. Prep is the first year of primary school in Queensland, and children typically commence aged between 4.5 and 5.5 years. In 2012, an *Australian Curriculum* for primary and secondary schooling (ACARA, n.d.) was introduced in Queensland. Concomitant with the rollout of the *Australian Curriculum* has been the gradual phasing out of Prep's original play-based curriculum and pedagogy framework, the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (QSA 2006). During this period, a number of tensions have emerged, including the exclusion of children from curriculum construction, and reduced opportunities for children's agentic participation in classroom practices (Ewing 2012). In this context, a more formal approach to learning has been promoted, while a play-based approach has been backgrounded. We sought to understand the ways in which young children accounted for and engaged in classroom activities within this new education agenda.

Research participants and ethical considerations

A member of the research team who had previous associations with a local school had suggested this setting as a potential research site. Once the school principal and a classroom teacher had indicated their interest in participating in the study, ethical approvals were gained from Queensland University of Technology (1400000238) and the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (550/27/1454).

An ethical approach is more than the initial formal consent process but rather an orientation throughout the study. Our ethical approach recognised the potential impact of adult-child power relations on children's decisions to participate or to opt out of activities. This awareness demanded sensitivity to children's verbal and non-verbal cues during data collection (Alderson 2005). Participant confidentiality in the reported data was assured through the use of pseudonyms.

The researcher visited the classroom on two occasions before fieldwork commenced to meet with parents and children, and answer questions about the study. Information posters with her name and photograph, and information about the study, were placed around the classroom. Parents and children were invited to provide their written consent for children to participate. Parents were asked to read with their child a child-friendly consent form that used text and images to describe the study, the activities of the researcher, and how data would be used. Children were asked to write their name or make their mark on the form if they wished

to participate. All 25 children (13 girls and 12 boys), and their parents, provided their written consent. To ensure their ongoing assent, the children were asked to reaffirm their verbal consent throughout, and were reminded that they could choose not to participate and stop the recording at any time. A number of children exercised this right during the study, acting as gatekeepers in the research process (Danby and Farrell 2005).

The setting

Located within a large primary school in Brisbane, the Prep classroom had one primary school teacher and two part-time teacher assistants. The teacher had taught Prep since its introduction in 2007, and had taught a play-based preschool program at the school for ten years prior to that. Acknowledging the co-existence of two curriculum frameworks for Prep, the teacher was committed to providing a play-based curriculum in line with the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (QSA 2006). During fieldwork, the teacher described to the researcher how she 'passionately' believed in play through child-initiated activities, which happened in the period of the school day known as 'inside play.'

'Inside play'

In early years settings, opportunities for freely chosen, child-initiated activities are described as 'free play' or 'free choice' (Wood 2014a, 5). In this classroom, the teacher described such opportunities as 'inside play': a period that provided opportunities for the children to negotiate with adults and peers access to resources, space and partners of their choosing. 'Inside play' took place two to three days a week and always in the middle session between morning tea and lunch for approximately one hour, although this varied depending on the day's schedule.

'Inside play' resources included craft materials, books, recycled materials (such as cardboard and plastics), wooden and commercial building blocks, dress ups, old electronic devices and commercial toys. During 'inside play', children engaged in self-chosen activities including craft, fantasy play, puzzles and reading. Children regularly initiated and organised performances (such as concerts and puppet shows) for their teacher and classmates. The children's constructions (e.g. of wooden blocks) remained throughout the week so that they could continue to use them, and this facilitated continuity in their activities.

While 'inside play' took place predominantly inside the classroom, the teacher made opportunities available for children, if they requested it, to engage in their activities in the

shaded area outside the classroom. This most commonly occurred when the children wished to paint or stage a performance. If requested by the children, the teacher and teacher assistant helped with cutting, hanging items up for display, spelling and conflict resolution. If invited by the children, the researcher also assisted and participated in activities such as craft, puzzles and fantasy play.

An ethnographic approach: Data collection

While there is 'no prescriptive recipe approach to how to 'do' ethnography' (O'Neill 2015, 134), framed as a contemporary ethnography (Forsey 2010; Wolcott 2005), this approach is:

iterative-inductive research that evolves in design through the study... draws on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, and asking questions. (O'Reilly 2009, 3)

The researcher is a 'research instrument' and the children are 'research participants' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 17). Five months of fieldwork in the classroom occurred over the last two terms of the school year. This fieldwork timeframe aligns with Wolcott's (2005) view that ethnography captures complete cycles of activity. During this time, the researcher built relationships through direct and sustained contact with the children, their teacher and parents.

During initial visits to the classroom, the researcher sought opportunities to build relationships with the children by engaging with them in their classroom spaces and in the playground, with the aim of building rapport and becoming a familiar figure (Mayall 2002). One way to respect the children's agency was to participate only at their invitation. Data collection was guided by each child's interests and their inclination to communicate with the researcher. Being mindful of the ways that children might ordinarily choose to express themselves, the study used a Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss 2011). Influenced by the sociology of childhood's emphasis on children's agency (Prout and James 1997), the children were invited to take the researcher on child-directed tours of their activity spaces inside and outside of the classroom, and to represent their experiences through drawings. These activities were designed to encourage children to share their perspectives in open-ended ways where their views were taken seriously.

Inside the classroom, 65 hours of video recordings captured participant observations of children as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities and practices, and research

conversations with the children and teacher. The researcher asked questions of the children about what constituted play and work in the classroom, what the children enjoyed and why. These questions generated many discussions. The questions were typically asked in regard to what was happening at that time. Outside of the classroom, 40 hours of audio recordings captured participant observations of children, and research conversations with children and parents in open spaces such as the playground. Audio recordings were used with the participants in these spaces to avoid capturing images of children who were not part of the study. Additional data collection included the researcher's hand-written field notes, and artefacts such as children's drawings and writing.

Data analysis

Early data analysis involved reflecting on children's drawings and writing, and reviewing field notes and transcripts of audio and video-recorded conversations and classroom activities. Data were examined to identify themes, which involved identifying *emic* themes (Corwin and Clemens 2012); that is, concepts that the children and teacher used to describe their experiences and perspectives. In the second stage of analysis, data were organised in congruence with *etic* themes (Corwin and Clemens 2012); that is, concepts evident in the literature relevant to childhood studies. These stages of emic and etic coding were not a discreet process but an iterative one requiring continuous review, reflection and refinement. The purpose was to construct a rich, deep description of the setting and participants, with data organised along thematic lines.

The study considered matters of reliability, which refers to the process where others viewing the data may understand how the researcher arrived at those themes and perhaps identify similar themes (Theobald et al. 2015). Reliability involves transparency of the representation (e.g. field notes) and data analysis (e.g. making explicit the analytic approach) (McMillan and Schumacher 2006; Peräkylä 2010). Validity refers to the researcher's interpretation of data and whether those interpretations are supported by the data (Peräkylä 2016). In particular, positioning data extracts within the context from which they arose, identifying the researcher's questions and the talk that follows contribute to reliability and validity of findings (Silverman 2006).

Researcher reflexivity illuminates the researcher's subjectivities in relation to the research process (Delamont 2004). An example of reflexivity involved reflecting upon the types of questions that the researcher asked the children, in particular her use of the terms 'play' and 'work'. As the study progressed, the researcher realised that children did not

initiate or engage in conversations about play and work among themselves. Her initial assumptions about the ways children understood and participated in their everyday worlds of play and work had been framed through the researcher's lens, and did not reflect the ways in which the children themselves framed their activities.

With the focus of the study on children's perspectives of play and their classroom activities, the next sections discuss the children's framing of their classroom activities within adult agendas, their assertions of their agency, and their descriptions of their activities as play/not play.

Findings

Three themes were identified and are discussed below. They are (1) children frame their activities within adult agendas; (2) children value agentic opportunities in classroom activities; and (3) children initiate self-described 'work' practices.

Children frame their activities within adult agendas

With an initial focus on children's perspectives of whether their activities were 'play' and 'work', the researcher asked questions of the children, and the children oriented to the researcher's agenda. Through their responses, children's diverse perspectives were identified. Their responses reflected their participation in classroom life within a teacher-framed agenda that included how she organised the physical and learning spaces of the classroom, and the time management of those spaces.

It is Tuesday. In the first session of the day, the teacher organises the children into teacher-directed literacy groups. I sit with one group on the carpet, and have a conversation with them while they are making words with small alphabet blocks.

R: So Kyle. Is this work or is it play?

Melissa: Play.

Kyle: Work. On Wednesdays we're doing work. We don't do work on Monday but only Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

R: [To Melissa] So do you think this is work or play? Kyle says it's work because it's Tuesday and Tuesday is a work day.

Kyle: Yep. Monday isn't a work day. Not Monday.

Melissa: Actually it is a work day.

R: So if this happened on a Monday and Monday was a play day, would this be play?

Melissa: Yes.

While the children orient to the researcher's framing of activities as either 'work or play', they proffer differing views as to whether their activity is play or work. The children do not draw on the characteristics of the activity, the presence or otherwise of an adult or the space in which the activity is occurring in order to categorise it. Instead, they draw specifically on the adult-constructed agenda of how the classroom is managed in their responses. Their reference to the weekly timetable and structure of classroom time highlights children's competence in orienting to adult agendas, and their nuanced and complex interpretations of classroom activities.

Other than in response to the researcher's questions, the only other time that the children talked about activities in the context of play and work was to find out about particular structures of the day, that is, within an adult-generated context. Children would often ask the teacher if they would be having 'inside play' that day. Also, they would frequently ask the researcher if she would be there for 'inside play'. Their framing of 'inside play' in their questions suggested that 'inside play' referred to a particular period of the day, rather than explicitly meaning 'play'. This theme is now explored.

Children value agentic opportunities in classroom activities

While 'inside play' was predominantly a time when children were engaged in freely chosen activities, they also were engaged in teacher-directed and other activities that might not ordinarily be categorised as play. From time to time, children would participate in individual literacy and numeracy assessment tasks that were initiated by the teacher or teacher assistant. Sometimes, the teacher would ask the children to complete outstanding tasks, prepare gifts for an upcoming holiday or event, or undertake an art activity for their learning portfolio. These tasks were organised in small groups and supervised by the teacher or teacher assistant. Despite the periodic requirement that children engage in activities not of their choosing, they overwhelmingly described 'inside play' as one of the best things about Prep. Olivia's comments demonstrate the significance of 'inside play' to her enjoyment of school.

During 'inside play', I set up a table in the shaded area outside the classroom. I have provided some paper and felt pens for the children to draw. Olivia asks what I am doing. I explain that I am looking for some children to tell me about what they like to do in Prep. I ask Olivia if she would like to join me and she does. Olivia draws a picture of her favourite thing about Prep; the new artificial turf area in the playground. We talk about what she likes and does not like about school. We talk about her younger sister Jody who is starting Prep next year.

- R: If she [Jody] said 'Olivia what will I do in Prep?'
- Olivia: She hasn't said that.
- R: Has she not? If she did, what would you say to her?
- Olivia: It's really, really fun in Prep.
- R: And if she said 'Olivia what is the very best thing about Prep?' what would you say?
- Olivia: I would say the best thing about Prep is inside play.

Rather than responding to the researcher's question about what she does at school, Olivia's first reaction in talking about Prep is that it is fun. Her response focuses on her positive feelings about Prep, and in particular 'inside play'.

Conversations with children questioned what 'inside play' represented. Did the children not equate 'inside play' with 'play'? Did the children identify 'inside play' as a specific time when they were afforded agency to make decisions about what they did and with whom? The answers to these questions may be found in Olivia's comments about the activities that she and her older brother, Harry, do at school.

- R: Do you and Harry...do you do the same things in school...learning and stuff?
- Olivia: No, he does just work.
- R: Does he? What kinds of things does he do?
- Olivia: Writing and stuff.
- R: What do you do that's different?
- Olivia: Well I do some writing on the weekend and I do some inside play which we're doing now and like stuff which are different.

Olivia describes to the researcher her engagement in the drawing activity as 'inside play'. Her reference to 'what we're doing now' suggests that Olivia's understanding of 'inside play' is a period of time where she can choose an activity; in other words, a time and context where she could assert agency.

Olivia differentiates between what she does in Prep and what her brother, Harry, does in Grade 3. Olivia's description of 'writing and stuff' as 'work' was similar to those expressed by other children who described maths and reading as work. Olivia's assertion that the writing done by Harry in school is different to the writing she does herself at the weekend reflects the significance of agency and context. It is likely that, on the weekend, Olivia chooses to write. Writing, in that context, may have relevance for her; she is doing it because it has meaning and purpose for the activities in which she is engaged. Harry, on the other hand, is required to write at school because that is the 'work' of school children. Negative attitudes about writing and reading were evident in conversations with other children, as illustrated in the following example. In this example, similar to Olivia's accounting of Harry's Grade 3 writing experiences as work, the children comment negatively on writing activities.

It is 'inside play' time. I am with Gemma, Chloe and Sean. The teacher has asked them to finish a painting activity for their learning portfolio. I ask the children about Prep and how they feel about their upcoming move into Grade 1.

- R: Prep sounds like lots of fun. Are there any things that aren't so fun?
- Gemma: Writing yeah.
- R: What about you Chloe? Anything you don't like?
- Chloe: Writing. Sometimes I take a long time.
- R: Is that not a good thing?
- Chloe: No. I take a long time. I take lots of hours.
- Sean: I take five hours.
- R: When you go to Grade 1 because you'll be going there soon...
- Gemma: Too much writing and reading groups. In Grade 1 they do lots of reading and writing and reading groups.
- R: And that's not good fun?
- Gemma: Uh uh.

The children nominate writing as not enjoyable and list a number of reasons: it takes lots of hours, too much writing, and lots of groups. Their comments suggest that they were orienting to the structured practices of writing in their classroom. Gemma's reference to 'groups' in Grade 1 was an activity that the children were already familiar with in Prep. They routinely engaged in teacher-directed literacy and numeracy rotation groups for the purposes of practising skills such as writing and reading. In contrast to 'inside play', these structured activities afforded the children very limited, if any, opportunities for agentic participation.

In the context of the children's unenthusiastic attitudes towards writing, it is of considerable significance that in every 'inside play' episode recorded children were observed engaging in writing practices. This theme is now explored.

Children initiate self-described 'work' practices

The previous section discussed how children spoke about writing as work and as a dis-preferred activity. It was with some surprise that we found that children actually did quite a lot of writing in this classroom, when they were the ones that initiated the activity and when it made meaning for the activity in which they were engaged. While children typically engaged in freely chosen writing activities at tables, they were also observed engaging in freely chosen writing activities at other times. Sometimes, children took paper and pencils outside to the playground at lunchtime to write. The children's decision to engage in writing during lunchtime was entirely of their own choosing, without adult involvement.

Writing formed an integral part of the children's constructed spaces. With 25 children in the classroom, physical space was limited and particular areas such as the carpet area and home corner were coveted. The children used writing as a strategy to delineate their own spaces by making signs to describe what they had built, to notify others in the classroom of their claim on a space, to allow access to particular children to their space, and to keep other children out of that space. In order to be part of an activity, the children determined that one's name had to be on a sign. This rule initiated by the children required them to negotiate their participation in an activity.

As well as writing names to protect their play spaces, the children wrote signs and labels that were relevant for their activity. For example, a group of children created a 'Sea World' exhibit during 'inside play'. Having visited similar exhibitions, the children were familiar with the signs used to label animal enclosures and provide information about the animal, its life cycle and habitat. The children created their own information labels that were

purposeful and relevant in the context of their 'Sea World' exhibit. The children also used writing to organise their classmates into visitor groups and record who visited.

These examples show that during 'inside play' writing was self-initiated by the children in the context of what they were doing at a particular time. While they were not always able to spell the words they needed, the children utilised classroom resources, and enlisted the help of peers and adults in their writing.

Discussion

Children often identify activities as play or work based on the presence of an adult or the location of an activity (e.g. Einarsdóttir 2010; Howard, Jenvey and Hill 2006; Keating et al. 2000). The children in this study did not comment explicitly on whether or not the adult directness of the activity framed the activity for them as either work or play. Those previous studies relied directly on children's accounts of their practices. What became evident in this study of children's accounts and their actual video-recorded practices is that context did make a difference. Children described the involvement of the teacher when they discussed writing as work. When engaged in freely chosen activities, they self-initiated activities that required writing as part of the activity, to mark activity boundaries through name labels or to contribute meaning to the game (e.g. animal names in 'Sea World'). 'Inside play' was a period of time where they could assert their agency and even engage in activities that elsewhere had been described by them as work.

Data for this study used two different methods – by asking children about their perspectives and by engaging in video-observations of their actions. In reporting the data, we included what the children said and what the researcher had asked - the sequence of the conversation. What became apparent was the influence of the researcher's questions to the children about their activities. How the researcher framed those questions framed how the children responded, such as when the researcher asked about work or play. Reflexive practices illuminated the ways in which this researcher positioning had directed how the children addressed what was being asked of them. The researcher's questions about work and play represented an 'outsider' view of classroom life and not one that was being constructed by the children. The researcher's agenda was not the same as the children's even though they did attend to the researcher's questions.

The phenomenon of 'inside play' was understood through a reflexive broadening of gaze beyond what children had to say in response to questions to include what children

wanted to talk about, and what they actually engaged in during classroom inside time, that is, their agenda. 'Inside play' was the topic of conversation most initiated by the children; one that was contextually relevant and meaningful to them. Engagement in ethnographic research that included children's accounts and what they did in the classroom produced thick description of what was going on (Geertz 1973).

From a distance, images of the children writing during 'inside play', particularly at tables with an adult present, might be indistinguishable from generic images of children engaged in writing. However, it is in the thick description of 'inside play' episodes – garnered from children's responses, their self-initiated conversations and participant observations – that opportunities exist to understand more deeply children's agentic participation and engagement in classroom practices.

The complex and flexible meanings that children ascribed to their classroom activities make it increasingly important for educators and researchers to be aware of children's views and practices. Engaging with children in conversations about their learning practices may help to differentiate between the ways in which adults and children understand classroom activities, reduce dichotomous perspectives of play and work, and illuminate for educators the underlying values that children ascribe to their practices. For example, there were differences between children's unenthusiastic views of writing within the context of structured classroom activities that afforded them little if any agency, and their self-initiated engagement in writing practices during 'inside play'. While the children viewed writing as unenjoyable, their agentic engagement in writing practices during 'inside play' demonstrates that it had purpose and was contextually relevant. The affordance of agentic opportunities led to children's engagement in 'work' practices during 'play' experiences.

The findings have particular relevance for classroom practice as we consider how best to engage and motivate children in learning activities. Planning *with* children - rather than *for* children - can provide opportunities for educators and children to identify together possibilities to support children's agentic participation in classroom activities. Affording children agentic opportunities may also promote their self-initiated participation in activities in more meaningful and flexible ways. This consideration means a re-focusing of teacher-child talk around classroom activities in the context of agentic opportunities for children rather than the framing of activities as distinct pursuits.

Conclusion

This study of children's perspectives of play and their engagement in classroom activities highlights tensions between adult-centric agendas (such as play and work) and child-centric agendas (such as opportunities for children to exercise choice and control in their practices). The meanings that children ascribe to play illustrate their application of 'insider knowledge' to their complex understandings of classroom activities.

Adult agendas influence the ways in which children frame their classroom activities, and children's understandings of classroom activities may be very different to adults' understandings. Engaging with children in conversations about their classroom practices, and not just about the content and knowledge of what they are learning, may reduce adult assumptions about classroom activities, and illuminate the underlying values that children ascribe to their practices. Re-framing how we think about classroom activities – away from discrete notions of play and work towards an understanding of activities in the context of potential opportunities for children's agentic participation – provides rich possibilities for understanding children's learning experiences.

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Chapter 7: Paper 2

It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them.

Leo Buscaglia, author and speaker (in Robinson, 2007, p. 150)

The authors listed below have certified* that:

1. they meet the criteria for authorship in that they have participated in the conception, execution, or interpretation, of at least that part of the publication in their field of expertise;
2. they take public responsibility for their part of the publication, except for the responsible author who accepts overall responsibility for the publication;
3. there are no other authors of the publication according to these criteria;
4. potential conflicts of interest have been disclosed to (a) granting bodies, (b) the editor or publisher of journals or other publications, and (c) the head of the responsible academic unit, and
5. they agree to the use of the publication in the student's thesis and its publication on the Australasian Research Online database consistent with any limitations set by publisher requirements.

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Contributor	Statement of contribution*
Helen Breathnach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collected data • analysed data • conceptualised and designed the paper • selected data for inclusion in the paper • undertook a literature review • drafted the manuscript • revised manuscript based on recommendations from co-authors and journal reviewers
Lyndal O’Gorman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provided analytic support when needed • provided conceptual advice • critically reviewed the manuscript
Susan Danby	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provided analytic support when needed • provided conceptual advice • critically reviewed the manuscript

Principal Supervisor Confirmation

I have sighted email or other correspondence from all co-authors confirming their certifying authorship.

Lyndal O’Gorman

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15/12/16

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Date

“Well it depends on what you'd call play”:

Parent perspectives on play in Queensland's Preparatory Year

In the context of recent education reform, Queensland's Preparatory Year (Prep) is undergoing a period of significant change. The framing of Prep under a new national curriculum reflects a shift from its play-based roots to a formalised subject-based approach. This shift coincides with suggestions that parents may favour more formalised approaches to teaching and learning in the early years. This paper reports on two studies in which parents were interviewed about their views of play in Prep. Data were analysed thematically, with a focus on themes used by parents to talk about play. While parents broadly valued play, the findings suggest that parent participation greatly influenced their acceptance of play-based learning in the formal learning context of Prep. The findings raise implications for educators in fostering strong parent-teacher partnerships in order to facilitate improved parental understanding and support of play in early childhood programs.

Keywords: Preparatory Year, Prep, Queensland, play, parents, partnership, early years, curriculum, interviews, thematic analysis

Introduction

The Preparatory Year (Prep) is the first year of primary schooling in Queensland. When introduced in 2007, this fulltime non-compulsory program and its curriculum and pedagogy framework, the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG)*, reflected a child-centred model of early childhood education valuing play-based, hands-on and child responsive learning (Hard & O'Gorman, 2007). The education landscape changed significantly in Queensland with the introduction of a standardised, national *Australian Curriculum* in 2012 (Petriwskyj, Turunen, & O'Gorman, 2013). As part of the phased introduction of *Australian Curriculum* in Queensland, which is intended to be completed in 2016, Prep's *EYCG* is being phased-out (Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), 2011, 2012).

Since Thorpe et al.'s (2005) report on the 2003 Prep trial, only a handful of studies have investigated stakeholder views of Prep. No published research has specifically considered stakeholder views on play in Prep since the trial. In the context of the curriculum

shifts in early childhood education in Queensland, current stakeholder expectations and experiences of Prep as a play-based, non-compulsory program are unclear.

This paper presents findings from two studies that investigated parent views of play in Queensland Prep. In this paper, we discuss how play has become a contested concept in early childhood education, and explore some specific challenges that are faced in Queensland Prep. Drawing on parents' perspectives, we suggest that strong parent-teacher partnerships can support the enactment and promotion of play pedagogies in early years' settings.

Background to the studies

Queensland Prep

The current non-compulsory Queensland Prep program was first introduced in 2007 following its trial in 64 sites across Queensland in 2003. The intention of the program was to provide all Queensland children with “better preparation before they enter school” (The State of Queensland, 2002, p. 7) and to “enhance thinking skills, school performance and social adjustment” (The State of Queensland, 2002, p. 14). Children commencing Prep are typically aged between four and a half and five and a half years, and they attend five days a week.

The *EYCG* (QSA, 2006), a curriculum and pedagogy framework developed specifically for Prep, identifies play as one of five contexts for learning and development. Reflecting research findings in early years' settings in the UK (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004), the *EYCG* acknowledges the important role of adults in supporting and facilitating play-based learning with children (QSA, 2006). Research pointing to optimised learning for children where strong parent-teacher partnerships exist emphasises the importance of parents' continued involvement in their children's school-based education (Berger, 2008; Comer & Ben-Avie, 2010; Tayler, 2006). Thus, the *EYCG* also acknowledges the relationship between children's learning at home and at school, and the significance of collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers as key to children's success (QSA, 2006).

In 2012, Prep in Queensland was at the centre of significant education reform with the roll-out of the *Australian Curriculum* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.). Prep's position shifted from an early years' program with its own separate, play-based curriculum and pedagogy framework to its current status as the first year of “formal” schooling in Queensland (Minister for Education, Training and Employment, 2013,

p. 958) with a focus on school attendance, academic learning outcomes, and formalised assessment and reporting (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2011).

Tensions since the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* include the exclusion of students from curriculum construction, with concerns raised that educational agendas such as social justice and student agency may be sidelined (Ditchburn, 2012a, 2012b; Ewing, 2012). Further, the separation of subjects in the *Australian Curriculum* into “discrete academic disciplines” (Ewing, 2012, p. 102) represents a shift away from the “broadly based... balanced... integrated program” (QSA, 2006, p. 9) provided by Prep’s *EYCG*. While there is not necessarily an incongruence between standardised academic curricula and play pedagogies in achieving successful outcomes for children in the early years (Petriwskyj et al., 2013), Australian commentators note a push away from play pedagogies towards more formalised, outcomes-focused learning strategies (Grieshaber, 2010; Hard & O’Gorman, 2007). Of particular relevance to Prep is the suggestion that pre-eminence of literacy and numeracy outcomes, together with the pedagogic silence of the *Australian Curriculum*, may result in formalised pedagogies for young children (Luke, 2010; Petriwskyj et al., 2013).

Play in early education settings

Significant attention is given to the topic of play in early childhood education. While commonalities exist in descriptions of play, its context dependence and variance means that there is no *one* definition of play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). This paper does not attempt to construct a definition of play but rather consider how play might be viewed by parents in early childhood settings.

A diversity of perspectives exists regarding the facilitation of different approaches to play. Through an early childhood education lens, play is valued conceptually and pedagogically (Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009; Flear, 2013). Despite evidence that play can be understood as serious (Cobb-Moore, Danby, & Farrell, 2005; Danby, 2005) and educational (Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009; Brooker & Edwards, 2010), the concept of play in education settings, more broadly, is contested (Hyvönen, 2011). While recognised as an important pursuit in non-compulsory education settings, play is not always endorsed in more formal settings (Einarsdóttir, 2006; Flear, 2013; Hard & O’Gorman, 2007) where it is often positioned by adults as a means to an end, such as a reward for the completion of work or as a holding task (Moss & Petrie, 2002). The positioning of play in this way suggests that it can

be treated as separate to, and less important than, learning (Anning, 2010; Moyles, 2010; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008).

In early childhood settings, play traditionally has been viewed as a child-initiated and directed activity (Fisher, 2010; O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Wood & Attfield, 2005). While contemporary research (Sylva et al., 2004; Thorpe et al., 2005) emphasises the important role of adults in supporting and guiding children’s learning through play, tensions borne out of differing educational beliefs, practices and orientations can result in ambiguity as to when and how teachers should involve themselves in play (Dockett, 2010; Flear, 2013; Wood, 2010). Suggestions that many teachers may themselves view play and learning as dichotomous pursuits (Hyvönen, 2011) further emphasise the ambiguous nature of play in education contexts.

Differences in how play is positioned in Australian state and national curriculum frameworks may further shape stakeholder views of play. While research suggests that educators and parents view play as positive, valuable and creative, the findings also highlight that they consider it to be a less serious endeavour than more formalised practices such as teacher-directed learning (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008; O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). In South Australia, teachers’ concerns regarding heightened expectations related to curriculum and learning outcomes, and formalised assessment and reporting, were identified as barriers to play pedagogy in the early years (Dockett, 2010). With Prep positioned as both non-compulsory *and* the first year of formal schooling in Queensland, there is evidence to suggest that tensions are already emerging amongst stakeholders as to the role and value of play in Prep. In particular, Queensland Prep teachers highlight the challenges they experience when trying to substantiate children’s learning through play to other adult stakeholders (O’Gorman & Hard, 2013). A belief amongst teachers that parents are unsupportive of play, favouring instead formalised literacy and numeracy activities, has also been identified as a barrier to play in Australian early years’ settings (Dockett, 2010; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000).

A perceived endorsement by the wider community of traditionally valued knowledge and skills, such as literacy and numeracy, is evident in sustained commentary from the Australian media. In particular, assertions regarding Queensland children’s poor performance in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) relative to other states and territories have resulted in a concerted focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes (Caldwell & Chilcott, 2012; Chilcott & Vonnov, 2012; Chilcott, 2011, 2013; Morton, 2013)

and a push-down of formalised curriculum in early childhood settings (Hard & O’Gorman, 2007).

In light of such commentary and perceived parent attitudes to play in education settings, this paper considers how parents view play in the context of early years’ settings, such as Prep.

The studies

This paper presents the findings from two studies in which parents were interviewed to investigate their views on play in Prep and its role in their child’s development. The rationale for these studies lies in the paucity of research on stakeholder views in the context of Prep. Since Thorpe et al.’s (2005) *Preparing for School trial*, only a handful of studies have investigated stakeholder views in Prep. These studies investigated parent and teacher views on the introduction of Prep (O’Gorman, 2007; Walker et al., 2012), Prep teacher views on leadership (O’Gorman & Hard, 2013), Prep teacher views on school readiness (Noel, 2010), and teacher aide views on the impact of the *Australian Curriculum* in Prep (Sonter, 2013). While O’Gorman and Ailwood (2012) reported on parent views of play in Prep, their data were gathered independently of, but at the same time as, the trial of the Prep program in 2003, some years before Prep’s universal rollout in Queensland in 2007.

Study 1

In Study 1, parents of children enrolled in Prep in 2012 were interviewed. They were recruited via an advertisement posted on a Queensland University of Technology (QUT) classifieds email list. The parents (7 mothers and 1 father) had children who attended state and independent schools in Brisbane. The participants were unknown to the researcher prior to the interviews taking place. Conducted in office spaces on QUT campuses, interviews were semi-structured in format, quite formal in approach, and lasted from 30 minutes to two hours.

Study 2

Study 2 was an ethnographic study in a Prep classroom in Brisbane in 2014. The Prep classroom had been identified as a potential research site by a member of the research team who had previously been a teaching colleague of the classroom teacher. Data consisted of semi-structured parent, teacher and child interviews, and classroom observations.

Specifically, it is data from interviews with six mothers in Study 2 that are presented in this paper.

The participants were known to the researcher by the time they were interviewed through the course of informal conversations in and around the classroom. All but one of the interviews took place in quiet spots in the school grounds. The other interview took place over the phone. Unlike the more formal interview environment in Study 1, interviews in Study 2 had all of the distractions normally associated with a school environment. These included school bells ringing, and children and adults passing by, stopping to say hello. Younger siblings also were present for a number of the interviews.

Because of the relationships that had developed between the researcher and the participants, the interviews took a more informal, conversational format and lasted up to 45 minutes.

Studies 1 and 2 have ethical approval from QUT (Study 1: 1200000105; Study 2: 1400000238) and Education Queensland (Study 2: 550/27/1454). Parents in each study provided written consent and pseudonyms are used to de-identify participants.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used in both studies to investigate parent views of play in Queensland Prep. A list of questions guided the interviews. These included:

- How do you define play?
- Does your child play in Prep?
- Does play have positive benefits for your child?
- Does play have negative consequences for your child?
- What place do you think play has in a Prep classroom?

The interviews in both studies were audio recorded and transcribed in full to provide as thorough as possible an account (Roulston, DeMarrais, & Lewis, 2003). The transcripts were emailed to the participants for member checking and to provide participants with opportunities to ask questions or provide feedback on their interview or other aspects of the study.

The process of interviewing with two different groups of participants (i.e. those known and unknown to the researcher), in different settings, at different points emphasised how the research interview is one that is collaboratively produced by the participants and the

researcher (Roulston, 2010). While the focus of the interviews in both studies centred-around parent views of play in Prep, the interviews differed in the different physical locations in which they took place and in the nature of the relationships between the researcher and interviewees. Particularly evident in Study 2 were parents who asked the researcher questions and discussed matters regarding their families and personal circumstances that were outside the scope of the study. The researcher spoke with some parents about her own personal experiences in the classroom, and about her own children in the context of Prep. These interactions highlight that, while the content of interviews is important, the context of the interview is an important consideration in the analysis of interview data (Roulston et al., 2003).

Data analysis

Analysis of data from Study 1 was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) *Phases of Thematic Analysis*. This approach involved reading and re-reading interview transcripts a number of times to understand the data as a whole. Codes were identified and aggregated to form main themes and sub-themes. The same process guided the interview data analysis in Study 2. In keeping with the ethnographic design of Study 2, particular consideration was given to themes in the data derived from the language used by the participants, referred to in ethnography as emic themes (Wolcott, 2008). The final phase involved examining the data from both studies to note similarities and differences between the two, and to ask "what stands out?" (Roulston, 2010, p. 200), and these are presented below.

Study 1: The findings

There were three key findings from Study 1 regarding parent views of play in Prep:

1. Play is understood from an adult perspective

Parents in Study 1 understood Prep to be a "play-based" program, which led to an assumption for many that play activities were present in Prep. Some parents however, expressed concerns that play was not evident in Prep. Most parents commented that they spent little time in their child's classroom and had not directly witnessed their child playing there. Parents typically described play in the context of resource-based, teacher-directed playful activities, and a number made reference to designated "corners" and displays in the room. For example:

It's free... it's not very prescribed in that they've got a lot of say over what they do. So they get a picture of a bunny but then they can do whatever they want with it. They can colour it in or stick things on it or whatever so it's quite up to them how they deal with that and they have a lot of fun. (Jade S1)

2. Play is problematic in the context of formal learning outcomes

Parents in Study 1 broadly indicated that they valued play as an appropriate context for learning, describing it as “fun” and a way to “engage” young children in learning. In particular, parents suggested that, when playing, children did not realise they were learning:

...it might still have a learning objective but they might not know it so they don't think they're learning something. They just think they're having fun. (Lee S1)

Tensions arose when play was considered in the formal context of Prep and learning outcomes. Some parents expressed concern that too much play might be detrimental to learning. One parent suggested that it would render Prep akin to “day care”.

In terms of the school environment I guess if it was all free play where does the learning happen? If it's just play then yeah... well I would be disappointed. (Lisa S1)

Let's say... all you did was just activities... I mean so long as the outcomes are met there is no problem in doing so. But let's say you're meeting all these other outcomes...but, you know, we're leaving part of the maths behind or... letting something else slide a bit... if we're not meeting other outcomes... the kids will love you for it...you've played all semester and they've learned some stuff but they haven't learned everything. (Alex S1)

3. The Prep teacher's role is to direct play to ensure that learning outcomes are met

Most parents in Study 1 suggested that, for learning to occur, play should be directed by the teacher. For these parents, free play (i.e. child-directed play) was not an activity that was supported within the classroom. Free play was seen as largely purposeless, where children would “wander off” and “never concentrate”. There were suggestions that it would be “incredibly frustrating” for the teacher and lead to “anarchy” in the classroom:

...in a classroom of 25 kids it's got to be directed and they do their undirected play outside at break... I don't see any point in undirected play within classroom teaching hours. (Kim S1)

...at this age if they were told to lead their own activities they would be only very loosely associated with what they're meant to be learning. (Jade S1)

One parent described her perspective on the role of the teacher in directing play and learning:

... I'm thinking [Teacher] would break them down into their designated group and maybe orange group you can have a play in home corner and then they get ten minutes in there and maybe they swap around or something or maybe they get to choose. Okay, there's these five things that you get to do. So you can play in home corner. You can colour in. (Lee S1)

With the exception of one parent who described how her child's Prep teacher had scaffolded children's learning in a child-initiated, play-based episode, notions of "shared-sustained thinking" (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002, p.8) were largely absent from parents' interpretations of the teacher's role in play. For many parents, the teacher's age or character was a key determinant of their ability or desire to participate in play; teachers would be more likely to participate in play if they were "young" and "energetic" rather than "old" and "tired". Whether a teacher had children also was seen as having an impact on whether or not they would participate in children's play.

Study 2: The findings

The findings from Study 2 are organised under three headings, in line with those used for Study 1.

1. Play is understood from a child's perspective

The parents in Study 2 spent regular and significant periods of time in their child's classroom in the morning after school drop-off, volunteering in the classroom, and networking with other parents and the wider school community. As was the case in Study 1, the parents in Study 2 valued play as an important aspect of children's

learning. A clear distinction between the two studies, however, is that parents in Study 2 considered play from a child's perspective rather than from an adult perspective:

They [children] learn by doing. They learn by experiencing. They learn by, you know, playing with other children. (Sue S2)

...from what I understand it [play] is part of how... the children learn. (Eva S2)

Parents described play as an active process. Rather than focusing on resources or artefacts, parents spoke of what *their* child *did* during play. Parents particularly talked about their child's play in the context of collaboration with other children and the involvement of teachers. Parents also described learning in play:

...he has to show me what he's built during indoor play... they've built some kind of space craft that he shows to me and there's always a note on the space craft saying the names of the children and "stop, this is..." whatever it is and you can see that [Teacher] has encouraged them to phonetically spell it how they think it should be spelled. (Louise S2)

...you see all this stuff around the classroom from inside play... the reef display that they're doing at the moment and they come home with creations that they've made. They did the Prep movie night...that was wonderful. So [Teacher] took an extension of whatever the curriculum was and tailored it to the interest of all the children. (Vicky S2)

2. Play and learning are inter-connected

In identifying learning in their child's play, parents talked about play and learning as being inter-connected rather than as separate and distinct, as described by parents in Study 1.

...the kids highly value inside play... I guess because it turns their learning space into not just a learning space but a fun, like, play environment. (Vicky S2)

it [learning] needs to be fun and purposeful and have that meaning to it. (Sue S2)

3. The Prep teacher's role is to advocate for play and to develop strong parent-teacher partnerships

The classroom setting in Study 2 had a strong play-based agenda. The teacher described how she “passionately believe[s] in play inside the classroom”. In positioning play as a context for learning in Prep, the teacher commented on the need to “advocate very strongly” on behalf of play and appropriate early years’ pedagogies with teaching colleagues, school leaders and policy makers.

While many parents expressed surprise at the level of play in the classroom, it was evident that they accepted the teacher’s play-based agenda and were grateful that she was their child’s teacher:

...we’ve been really impressed with [Teacher]... we’ve just been so pleased that she’s the teacher and she’s done such a great job. (Louise S2)

Parents also recognised the teacher as an advocate for play in Prep:

...we’ve been really lucky...school is a really great place to actually be... [Teacher] will stick up and stand for something. (Vicky S2)

...in talking with [Teacher] it’s [play] not something that is a designated part of what they do. Like they don’t have to do it and I know that it’s something that they’ve worked hard to make time and space for ...I’m very grateful for that. (Barbara S2)

There was a strong sense of community between the parents and the teacher, and between families outside the classroom context. Parents described how the teacher advocated, and laid the foundations, for partnership at the beginning of the year. Parents spoke about the impact that strong parent-teacher partnerships had on their family’s relationships within the school community:

[Teacher] made a really good point that...my husband and I volunteer...we’ve made a real point of getting quite involved... she said that’s helped him [child] feel quite settled.... said you’ll experience a whole new community and you’ll make new friendships and it’s a new path and I remember thinking “ah whatever”... but I love it. Oh my God, I’m like “shame we didn’t start school years ago”. (Vicky S2)

...you go into a new group of people and there are those normal barriers to start getting to know someone and making new relationships and friends. She [Teacher] removed a lot of them for us... It's been so good to make these new friendships and for the families to be able to spend time together... and I've benefited as well from the time that I've had in the classroom. I've loved being a part of it... [Teacher] said it's important for the kids to see their parents in the classroom so that they know that the parents think that's it important too... [Teacher] is such a great person. I like seeing how she does things as an individual, not just with the kids but even how she wrangles the parents and, you know, the way that she gets people to do things. (Barbara S2).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate different ways in which play in Prep is interpreted by parents. In particular, the findings from Study 2 highlight the positive outcomes of parent engagement and strong parent-teacher partnerships in providing parents with an alternate lens through which to view play, resulting in deeper understandings of their child's early learning experiences. While not representative of all parents in Queensland, the findings of these two studies provoke theoretical questions about the role of play in Prep, the role of teachers in advocating for play, and the significance of strong parent-teacher partnerships.

The parents in Study 2 were in a position to spend significant time in their child's class. Not all parents would have the time or resources to be so involved. It is possible that parents in Study 1 were restricted in their involvement in their child's classroom due to work or other commitments. The impact of school culture on parent-teacher partnerships was evident in Study 1 with one parent commenting that she did not feel welcome there. As such, schools have an important role to play in fostering parent involvement (Ashton et al., 2008; Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Skouteris, Watson, & Lum, 2012). More creative strategies, such as those suggested by the *Australian Family-School Partnerships Framework* (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008), may facilitate schools reaching out to *all* parents, rather than those who are readily accessible. The findings from Study 2 highlight that strong parent-school partnerships can imbue parents with a sense of efficacy and agency in their child's school-based learning that translates into parental support and involvement in the classroom environment.

Parental involvement provides opportunities for parents to understand firsthand the programs their children attend. Understanding the role of play in young children's learning, and the role of the teacher in play, is heightened by strong parent-teacher partnerships and teacher advocacy. The findings suggest that, where teachers advocate for play in the context of strong parent-teacher partnerships, it is possible for play pedagogies to be enacted and promoted. Such contexts may also provide opportunities for parents themselves to advocate for play, and in turn strengthen the alliance between schools and families in the education of young children.

Conclusion

An investigation of how parents interpret play and its relevance in Prep highlights that their perspectives are multifaceted and, in some instances, incongruous. The majority of parents in both studies viewed play an appropriate learning strategy for young children. However, many (particularly those in Study 1) struggled to balance their views of play more broadly with those of play in the formal learning context of Prep, evidencing Youngquist and Pataray-Ching's (2004) positioning of play as problematic in the context of formal education settings.

The findings highlight the significance of collaborative parent-teacher partnerships that are underpinned by shared-decision making, active participation and parental involvement fostered by teachers and schools. Parent-teacher partnerships, which sit within the scope of curricula and regulatory policy, are key to children's success at school. Through collaborative engagement in their children's education, parents are more likely to have a greater understanding of the early childhood programs their children attend resulting in stakeholders better facilitating the education of young children. Ongoing engagement and debate amongst all stakeholders that considers the variation of understandings of play and its place in early childhood settings is a vital challenge as we reinterpret the relevance of play in shifting early childhood contexts.

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Chapter 8: Paper 3

Creating a world that is truly fit for children... means changing the world with children, ensuring their right to participate, and that their views are heard and considered.

Carol Bellamy, lawyer and politician (in UNICEF, 2005, p. 4)

The authors listed below have certified* that:

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Becoming a member of the classroom: Supporting children's participation as informants in research

Engaging with children as research informants and supporting their participation in research is increasingly recognised as valuing children's views on matters that affect them. Less attention, however, is given to the ways in which children co-construct and manage their participation in child-researcher interactions. Drawing on sociology of childhood understandings, such as the social competence of young children, this ethnographic study investigated the co-production of child-researcher interactions with children aged five years in their first year of primary schooling in Australia. Findings show how child participants oriented to and managed the researcher's disruption of the everyday generational order of child-adult relations. In so doing, interactional space was created for the co-production of children as expert informants who then oriented to a social order of membership inclusion produced in child-researcher interactions. Creating interactional spaces provides enhanced opportunities for children's participation as informants in research, and in child-adult interactions across social structures.

Key words: Child-adult relations, children as participants; children's competence; generational order; social membership; research with children

Introduction

Paradigm shifts over the past two decades in childhood research have resulted in an increasing recognition of engaging children as research participants (Mason and Danby 2011; Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood 2011; Theobald et al. 2015; Alderson 2008; Prout and James 1997). The 'new' sociologies of childhood have provided a conceptualisation and reconstruction of children as competent co-constructors of social worlds where knowledge, identity and meaning-making are made visible in interactions (Prout and James 1997). So too, the provision for children's participatory rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) brought to the fore children's legal rights to make decisions and be active participants on matters that affect them. Framed by notions of children as competent participants in research and as 'experts in their own lives' (Clark and Moss 2011, 35), this

article reports on a study, the aim of which was to explore ways that researchers can support young children's participation in research as informants of their everyday practices.

Concomitant with an increasing focus on children's competence and participation in research has been a focus on the ethical and methodological challenges of doing research with children (Ryen 2016), and participatory methods that can be used to support children's engagement in research (Clark and Moss 2011). Less attention, however, is given to the ways in which children's participation, as an 'interactionally managed activity that relies upon specific child–adult practices' (Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood 2011, 19), is co-constructed in child-researcher interactions (Harcourt and Einarsdóttir 2011).

Drawing on research encounters that occurred during an ethnographic study with children aged five years in their first year of primary school in Australia, we explore strategies used by the researcher in co-constructed interactions with children to support their participation in research. Framed within the sociology of childhood understandings of children's competence, we reflect on examples of co-constructed interactions in which children oriented to and managed the researcher's stance as a learner, and engaged as expert informants of their practices including how to act as a member of their classroom.

We begin this article by reflecting upon the ways in which child-researcher interactions are framed from a generational perspective within structural and social contexts.

Researching with children from a generational perspective

Relationships developed with children are of particular importance in facilitating children's participation and engagement in research (Waller and Bitou 2011). While the term 'participation' is used to describe the many roles that children experience in their daily lives, participation also can be taken to mean a process of activities in which children are involved in 'talking, thinking and deciding' (Alderson 2008, 79) about matters that affect them. The role of adults in this participatory process is to listen, respond and incorporate children's perspectives on these matters (Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood 2011).

Our understanding of the ways in which social interaction is co-produced between children and researchers is framed by the concept of generational relations between children and adults. Generational relationships identify the social positions that children and adults hold in relation to each other, and within specific social structures such as homes and schools (Alanen 2001; Jenks 1996; James 2009; Mayall 2002). Within social structures, social orders are continually 'co-constructed interactionally' between participants through the organisation

of social relations *in situ* (Danby 2009, 1597). Generational child-adult social orders collaboratively produce specific identities, behaviours, roles, constraints, rights, responsibilities and privileges within social structures (Mayall 2001; Mayall 2008). Classroom social orders that frame adults as having privileged authority over children can limit children's opportunities to have their opinions heard (Theobald and Kultti 2012; Houen et al. 2016; Warming 2016). In co-constructed classroom talk and interactions, children and adults have asymmetrical rights (Speier 1976). For example, children often are required to raise their hands if they wish to speak, while adults control the topic and pace of conversation.

While researchers typically do not retain the authority position of a teacher in classroom settings, the co-production of interactions between children and researchers is framed by everyday generational and classroom social orders. From a generational perspective, there have been two approaches to research with children (Mayall 2008). The first approach asserts the generational order by privileging adult knowledge, and reflects an historical emphasis on children as research objects. The second approach challenges the generational order by emphasising research with children as subjects. This approach supposes that child-adult power relations can be disrupted with the aim of reducing adult authority (Mayall 2008). From this perspective, researchers have attempted to adopt a range of identities including the non-authoritarian adult (Corsaro 1985; Mandell 1991), friend (Fine and Sandstrom 1988), least adult (Mandell 1991), and detached observer (Coenen 2011; Damon 1977). Some ethnographers have attempted to take an atypical adult role by entering children's play spaces and engaging with them (Corsaro 1996; Corsaro and Molinari 2008). This method of not acting as an adult is intended to support the researcher in successfully negotiating a space between that of an adult in a position of authority and the children themselves (Thorne 1993; Warming 2005).

In this study, we adopted an approach advocated by Mayall (2008) that does not assume adult superiority nor discounts child-adult power relations in co-constructed research encounters. Rather, our approach recognises that children hold unique knowledge to which adults do not have, or access to, on what it means to be a child. Researching children and childhood from a generational perspective provides opportunities to consider the ways that social orders within social structures enable or constrain children's participation (Mayall 2001; Esser et al. 2016). In particular, our approach sought to identify the ways that children's participation is interactionally managed and co-constructed in child-researcher interactions.

The study

The study took place in a Preparatory Year (Prep) classroom in a major city in south-east Queensland, Australia. Prep is the first year of formal schooling in Queensland, and children typically commence aged between 4.5 and 5.5 years. The setting was located in one of four Prep classrooms in the school. In the classroom, there was one primary school teacher, two part-time teacher assistants and 25 children (13 girls and 12 boys).

In negotiating visits to the classroom, the classroom teacher suggested a schedule that provided the researcher with opportunities to observe teacher-directed episodes, spend morning tea and lunchtime with the children, accompany the children to specialist lessons (such as Science and Physical Education), and participate in child-led, free choice activities such as craft, puzzles and pretend play. In these activities, the researcher participated as a helper, friend, mediator and assistant. This was not unusual within everyday child-adult relations in the classroom as these were positions often occupied by the teacher, teacher assistants and parent helpers. As others have noted, the researcher's role is not singular or static, but rather a multi-faceted one that shifts and orients to the contexts and participants in the setting (Davis, Watson, and Cunningham-Burley 2008; Waksler 1986; Danby 1997; Butler 2008).

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations such as participant access and consent, and researcher-participant power relations are amplified in research with children, as ethical consent is an ongoing process (Einarsdóttir 2007; Christensen and James 2008). In particular, our ethical approach recognised the potential impact of generational relations on children's decisions to participate in activities with the researcher.

The researcher visited the Prep classroom on two occasions before fieldwork commenced to meet with parents and children, and to address questions about the study. Posters with information about the study were placed around the classroom. The researcher provided information about herself in the posters and in conversations with parents and children. Parents and children were invited to provide their written consent for children to participate in the study. Parents were asked to read with their children a child consent form that used child-friendly text and images to describe the study, researcher activities, and how data would be collected and used. In particular, the researcher identified her role in the child consent form as being to find out what Prep was like and about all the things that children did

in Prep. Children were invited to write their name or make their mark on the child consent form if they wished to participate. All children and their parents provided their written consent.

To ensure their ongoing consent, the researcher asked children to reaffirm their verbal consent throughout the study, and reminded them that they could choose not to participate and stop recordings at any time. Children exercised this right on a number of occasions during the study by asking the researcher to not record their activities. Doing research with children demands sensitivity, however, to both verbal and non-verbal cues (Alderson 2005). Thus, children's facial expressions, body language and non-verbal responses were also taken as expressions of their decisions to opt-out.

Ethical approvals for this study were given by Queensland University of Technology (1400000238) and the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment (550/27/1454).

An ethnographic approach: Data collection

The study was framed as a contemporary ethnography (Forsey 2010; Wolcott 2005). This iterative-inductive approach

...draws on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, and asking questions. (O'Reilly 2009, 3)

In ethnographic research, the researcher is positioned as a 'research instrument' and the children as 'research participants' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 17). Within these relationships, knowledge and identities are collaboratively co-constructed (Warming 2016).

Fieldwork occurred over the final five months of the 2014 school year. The researcher sought opportunities to engage with children in their spaces inside and outside of the classroom, and her participation in children's activities was at their request or invitation. Thus, data collection was guided by each child's interests and their inclination to engage with the researcher.

Video-recorded participant observation and informal conversations formed the basis of data collection. Inside the classroom, the researcher captured 65 hours of video-recorded participant observations and conversations with children as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities and practices. Outside the classroom, the researcher captured 40 hours of

audio-recorded participant observations and conversation with children in open spaces such as the playground. The researcher used audio recordings in outside spaces to avoid capturing images of children from adjoining classes who were not part of the study. Cameras were not used near private areas (such as the bathroom) or in concealed play areas where children had created private spaces.

In initial visits to the setting, the children demonstrated curiosity about the researcher's use of a video camera, watching her from a distance or looking at the camera as they passed by. In later visits, children showed interest in what the researcher was recording and were keen to participate. They would often ask her to record what they were doing or to 'take a picture' of them, and then play it back. Children also enjoyed looking through the lens themselves, sometimes holding up a hand or an object and then looking through the lens to see it from the 'other side'. Facilitating children's use of the video camera in this way also attended to ethical considerations regarding the use of video cameras with children. Providing opportunities for children to see themselves on camera and reflect on how they feel about it contributes to their informed consent (Robson 2011). The researcher also made hand-written field notes after each visit to the setting, and collected artefacts that included children's drawings and writing. Prior to analysis, conversations were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, and pseudonyms were used for participants.

In conversations with children, and in response to their questions about who the researcher was and what she was doing in their classroom, the researcher emphasised her role as being to find out from children what they thought about Prep, what they did in Prep, what they enjoyed doing and why. Children were positioned as expert informants about their experiences in school, while the researcher presented herself as a learner (Einarsdóttir 2007; Graue and Walsh 1998; Mayall 2008; Danby 1997) investigating the unique knowledge that children had about their experiences in school.

Data analysis

This study is framed by theoretical understandings of children as competent participants who engage in the co-construction of knowledge, meaning-making and identity (Prout and James 1997; Mayall 2002; Jenks 2005; Corsaro 2005). Framed by a generational perspective, analysis of the data focused on ways in which social order was collaboratively co-constructed and reconstructed in child-researcher interactions.

The first stage of analysis involved an initial review of video- and audio-recorded data, and hand-written field notes, to identify all episodes of co-constructed child-researcher interactions. Within this corpus of data, we noticed that there were particular ways in which children oriented to and managed the researcher's actions when she adopted a stance of learner. In describing participants' actions in interactions, we use the term 'stance' to reflect the multimodal and multiparty nature of interactions (Goodwin and Alim 2010), through which individuals 'project, assign, propose, constrain, define, or otherwise shape the subject positions' of participants (Jaffe 2009, 8).

As we explored the ways in which children oriented to and managed the researcher's actions and stances, we reflected on the ways in which generational order framed the interactions. An example of this was the way in which children oriented to the researcher as an authority figure. These interactions, for the purposes of our analysis, are most relevant here. In particular, we identified interactions where children initially oriented to the researcher as an expert or authority figure, but where the researcher did not take up this stance and instead maintained her stance as a learner. We chose four episodes that show the everyday social order of child-adult relations interactionally re-constructed in child-researcher interactions to be one where children oriented to stances as expert informants while the researcher maintained her stance of learner. In choosing these examples, we attended to matters of reliability; the process where others viewing the data may understand how the researcher arrived at those findings and perhaps identify similar ones (Theobald et al. 2015; Silverman 2006). Reliability involves transparency in the data analysis (e.g. making explicit the analytic approach) and in how data are represented (e.g. field notes) (Peräkylä 2010).

Four interactional episodes showing generational relationships

Framed within a generational perspective, and drawing on key concepts of knowledge, meaning-making and identity, the following four interactional episodes show how child-researcher relationships were produced and co-constructed. Episode 1 demonstrates how, during an initial visit to the setting, the researcher disrupts the existing generational social order of the classroom by not acting as a teacher or parent might in the classroom. In episodes 2-4, the researcher disrupts the existing child-adult social order by adopting a stance as a learner who is seeking knowledge from children as expert informants about their practices. In these interactions, children assume varying stances as expert informants.

The researcher disrupts the generational social order of the classroom

Episode 1

This episode took place in the second week of fieldwork.

It is lunchtime. The children are sitting outside on the ground eating. They are to remain in the area until the teacher directs that eating time is over and that they can go and play. I sit down on the ground with the children. I notice that the teacher walks around on the grass in front of the children, while the teacher assistant sits close by on a chair. One boy, James, goes and gets a chair which he holds out to me. 'You can sit on this' he tells me. 'That's okay' I say. 'I'd rather sit on the ground with you guys'. 'Okay', says James. He puts the chair to the side and sits down beside me.

By sitting on the ground with children, rather than sitting on a chair or standing as other adults are doing, the researcher disrupts the everyday child-adult social order of the lunchtime setting. James orients to and attempts to manage the researcher's action as one that disrupts the existing social order. The researcher's identity as an adult in the context of the existing child-teacher social order is co-constructed when James offers her a chair on which to sit. Rather than simply declining his offer, the researcher explains to James that she would 'rather sit on the ground with you guys'. This presents an opportunity for James to take up a physical position sitting beside the researcher. Through their respective multimodal stances (through their talk and body positioning), a social order is being produced between James and the researcher where the researcher's adult practices of sitting on the ground are taken up and accepted by James. This researcher stance suggests a mutual social order, one where an adult sits on the ground, just as children do. This is different to the teacher-as-adult construction, and positions the researcher as one who can participate in a conversation where there is a mutuality of body positioning, and of relationship.

Researcher is co-constructed as learner and children as expert informants

Children were aware of the researcher's identity as being both a teacher and a mother of children attending primary school, and it is possible that the researcher's professional and personal experiences might be interpreted by children as insider knowledge of the classroom and how schools work. From an ethnographic perspective, an 'insider' is traditionally used to

describe a researcher who is a member of, or is familiar with, the local group or context (Wolcott 2008). In the following episodes (2, 3 and 4), the researcher did not work within the teacher positioning, but rather took a stance of learner. This created interactional space for children to take up stances as *the* expert insiders and informants about their school practices.

Episode 2

The following episode took place in the sandpit* during lunchtime.

* *A sandpit is a hollow box or hollow filled with sand for children's play activities.*

During lunchtime, I join Molly, Peter and Kyle in the sandpit. We dig holes and make sandcastles. Peter asks me if he can get some water to make the sand wet. 'Are we allowed to bring water in to the sandpit?' I ask him. Kyle says 'no, you're not allowed' but Peter says he will ask the teacher on duty. When he returns, he tells us that the teacher said no, that he can't bring in water but that instead he needs to dig deeper and find damp sand underneath.

While teachers and teacher assistants regularly played ball games with children during lunchtime, and walked around the playground area, they did not enter the sandpit except to instruct packing up at the end of lunchtime. Thus, the researcher's practice of entering the sandpit for the purposes of play and conversation with children was an unusual one for an adult in this setting. Despite the researcher's disruption of the existing social order by playing and talking with children in the sandpit, the researcher's identity as an adult in the context of the existing child-adult social order is co-constructed as Peter seeks her permission to bring water into the sandpit. The researcher does not take up Peter's request but instead adopts a stance of learner and seeks knowledge from the children as to the rules. This opportunity offered children the possibility to take up positions as expert informants.

In using the word 'we' in her question ('are *we* allowed'), the researcher frames herself as a part of this group and infers that authority lies elsewhere. Kyle does not respond with the collective 'we' but instead advises the group that '*you're* not allowed'. Kyle's identity is co-constructed as an expert informant who tells the researcher and Peter the school rules. His orientation to the researcher is one where he constructs her as a learner of children's practices and as an outsider who needs to know these rules in order to become a *proper* member of the classroom.

Peter does not challenge Kyle's stance as expert informant, or his stating of the rules to the group that they are not allowed to bring in water. Peter's decision to seek clarification from the teacher on duty highlights his awareness that the existing social order is one where children seek permission from adults as experts with authority. His actions show that he understands that it is the teacher, not a researcher or peer, who makes the classroom rules. His action also shows his competence in orienting between the existing social order and the new social order being produced in the child-researcher interaction.

Episode 3

The following episode took place while the researcher walked around the playground during lunchtime.

I walk around the playground during the lunchtime play period. Molly [a child in the setting] comes up and asks me what I'm doing. 'Just hanging out', I tell her. As we walk around the playground chatting, a child from another classroom asks me if they can use the bathroom. I know that children use the bathroom in our classroom during lunchtime but I use the opportunity to defer to Molly as the expert insider on the school rules. 'Is it okay for me to say yes? Can kids use the toilet during lunchtime?' I ask her. Molly replies 'yeah that's okay. They can ask me the next time though if you want'.

The researcher's identity as an adult in the context of the existing child-adult social order of the setting is co-constructed when the child seeks her permission to use the bathroom. Attending to the child's request in her first question to Molly ('is it okay for me to say yes?'), the researcher orients also to the existing social order where adults hold authority positions. The researcher next orients to a new social order in the interaction with Molly when she seeks Molly's advice. In her second question, ('can kids use the toilet during lunchtime?') the researcher displays a lack of knowledge about the school rules and adopts a stance as learner. Within this new social order emerging, interactional space is created for Molly to participate as an expert informant in sharing understandings with the researcher about how to be a *proper* member of the classroom. As expert informant within this new social order, Molly assumes some authority to give permission to children to use the bathroom ('they can ask me'). However, Molly's statement that she can give permission to other children 'if you want' demonstrates her awareness of the existing everyday social order to be one where the

researcher is an adult who therefore retains ultimate authority. In this way, Molly displays her competence in orienting between the existing child-adult social order and the new social order being produced in this child-researcher interaction.

Episode 4

The following episode took place at the conclusion of morning tea.

I am sitting outside with children as they eat their morning tea. The teacher signals the end of eating time. Those children who have finished eating pack their lunchboxes away and transition to the playground. I sit with Peter and Luke on the ground while they finish eating. A child from another class walks up to me, holding his lunchbox open in his arms. He says nothing. I don't understand what I'm supposed to do. I turn to Peter and Luke. 'What's this about?' I ask them. 'You need to check that he's had his sandwiches' says Peter. 'He can only go and play if you say he's had enough', says Luke.

The researcher's stance as a learner unfamiliar with, and trying to understand, children's practices creates interactional space for Peter and Luke to participate as expert informants, producing a social order where the researcher is the recipient of information about how the classroom operates. Rather than simply attending to the researcher's question, Peter displays his competence as expert informant by providing quite specific information so that the researcher can make meaning of the child's action. Specifically, Peter informs the researcher what behaviour is required of her as an adult within the existing social order of the setting. Luke offers additional particular information to the researcher as to what behaviour is required of her if the child has not eaten enough. In providing more information than was actually requested, Peter and Luke demonstrate their competence in orienting to the researcher's identity of learner, and the knowledge that is required for her to act as a participating member of the existing child-adult social order. Peter and Luke demonstrate their competence in orienting both to the existing child-teacher social order and the new social order being produced in this child-researcher interaction. They also demonstrate that they view their classroom rules from the stance of the researcher as an outsider; that is, their sharing of this insider knowledge is necessary for the researcher to become a *proper* member of the classroom.

Discussion

Children's participation in research and the stances produced in child-researcher interactions are understood as a socially produced phenomena co-constructed within structural and relational contexts (Esser 2016; Honig 2009). Adopting a generational perspective provides opportunities to consider ways in which social orders are produced, and the multiple identities and stances that children can occupy in co-constructed interactions (Esser et al. 2016; Mayall 2001). Childhood Studies have provided a theoretical reconstruction of children as competent co-constructors of knowledge, identity and meaning-making (Prout and James 1997). In this article, we showed ways that knowledge, identity and meaning-making were co-produced in child-researcher interactions where the researcher adopted the stance of learner. The researcher emphasised her stance as a learner by behaving in ways that were not typical of the everyday child-adult social orders within the setting. Her purpose was to encourage children to interact with her not as they might with a teacher or parent, but as someone who was learning about what happens in their classroom. A consequence of this stance was that the existing child-adult social order in the setting was disrupted between child and researcher to one where the children supported the researcher to be a member of the classroom in the same way that they were members of that classroom.

Reflecting on the ways in which the researcher disrupted the existing social order, there are elements reflective of what Garfinkel (1967) describes, from an ethnomethodological perspective, as a breaching experiment. A breaching experiment involves the researcher demonstrating a behaviour or action that disrupts the everyday social orders for the purposes of producing a 'disorganized interaction' (Garfinkel 1967, 38) among participants. While Garfinkel's breaching experiment was an intentional activity, in this study we suggest that the researcher engaged in a form of unintentional breaching experiment where she disrupted the social orders of child-adult relations by maintaining her identity as an adult but not behaving in ways consistent with the practices of everyday adult behaviour in a classroom setting. The researcher's intentional stance as a learner in the setting was adopted for the purposes of trying to balance her position as an adult with any preconceived ideas that children might have about adults or adulthood. Thus the intention, in this case, was to create space for children to inform on their practices, rather than to intentionally produce disorganised interactions. The consequence of the researcher's stance, however, was that social orders of everyday child-adult relations in the setting were disrupted, creating space for the co-production of children as expert informants.

Children display their social competence as they actively engage in everyday events and interactions with others (Speier 1973; Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998). Particularly evident was children's competence in orienting both to the context of interactions, and to the existing child-adult social order in the setting. Children took initiatives within the existing social order (such as offering the chair in Episode 1, and providing information to enable the researcher act as a member of the children's culture within the existing social order in Episodes 2-4), and then oriented to a social order of membership inclusion produced in child-researcher interactions. While the researcher's stance provided some disruption to the existing social order, these episodes show children's competence in orienting to and between different social orders.

Examining episodes of co-produced child-researcher interactions enables investigation of how children orient to, engage with and manage peer and adult structures as they participate in their practices (Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood 2011). In childhood research attention often is given to the ways in which participatory methods can support children's participation in research. Supporting children's participation in research is more than using participatory methods to engage with children in their spaces. Supporting children's participation as expert informants requires adults to critically reflect on their practices in child-adult interactions so that 'relational space' can be afforded to them (Bae 2009, 398; Bae 2012).

In describing specific interactional practices that the researcher employed in the midst of everyday talk and activities with children in the setting, the researcher described her *way of being* with the children, whether she was attending to her research agenda in the context of specific research activities or whether she was engaged with children in everyday activities. The consequence and significance of this approach is that space was created for children to participate in child-researcher interactions as expert informants about their practices, whether or not those practices were directly relevant to the researcher's agenda. Consequently, the children oriented to the researcher as someone needing to know about the existing social order as shown through their reformulation of rules. This approach supported children's participation as informants about their perspectives and practices, rather than as responders in the context of a research agenda. The researcher was being informed about how to act as a member of this classroom, from the children's perspective. In other words, she was being oriented to as someone becoming an insider as they were in the classroom. This social order

introduced to her was their social order, from their perspective, and not the teacher's social order. The researcher was given lessons on how to be a *proper* member of this classroom.

Conclusion

Examining episodes of co-produced child-researcher interactions enables investigation of how children orient to, engage with and manage peer and adult structures. We showed how the researcher created interactional spaces for children to take up stances as expert informants of their practices. Identifying interactional strategies that researchers can use in child-researcher interactions has relevance for researchers in supporting children's participation in research as informants of their practices.

The ways in which interactions are co-constructed and co-produced within relational and situational contexts show generational orders as an ongoing interactional project, in particular in child-adult relations within the social structure of the classroom. Examining child-researcher interactions highlight children's understandings of the generational order in shaping their participation in their social worlds. Drawing attention to the ways in which generational order and structural contexts enable or constrain children's participation in research is a critical aspect of engaging in research with children. At the same time, the researcher's interactions reshaped the existing social order of child-adult interactions to collaboratively produce with children a social order where she was being constructed as a member of the classroom, just as they were. This approach meant reframing existing generational social orders to produce to mutually constructed social order where the researcher was being oriented to as a member of the classroom.

In framing children's participation within the structural constraints and social orders of child-adult relations, our findings have relevance across different contexts that involve child-adult interactions. Creating interactional spaces for children to occupy different identities and stances provides opportunities for researchers, educators and other childhood professionals engaging with children to reflect on how they create rich possibilities for children's participation in their everyday worlds. The findings of this study showed clearly that, when they are provided with opportunities to participate as competent and expert informants, children provide rich insights into their social worlds. These findings have important implications for how children are understood in childhood research, and in early childhood policy and practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Chapter 9: Conclusion

Play is the highest form of research.

Neville Scarfe, educator and researcher (1962, p. 120)

9.1 Introduction

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to investigate children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences in one Preparatory Year classroom. With increasing emphasis on children's participation in research and practice contexts (Theobald et al., 2011), the study sought to engage and support young children as research participants to express their views about what they considered important to them in school.

The data collection for this study took place at a critical juncture in Queensland Preparatory schooling history. The 2016 cohort of children was the last to attend Prep as a non-compulsory program operating under both the play-based *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) and the national *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.). The children beginning Prep in 2017 are now enrolled in a compulsory year of schooling exclusively using the *Australian Curriculum*. Under this new model, there is an increased focus on formal curriculum, academic outcomes and standardised assessment in Queensland's first year of schooling (Petriwskyj et al., 2013).

While previous studies investigated ways that children categorise and define play and non-play activities in education settings, less is known about the activities that children value at school and the ways in which they engage in those activities. The aim of this study was to contribute to understandings of children's perspectives of play and their experiences in early childhood education settings.

In Australia, valuing children's perspectives on matters that concern them had more uptake in child welfare and research contexts than in education contexts (Theobald et al., 2011). This study contributes to existing knowledge by investigating children's perspectives in an Australian early education context. Investigating children's educational experiences

from their own perspectives affords children opportunities to have a say on matters of importance to them, such as play, within their Prep classroom. Findings present an additional lens through which to view the significance of adult agendas on children's daily lives. This study stands to influence policy and practice in early childhood settings by offering theoretical implications for how play can be understood as a nuanced and complex concept and practice, and practical opportunities for teachers to enhance children's participation in classroom practices across international early childhood contexts.

This concluding chapter revisits the Prep setting to address recent educational developments in the field of early childhood education. Next, the chapter addresses the research questions that underpinned the study. Three key findings of the study are identified, and the study's methodological contributions and its limitations are discussed. The chapter finally outlines recommendations of the study and opportunities for further research. The chapter concludes with a summary.

9.2 The Prep classroom revisited

Since the conclusion of fieldwork in this study, three developments have occurred in the Queensland education landscape of relevance to this thesis topic. These are: (1) Introduction of an *Age Appropriate Pedagogies* program; (2) The Prep year becomes compulsory in 2017; and (3) Review of the Australian Curriculum in Queensland.

Introduction of Age Appropriate Pedagogies program

In 2015, the Queensland state government announced its strategy to support young children's transition from kindergarten (the year before Prep) to Prep (DET, 2016), and initiated a review of international early years programs (DET, 2015a). The review focused on a number of key studies with children aged three to eight years in a range of early years settings including:

- The Cambridge Primary Review in England (Alexander, Doddington, Gray, Hargreaves, & Kershner, 2010);
- The Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE) project in England (Sylva et al., 2004);
- The Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation project in Northern Ireland (Walsh et al., 2006);
- The Active Learning project in Scotland (Martlew et al., 2011);

- Child-initiated pedagogies in Finland, Estonia and England (Helavaara Robertson, Kinosh, Barbour, Pukk, & Rosqvist, 2015);
- The High/Scope Perry program in the USA (Schweinhart et al., 2005);
- The OECD's (2015) Skills for Social Progress; and
- Creative Little Scientists in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Malta, Portugal, Romania and the UK (Cremin, Glauert, Craft, Compton, & Stylianidou, 2015).

The review (DET, 2015a) identified a need for balanced pedagogic approaches to fulfil teaching goals and be responsive to the holistic needs of learners. Approaches that included a mix of child-initiated and adult-initiated learning experiences were found to facilitate children's agency. The review identified that playfulness and positive personal relationships between children and teachers had a positive impact on children's learning outcomes. In particular, opportunities for real-life, imaginary, spontaneous and planned experiences were identified as important aspects of early years pedagogy. The review identified the significance of adult involvement and scaffolding of children's learning for the development of higher-order thinking (DET, 2015), and identified eleven characteristics of effective pedagogies as being:

...the qualities considered essential in effective teaching and learning interactions with young children. When teachers make conscious decisions to apply these characteristics in their teaching they strengthen the conditions that support and enhance curriculum delivery and learning. (DET, 2016b, p. 6)

The characteristics (*active, agentic, collaborative, creative, explicit, language rich and dialogic, learner focused, narrative, playful, responsive, scaffolded*) provided the foundation for an *age-appropriate pedagogies (AAP)* program, piloted in 45 Queensland state schools (DET, 2015). In 2016, the program was made available to state schools on an 'opt-in' basis.

During the piloting of the AAP program (DET, 2016a), the Brisbane Metropolitan Region of the Department of Education and Training commissioned the *200 Children's Voices* project (DET, 2016b). Children between the ages of three and eight were interviewed about their learning at school. Findings highlighted that children valued creative, playful and agentic learning opportunities. While the study identified that Queensland children in kindergarten had significant opportunities for displaying agency through their choices and decision making, Prep children did not have these same opportunities (DET, 2016b). While

there was a focus on children's agency, the project did not seek children's perspectives for the purposes of informing the *AAP* program's development. Instead, children's perspectives were collected as supplementary evidence to inform stakeholder decisions about early childhood education practices (DET, 2016b). The state government stated that its rationale for considering children's perspectives was based on 'the premise that children have ideas and opinions on things that matter to *them* [emphasis added]' (DET, 2016b, p. 9). The question then becomes: At what stage should children's ideas and opinions matter to *us*? This thesis, in the context of the recent *AAP* work, contributes to international early years practice and theory by foregrounding children's perspectives as important in their own right, and deserving of the same consideration as that of other early years stakeholders.

Teachers surveyed during the *AAP* pilot reported that 95% of their pedagogic practices in Prep were teacher-initiated and planned (DET, 2016b, p. 13). In post-study questionnaires, teachers responded favourably when asked if the *AAP* characteristics correlated with their early years philosophy. While *AAP* is an opt-in program for schools rather than mandated as part of Prep's curriculum model, it may assist schools in developing pedagogic frameworks that support children's agency and participation in classroom practices.

The Prep year becomes compulsory in 2017

In 2016, the state government advised that Prep will become a compulsory year of schooling in 2017, citing the importance of fulltime attendance at school in its announcement (Queensland Government, 2016). Concomitant with this change will be retiring the *EYCG* (QSA, 2006) during the 2017 school year with the Prep year curriculum being the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.). While no longer a prescribed curriculum framework, it is anticipated that the *EYCG* will continue to be made available online as a teacher resource (QCAA, personal communication, December 15, 2016).

Review of the Australian Curriculum in Queensland

The third significant event likely to have an impact on young children's future experiences in school has been a 2016 review by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) (2016b) of Queensland's implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.), and its impact on Queensland schools and stakeholder groups. The *Core P-10 Australian Curriculum* review (QCAA, 2016) found that the implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* in Queensland was rushed, with the curriculum introduced before being ready for implementation. The review found that teacher frustrations regarding the

excessive workloads, curriculum demands and time pressures, threatened to undermine curriculum implementation. Further, the national goal that the curriculum would not consume more than 80% of learning time was not met, resulting in unnecessary stress for school leaders, teachers, children and families. The review also found that there was no time available for children to engage in other activities such as sport, school assemblies, performance rehearsals and community events (QCAA, 2016).

The review's (QCAA, 2016) recommendations included defining a new *Core P-10 Australian Curriculum*, and developing new curriculum resources to support its implementation. It further recommended revising curriculum time allocation, revising the timelines for implementation, and publishing statements on the nature of the learner and the priorities for learning within each phase of learning. The stated aim of these recommendations was to produce clear curriculum expectations for all stakeholders, reduce teachers' workloads, support and consolidate deeper learning, and maximise children's engagement in their learning (QCAA, 2016).

The extent that these three changes might have an impact on Prep children's experiences will become apparent only in the future. The recent foregrounding of academic skills and learning outcomes over play-based approaches in Prep reflects a concerning trend reported internationally towards reduced opportunities for children's agency in their learning across early childhood contexts (Anning, 2010; Einarsdóttir, 2006; Gunnarsdottir, 2014; Hyvönen, 2011; Lindstrand & Björk-Willén, 2016; Theobald & Kultti, 2012). Therefore, while these three developments are specific to the Queensland context, the questions that they raise are not unique to Prep, and have implications for international early childhood settings in supporting children's agency and participation in the context of increasingly formalised approaches.

9.3 Revisiting the research questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences in the Prep year in Queensland. The study sought to engage and support young children as research participants to express their views about what they considered important to them in school.

In the design phase of the study, the initial research questions focused on:

1. What are children's accounts of their experiences in Prep?
2. To what extent is play an aspect of children's described experiences in Prep?

3. What are the implications of investigating children's accounts of play for early childhood education?

Once data collection began and I had immersed myself in the setting, it became apparent that the initial research questions did not provide sufficient scope to reflect upon the ways in which aspects of the setting influenced children's perspectives of play and their experiences in school. The ethnographic design of this study required that a holistic view of the setting be taken (Erickson, 2010; O'Reilly, 2009) in order to understand children's experiences and perspectives. In particular, the importance to children of having agency in their classroom practices was identified, which led to questions as to how children's agency was supported in the classroom in the context of teacher-parent partnerships. The study's shift to investigate children's agentic participation in their classroom practices illuminated the ways in which children participated in research encounters. This led to questions as to how researchers can support children's participation as informants in research. In attending to these matters, the research questions were revised as follows:

1. What are children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences in Prep?
2. What contextual factors support the provision of play-based learning opportunities for children?
3. How can researchers support children's participation in research as informants of their everyday practices?

This thesis was presented as a thesis by publication, with three journal papers that attend to these three research questions

9.4 Overview of journal papers

9.4.1 Paper 1

Attending to research question 1, the first paper is entitled '*Are you working or playing?*' *Investigating young children's perspectives of classroom activities* (Breathnach et al., 2017). This paper is published in the *International Journal of Early Years Education*.

The paper reports on data collected over five months of fieldwork with children in the Prep setting. Video and audio recordings captured participant observations of the children and teacher as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities and practices. Being mindful of the ways that children might ordinarily chose to express themselves, data collection was undertaken using a Mosaic approach to (Clark & Moss, 2011) to encourage

children to share their perspectives in open-ended ways. Influenced by the sociology of childhood's emphasis on children's agency (Prout & James, 1997), the children were invited to take child-directed tours of their activity spaces and represent their experiences through drawings. Conversations with children involved questions about what constituted play and work in the classroom, what they enjoyed and why. Drawing on data collected from a range of interactions with children, the study found that children's perspectives of classroom activities were influenced by teacher-framed agendas, and the agency afforded to them to engage in self-chosen activities and to design and negotiate their play spaces. For instance, children called writing activities 'work' if they were directed by the teacher, and yet they consistently chose to engage in writing activities during periods of freely chosen activities.

9.4.2 Paper 2

Attending to research question 2, the second paper is entitled *'Well it depends on what you'd call play': Parent perspectives on play in Queensland's Preparatory Year* (Breathnach et al., 2016). This paper is published in the *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. Arising from findings reported in Paper 1, this paper reflects on factors that supported the enactment of play pedagogies in the setting. Drawing on conversations with six mothers, the paper reports the mothers' understandings of play in Prep, and its relevance to their children's learning. These conversations are contrasted with interviews conducted during Breathnach's Masters Research study (2012) with eight parents of children attending Prep in Queensland. The paper attends to the different ways in which the parents in both studies viewed play in Prep, and considers the factors that influenced their perspectives and experiences. Findings reflect on the ways in which positive and enriched parent-teacher partnerships support parents' understandings of play in education contexts, and how such understandings facilitate the provision and support of play pedagogies in the Prep classroom.

9.4.3 Paper 3

Attending to research question 3, the third paper is entitled *Becoming a member of the classroom: Supporting children's participation as informants in research* (Breathnach et al., 2018). This paper is published in the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. This methodological paper reflects upon the complex ways that children and researchers co-constructed knowledge, identity and meaning-making in research encounters. Framed by a generational perspective and drawing on four episodes of child-researcher interactions, the paper explores the strategies used in child-researcher interactions to support

children's participation as expert informants of their practices. In particular, the paper shows how disrupting everyday child-adult classroom relations in a researcher stance as learner reshaped existing social orders to collaboratively produce with children a social order where the researcher was constructed as a member of the classroom. Creating interactional spaces provides enhanced opportunities for children's participation as informants in research, and in child-adult interactions more broadly across social structures.

9.5 Theoretical contributions: Key findings

While the study was located in a Queensland Prep classroom, findings in this thesis contribute to and extend theoretical knowledge in the area of children's perspectives and experiences across early years contexts more broadly.

Three key findings were identified in the study. They are:

1. Rather than focusing on adult-centric concerns regarding play and work in early childhood settings, children's actions showed they sought out opportunities to choose their own activities. In other words, it was their capacity to choose to participate that made the activity play or work.
2. Strong parent-teacher partnerships in this setting facilitated children's agentic play-based opportunities.
3. Creating interactional spaces in child-researcher interactions supported children in taking stances as expert informants of their practices.

This chapter now presents an overview of the key theoretical findings in the study.

Rather than focusing on adult-centric concerns regarding play and work in early childhood settings, children's actions showed they sought out opportunities to choose their own activities.

Children differentiate between play and work activities in education settings (Einarsdóttir, 2010a; Keating et al., 2000; Linklater, 2006; Patte, 2009; Thomas et al., 2006; Wood & Attfield, 2005). In this study, children had lots to say about play and work but only in response to researcher generated questions. Children in this study were observed not to be initiating or engaging in conversations about play and work as discreet pursuits, suggesting that the children in this study were not invested in the topic of play and work, often representative of adult rather than child-focused agendas. This study extends understandings of children's perspectives beyond definitions of what play might *be* or *look like* to

understandings of what play might *mean* for children in the context of their agentic classroom practices across international contexts.

The study found that children value choice and control in their activities, and builds on a body of international research that investigates what children value in school (e.g. Einarsdóttir, 2005; Linklater, 2006; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). In understanding children's perspectives of their classroom experiences, conversations with the children highlighted that what they most valued were opportunities to make decisions about what they did and with whom. 'Inside play' was the most popular topic of conversation initiated by children. This period of the day represented a time when children were afforded agency in their classroom practices. Periodically, however, children were required to engage in assessment tasks and adult-directed activities during 'inside play'. Even so, children described 'inside play' as one of the 'best things about Prep'. Investigating the experiences that children value at school highlighted the positive influence of agentic play-based opportunities on their attitudes towards their classroom practices and school more generally.

Play is sometimes considered as a less serious or valuable pursuit by parents and educators, particularly when compared to adult-directed, outcomes-focused activities (Breathnach, 2013; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). This study demonstrated that when agency was afforded to them during 'inside play', children engaged in academic skills such as reading and writing. In particular, children had negative attitudes towards writing in the context of teacher-directed activities which afforded them little if any agency over matters such as the writing materials they used, the location in which they did their writing or the intended outcomes. Despite this, writing was consistently evident in 'inside play'. Children engaged in writing practices for a number of purposes such as making signs, making props, recording the 'rules' of their activity, recording their involvement in an activity, and writing letters to their family and to each other.

This thesis advances understandings of how context influences the ways in which children frame their classroom activities. Previous studies suggest that situational contexts (such as the presence of a teacher, the presence of peers, or the location of the activity) are used by children to determine the nature of an activity (Einarsdóttir, 2010a, 2014; Keating et al., 2000; Linklater, 2006; Thomas et al., 2006; Vickerius & Sandberg, 2006). This study revealed that children did not draw on those situational contexts but rather utilised their 'insider knowledge' of the classroom. For example, orienting to the teacher's agenda and classroom timetable, children identified 'inside play' as the period of time in which they

could engage in agentic play-based opportunities. Children identified that an activity would be considered 'play' if it occurred on an 'inside play' day.

In a number of childhood studies, researchers' questions to children about play and work often are not reported or made explicit in the research product (Linklater, 2006; McInnes et al., 2011; Vickerius & Sandberg, 2006; Wing, 1995). Where researchers do report their use of terms such as 'play' or 'work' in questions to children (e.g. Chapparo & Hooper, 2002; Glenn, Knight, Holt, & Spence, 2012; Howard, Jenvey, & Hill, 2006; Keating et al., 2000), it is often not reported whether such terms have an assumed meaning, and how the researcher's use of these concepts might form part of children's co-constructed understandings. This study's methodological significance shows that, rather than removing the influence of the researcher in the production of knowledge, knowledge was collaboratively constructed with the children.

Strong parent-teacher partnerships in this setting facilitated children's agentic play-based opportunities.

Parents are often involved in their children's school-based education, particularly supporting children's transition to school (e.g. Skouteris, Watson, & Lum, 2012) and optimising children's learning outcomes (e.g. Comer & Ben-Avie, 2010). This study showed that parents' participation in classroom activities provided opportunities to understand firsthand the ways in which play underpinned their children's learning in Prep. Parents, by virtue of their involvement in the classroom, were able to draw connections between their children's learning and development at school, their children's 'inside play' activities, conversations with their children about 'inside play', and conversations with the classroom teacher regarding play in Prep.

Findings extend understandings of parental involvement by highlighting how strong parent-teacher partnerships imbued parents with a sense of efficacy and agency in their children's school-based learning. Strong parent-teacher partnerships were fostered by the classroom teacher, who used a number of strategies to provide different ways for parents to participate in their children's Prep experience. Some strategies targeted parents who were unavailable during school hours. For example, the teacher identified that very few fathers participated in classroom activities due to work commitments. In an attempt to involve fathers, she organised a 'Father's Night' where children and their fathers were invited to Prep for an evening of 'fun activities' in the classroom and Prep playground. This event provided opportunities for working fathers to be part of their children's learning experience in Prep.

These strategies have practical significance for educators across international education settings.

Parental and extended family member involvement in children's classroom experiences fostered connections between the children's communities inside and outside of Prep. In this way, children's learning experiences at home and at school were shared reciprocally between the teacher and parents. Parents' agency in their children's learning, afforded by strong school partnerships, resulted in parents themselves being advocates for play.

When parents have limited involvement in their children's classrooms, their views on the value and role of play in children's learning, particularly in the context of formal education settings, are ambiguous (Breathnach, 2013). This study highlighted how strong parent-teacher partnerships, in the context of the teacher's advocacy for play, facilitated parents' understanding and support of the play-based approach and children's agency in the setting, and facilitated a supportive environment for play pedagogies to be enacted and promoted. The practical implications of these findings are that strong-parent teacher partnerships can support the provision of agentic play-based opportunities for children, even within formal education settings. While other studies showed parents were unsupportive of play in education settings (Breathnach, 2013; Dockett, 2010), this study showed that strong parent-teacher partnerships resulted in positive parental expectations of play in education settings.

Creating interactional spaces in child-researcher interactions supported children in taking stances as expert informants of their practices.

Engaging with and supporting children as research informants is increasingly recognised as valuing children's perspectives on matters that affect them (Alderson, 2008; Mason & Danby, 2011; Prout & James, 1997; Theobald et al., 2015; Theobald, Danby, & Ailwood, 2011). Less attention, however, is given to the ways in which children co-construct and manage their participation in child-researcher interactions. Framed by a generational perspective, this study showed the ways that children's participation was interactionally managed and co-constructed in child-researcher interactions.

In interactions with children, the researcher emphasised her stance as a learner, that is, someone who was learning about their practices and what happens in their classroom. This was done by behaving in ways that were not typical of the everyday child-adult relations of the setting, such as by sitting on the floor with children and seeking their advice when attending to the requests of other children. A consequence of this behaviour was that the

existing child-adult social order in the setting was disrupted in these child-researcher interactions. Within this new social order emerging, interactional space was created for children to participate as expert informants. As expert informants of their practices, children supported the researcher to be a member of the classroom in the same way that they were members of that classroom. They did this by sharing understandings about how to become a *proper* member of the classroom. For example, informing about the school rules also involved informing about the behaviour required of an adult within the existing social order of the setting. In this way, they demonstrated their views of classroom rules from a stance as an outsider in the setting; that is, their sharing of their insider knowledge necessary for an outsider to *become* a member of the classroom. In orienting to the researcher stance as learner becoming a member of this classroom, children demonstrated their competence in orienting both to the existing child-teacher social order and the new social order being produced in this child-researcher interaction.

This study highlights the ways in which relational space supported children's participation in research as expert informants of their practices. Identifying interactional strategies to support children's participation as informants of their practices has relevance across social structures in the context of child-adult interactions.

9.6 Methodological contributions

An ethnographic approach produced thick description (Geertz, 1973) of children's perspectives and their classroom experiences in Prep. The methodological strength of ethnography is that the research design is not fixed at the beginning, and categories used for interpretation are not identified prior to data collection but rather evolves throughout the study (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Hammersley, 2010). As questions arose through reflexive practices, broadening the research gaze was possible – and in fact desirable - in order to manifest hidden aspects of classroom practices, and the perspectives that underlay those practices. Viewing the setting in a holistic way revealed how other aspects of the setting influenced children's perspectives of play and their classroom experiences. For example, conversations with parents illuminated how strong parent-teacher partnerships facilitated their understanding of and support for play-based pedagogies. This holistic view of the setting illuminated ways in which agentic play-based opportunities were supported in the classroom by strong-parent teacher partnerships.

As a researcher-practitioner, video recordings captured extended interactions and observations involving myself, the children and the teacher. I combined the use of video with other methods of data collection that included participant observation, conversation, children's drawings and walking tours. These methods provided rich sources of data that enabled detailed analysis of verbal and non-verbal interactions through fine grained transcription and line by line analysis of conversations. In this regard, video recordings served as both a visual accompaniment to other methods of data collection (such as field notes), and a primary data source. A novel methodological contribution of this study was the use of video to capture interactions between myself as researcher and children in the setting. These recordings afforded me opportunities to take myself 'back into the research situation' (SAGE Methodspace, 2009, 3:35) at later stages in the study. In this way, I was able to re-experience the interactions both as a participant and as an observer.

Bringing a reflexive approach to undertaking the field work and analysis involved reflecting upon the types of questions that I asked the children, in particular my use of the terms 'play' and 'work'. My initial assumptions about the ways that children understood and participated in their everyday worlds of play and work were initially framed through a researcher's lens. In this way, the ethnographic approach facilitated deeper understandings of children's agentic participation and engagement in their classroom practices.

9.7 Limitations of the study

Issues of research rigour and researcher subjectivity were discussed in detail in Chapter 4, and in Papers 1 and 3. To avoid repetition, this section considers instead temporal and physical limitations of the study.

This study took place at a particular time, in a particular setting and in a particular context. Despite the study's location within one Queensland Prep classroom, the participation of all children, their parents and teacher together with the richness of the data collected, suggests applicability of the findings to other Australian and international early childhood contexts.

The time constraints of a PhD study make it impracticable to spend extended periods of time living amongst 'the natives' in the setting. A review of ethnographies across disciplines highlights studies ranging from hours/days (Isaacs, 2013) to weeks (Henslin, 1990), as well as ethnographers being present for particular events or festivals (Pink, 2010). Similar variation in the length of time spent doing fieldwork is also evident in contemporary

education studies, ranging from days (Wyeth, 2006) to months (Seele, 2012), as well as instances of short observation periods extended over longer periods of time (Huf, 2013; Smith et al., 2005). In this study, I was guided by Wolcott's (2005) suggestion of being present through complete cycles of activity. In this regard, five months of fieldwork in the classroom occurred over the last two terms of the school year.

While this study did not have the scope of a large-scale study of Queensland's Prep (see, for example, Thorpe et al., 2005), the value of 'being there' (Trondman, 2008, p. 117) in the setting should not be underestimated. The ethnographic approach emphasises the importance of context in understanding a phenomenon, such as play. In this study, five months of fieldwork in the setting facilitated building relationships with children, parents and school staff, as well as the collection of rich data that illuminated the nuanced and complex meanings in participants' perspectives and experiences.

9.8 Recommendations of the study

Four recommendations arise from the study's findings:

1. Teachers engage with children in conversations about their learning practices in order to reduce assumptions about classroom activities, and to illuminate the underlying values that children ascribe to their practices.
2. Teachers and children collaboratively identify opportunities for children to display agency in classroom activities. This approach supports children as competent agents and decision-makers in their daily lives. A re-focusing of teacher-child talk around classroom activities provides rich possibilities for teachers and children to co-construct learning experiences together.
3. Peer observation used as a means of sharing strategies and practices related to supporting children's agency and play-based approaches between and among teachers. Framed within a context of professional development, video recordings of peer observations would provide a rich source of data for teachers and facilitate analysis of their practices both as observers and participants.
4. With schools having an important role to play in fostering parental involvement (Ashton et al., 2008; Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Queensland Government, 2015; Skouteris et al., 2012), it is recommended that creative strategies, such as those identified in the *Parent Community Engagement Framework* (Queensland Government,

2015) and the *Australian Family-School Partnerships Framework* (DEEWR, 2008), are used to facilitate schools in reaching out to all parents, rather than only those who are readily accessible to the classroom.

9.9 Future research possibilities

A number of opportunities for future research arise from this study.

1. The ethnographic approach of this study contributed a high volume of data for possible further examination and analysis. In the context of the findings reported in Paper 1, further investigation of teacher-child talk could explore the language that teachers use in their interactions with children as they frame classroom activities and practices.
2. This study identified ways in which the researcher stance as learner in child-researcher interactions supported children's stances as expert informants of their everyday practices in the classroom. In the context of findings reported in Paper 3, investigation of child-adult interactions in other social structures presents opportunities to further explore interactional strategies to support children's participation as experts in their everyday worlds.
3. This study identified differences between adult-centric agendas and child-centric agendas in educational settings. This finding asks: where is the child perspective in other contexts involving child-adult interactions? For example, in a recent visit to a newly constructed children's hospital I wondered if children's perspectives were reflected in the décor and layout of the hospital, and how children's perspectives might inform the services and stakeholder practices that they engage with across disciplines.
4. The introduction in 2016 of the *Age Appropriate Pedagogies* program (DET, 2016a), and the re-construction of Prep as a compulsory year of schooling from 2017 represent significant education reforms in Queensland's early years of primary school. Further potential reforms arising out of the QCAA (2016b) review of the *Australian Curriculum* in Queensland also are likely to impact on children's experiences in Prep. It is critical during this period of significant education reform that opportunities are made available for children to communicate their perspectives on matters affecting their daily lives, and that genuine opportunities are made available for children's perspectives to inform education policy and practice.

5. Further research presents opportunities to understand children's perspectives and experiences on a national level, and could facilitate the leveraging of rich resources and synergising of best practice from across the country. While this study has focused on the Queensland context, the introduction of the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) across the country provides, for the first time, a common curriculum between the states and territories. While curriculum and pedagogy resources supporting the implementation of the *Australian Curriculum* have been developed by each state and territory's own education department, the universality of the curriculum itself creates increased relevance for national stakeholders regarding education research. For example, research with children in Western Australian on their perspectives and experiences of pre-primary (the first year of compulsory schooling in WA) would have increased relevance in the Queensland context since the national rollout of the *Australian Curriculum*.
6. Children's perspectives of play and their experiences in Prep have been the central focus of this study. However, this study also has shown the importance and value of the views of other stakeholders such as parents, teachers and school leaders. As we consider how best to engage and motivate children at school, further research into the views of those stakeholders may provide additional opportunities to illuminate education policy and practice.

9.10 Chapter summary

The ethnographic approach of the study, framed by the sociology of childhood, facilitated rich descriptions of children's perspectives and classroom experiences in Queensland's Prep. As well as children's perspectives, conversations were held with parents and the teacher in the setting to understanding holistically the context for children's perspectives and experiences, and ways to support children in their learning.

This study stands to influence policy and professional practice in early childhood education settings by contributing nuanced and complex understandings of children's perspectives and experiences. Findings contribute rich understandings of what is important to children in school, and the classroom experiences and activities that they value. These findings have theoretical and practical significance for educators and policy makers across international early childhood education settings. This thesis contributes knowledge about the ways in which children's agency influences their engagement in classroom practices, as well

as their participation in research. The thesis identifies practical ways in which children's agency and participation in their practices can be facilitated and supported by teachers, professionals, parents and researchers working with children across social structures.

In the context of increasing pressure on play in education settings, this study supports educators and policy makers to understand what is important to children in school, and the factors that influence children's perspectives and experiences. It is hoped that the perspectives and experiences of the children in this study will encourage and foster communication, collaboration and partnerships amongst early childhood stakeholders, and within the wider community, about the validity and importance of agentic play-based learning for children in early childhood settings. It is also hoped that space is created for children, as the stakeholders most impacted by education policy agendas, to have a greater say on matters affecting their lives.

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Appendix A

QUT Research Ethics Application Approval

-----Original Message-----

From: QUT Research Ethics Unit
Sent: Wednesday, 2 April 2014 12:30 PM
To: Lyndal O'Gorman; Susan Danby; Helen Breathnach; Helen Breathnach
Cc: Janette Lamb
Subject: Ethics Application Approval -- 1400000238

Dear Dr Lyndal O'Gorman and Mrs Helen Breathnach

Project Title: Play in the Preparatory Year: Children's perspectives

Ethics Category: Human - Low Risk
Approval Number: 1400000238
Approved Until: 2/04/2016 (subject to receipt of satisfactory progress reports)

We are pleased to advise that your application has been reviewed and confirmed as meeting the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

I can therefore confirm that your application is APPROVED.

If you require a formal approval certificate please advise via reply email.

CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

Please ensure you and all other team members read through and understand all UHREC conditions of approval prior to commencing any data collection:

- > Standard: Please see attached or go to www.research.qut.edu.au/ethics/humans/stdconditions.jsp
- > Specific: None apply

Decisions related to low risk ethical review are subject to ratification at the next available UHREC meeting. You will only be contacted again in relation to this matter if UHREC raises any additional questions or concerns.

Whilst the data collection of your project has received QUT ethical clearance, the decision to commence and authority to commence may be dependent on factors beyond the remit of the QUT ethics review process. For example, your research may need ethics clearance from other organisations or permissions from other organisations to access staff. Therefore the proposed data collection should not commence until you have satisfied these requirements.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have any queries.

We wish you all the best with your research.

Kind regards

Janette Lamb on behalf of the Chair UHREC Research Ethics Unit | Office of Research | Level 4 88
Musk Avenue, Kelvin Grove | Queensland University of Technology
p: +61 7 3138 5123 | e: ethicscontact@qut.edu.au | w: www.research.qut.edu.au/ethics/

Appendix B

DETE Research Ethics Application Approval



Department of
Education, Training
and Employment

13 June 2014

Helen Breathnach

Dear Mrs Breathnach

Thank you for your application seeking approval to conduct research titled *Play in the preparatory year: Children's perspective* in Queensland State schools. I wish to advise that your application to invite research participants to be involved in your study has been approved. This letter gives you approval to approach potential research participants only.

You may approach principals of the schools nominated in your application and invite them to participate in your research project. In the first instance, please provide principals of these schools with the attached letter which provides important information to help inform their decision about whether they wish to participate in this study. Your approval is conditional upon provision of this letter to each of the school principals you have nominated (you may need to photocopy the attached letter to provide sufficient copies for all principals).

As detailed in the Department's research guidelines the following applies to the study:

- You need to obtain consent from the relevant principals before your research project can commence.
- Principals have the right to decline participation if they consider that the research will cause undue disruption to educational programs in their schools.
- Principals have the right to monitor any research activities conducted in their facilities and can withdraw their support at any time.

This approval has been granted on the basis of the information you have provided in your research proposal and is subject to the conditions detailed below.

- Perusal of and adherence to the Department's standard *Terms and Conditions of Approval to Conduct Research* in Departmental sites is required as outlined in the document at: http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/research/terms_conditions.pdf
- Any changes required by your institution's ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education, Training and Employment for consideration before you proceed.
- Any variations to the research proposal as originally submitted, including changes to data collection, additional research undertaken with the data, or publication based on the data beyond what is normally associated with academic studies, should be submitted to the research officer via email. Significant variations will require the submission of a new application.
- Papers and articles intended for publication that are based on data collected from Queensland state schools and/or Departmental sites should be provided to the Department for comment before release.

Education House
30 Mary Street Brisbane 4000
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Website www.dete.qld.gov.au
ABN 76 337 613 647

- Under no circumstances should any publications disclose the names of individuals or schools.
- You are required to contact the Department if you are contacted by the media about research activities conducted on Departmental sites or if you intend to issue a media release about the study.
- At the conclusion of your study you are required to provide this Office and principals of participating schools with a summary of your research results and any associated published papers or materials in hard copy. You are also requested to submit the documents in electronic format, or provide a link to an online location if possible, to research.stratpol@dete.qld.gov.au. **Failure to provide a report on your research will preclude you from undertaking any future research in Queensland State schools.**

Please note that this letter constitutes approval to invite principals and teachers to participate in the research project as outlined in your research application. This approval does not constitute ethics approval or support for the general and commercial use of an intervention or curriculum program, software program or other enterprise that you may be evaluating as part of your research.

Research Services values your input into the research application process and is seeking your responses through the enclosed short feedback form. It is hoped that this feedback will enable Research Services to effectively assess whether its processes are efficiently streamlined, transparent and mutually beneficial to all stakeholders.

Should you require further information on the research application process, please feel free to contact me, Rebecca Libke, Principal Research Officer, Strategic Policy and Intergovernmental Relations on (07) 3034 5932. Please quote the file number 550/27/1454 in future correspondence.

I wish your study every success.

Yours sincerely



Rebecca Libke
Research Services
Strategic Policy and Intergovernmental Relations
Trim ref: 14/196919

Attachment: Principals letter

Appendix C

Teacher/teacher assistant participant information and consent form

	PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT – Teachers/Teacher Assistants –
Play in the Preparatory Year: Children's perspectives QUT Ethics Approval Number 140000238	

RESEARCH TEAM

Principal Researcher:	Helen Breathnach	PhD Candidate
Research Supervisors:	Dr Lyndal O'Gorman	Senior Lecturer
	Prof Susan Danby	Professor
School of Early Childhood, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology (QUT)		

DESCRIPTION

This project is being undertaken as part of a PhD study by Helen Breathnach from the School of Early Childhood, Faculty of Education at QUT under the supervision of Dr Lyndal O'Gorman and Professor Susan Danby. You are invited to participate in this project because you are currently a teaching member in a Preparatory Year classroom in a primary school in Queensland and because your school principal has consented to you being approached to participate in this study.

There have been significant changes in the education landscape in Australia in recent years and these changes may impact upon children's experiences of the Preparatory Year. Within early childhood, the concept of play is important. Recent research has investigated parents' and teachers' perspectives regarding play in the Preparatory Year, but less is known about children's perspectives and experiences of play within the context of recent curriculum and policy frameworks. This ethnographic study will investigate children's perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year in 2014. In seeking their perspectives, this study aims to position children as persons of value within the research agenda and contribute to research on children's perspectives of play.

PARTICIPATION

We invite you to participate in the study of children's perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year. We ask you to read the information and consent package and to consider your participation. If you agree to participate, the principal researcher will provide you with information and consent packages, and we ask that you send these home with the children in your class.

Once the children and their parents/guardians have returned their forms, the researcher will arrange to visit the classroom in consultation with you. Researcher visits will occur one to two days per week until the end of the 2014 school year, or as mutually agreed upon by you and the researcher. During the visits, the researcher will video record observations of children engaging in play and learning activities. The aim of the video-recording is to capture, as naturally as possible, children's experiences and interactions regarding play with peers and/or adults, including teachers and teacher assistants. Conversations between the children and the researcher will also be video-recorded. All members of the classroom, including teachers, teacher assistants, parents and children will be asked to provide their consent to participate in the study. Only those who have provided consent will be filmed. Also, we are inviting children to provide examples of activities such as photocopies of writing and drawing, and photographs of activities that relate to the study.

Interactions will be video recorded discreetly so that there will be minimal impact. Participants are free to withdraw at any moment without penalty and to stop recording if ever they wish to do so. Participants are ensured confidentiality through secure storage of data and de-identification of transcribed data.

You can withdraw from the study at any time during data collection and do not have to give a reason for doing so. There would be no pressure to continue. Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. Any identifiable information already obtained would not be used in data analysis or publication. Your decision to participate, or not participate, will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT or with your school.

EXPECTED BENEFITS

The findings of this study will help us to understand children's experiences and their perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year. The findings will also contribute new knowledge, insight and understanding of children's perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year. The findings are important for people working with young children, including teachers, researchers, and those responsible for curriculum and pedagogy development in early childhood and primary settings. The data and findings will be discussed within a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis and also published in academic and professional journals. There will be presentations using extracts from the videos and audio recordings at academic and professional conferences and seminars, and in teaching contexts.

RISKS

There are minimal risks associated with your participation in this project. The focus of the research is on children's perspectives of their everyday classroom experiences. Data collection will take place in participants' everyday contexts, that of the school, by an experienced early childhood professional and researcher.

Minor risks may be related to:

1. Confidentiality. Video recorded data of the participants will be handled ethically. Interactions will be video and audio recorded discreetly so that there will be minimal impact. Participants' anonymity will be maintained by assigning pseudonyms in the transcription process. Informed consent will be obtained before collecting video recorded data. Participants will be given the option to request their faces be blurred and voices altered.
2. Persons who have not given consent could inadvertently be filmed during video data collection. To manage this, if for any reason that person happens to come into the frame of the video footage, their picture will be blurred out, and data collected will not be used in data analysis or publication.
3. Possible inconvenience for the teacher or disruption to classroom activities when children are involved in video-recorded activities with the researcher. To manage this, activities with the researcher will be conducted at times convenient for the teacher. Also, while the teacher is engaged in class activities with the children, the researcher will assume the role of a "quiet observer" to minimise any disruption caused by her presence.

The researcher is a registered teacher with the Queensland College of Teachers. As such, she is exempt from holding a Blue Card and has been issued with an Exemption Card from the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Your school or classroom will not be identified. The video recorded data will be analysed and transcribed by the principal researcher for the study. Once transcribed, all identifying information (such as personal names and place names) will be changed. The findings will be written up part of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis, and for publication in academic and professional journals. There will be presentations using extracts from the videos and audio recordings at academic and professional conferences, seminars, and in teaching contexts. The data collected in this study may also be used in future comparative research studies. During this period, the data will be kept in securely locked filing cabinets and on computers with passwords accessible only by the research team.

This project involves video recordings. Confidentiality will be maintained and you should be aware that:

- All comments and responses will be treated confidentially unless required by law.
- Only the research team will have access to the video recordings during the transcription and analysis phase.
- Electronic copies of original video recordings and transcripts will be stored on password protected computers, accessible only by the research team.
- Hard copies of consent forms and original video recordings, transcripts and drawings will be stored by the principal researcher in securely locked filing cabinets, accessible only by the research team.
- The video recordings may be used after completion of the project in comparative research studies or as instructional aides. This includes using the video recordings for conference presentations, teacher professional development, research training and research and teaching publications. You have the option to request that your face be blurred or your voice digitally altered to maintain anonymity.
- It is not possible to participate in this study without being video recorded.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

To indicate your willingness for your school to participate in this study, please complete the attached consent form and return it to the principal researcher: h.breathnach@qut.edu.au.

QUESTIONS / FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

If have any questions or require further information about the study please contact one of the research team members below.

Helen Breathnach
07 3138 9884
h.breathnach@qut.edu.au

Dr Lyndal O'Gorman
07 3138 3621
lm.ogorman@qut.edu.au

Prof Susan Danby
07 3138 3547
s.danby@qut.edu.au

CONCERNS / COMPLAINTS REGARDING THE CONDUCT OF THE PROJECT

QUT is committed to research integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. However, if you do have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project you may contact the QUT Research Ethics Unit on 07 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au. The QUT Research Ethics Unit is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an impartial manner.

Thank you for helping with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

	CONSENT FORM FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT – Teachers/Teacher Assistants –
Play in the Preparatory Year: Children's perspectives QUT Ethics Approval Number 140000238	

RESEARCH TEAM CONTACTS

Helen Breathnach 07 3138 9884 h.breathnach@qut.edu.au	Dr Lyndal O'Gorman 07 3138 3621 lm.ogorman@qut.edu.au	Prof Susan Danby 07 3138 3547 s.danby@qut.edu.au
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STATEMENT OF CONSENT

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this project.
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw your consent at any time, without comment or penalty.
- Understand that you can contact the Research Ethics Unit on 07 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project.
- Understand that the project will include video recordings and consent to this.
- Agree to participate in the project.

If you have any concerns regarding the video recording and wish to have your face blurred or voice digitally altered in the video recordings, please contact the principal researcher on 07 3138 9884 or h.breathnach@qut.edu.au.

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Please return this sheet to the principal researcher: h.breathnach@qut.edu.au

Appendix D

School principal participant information and consent form

	PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT – School Principal –
Play in the Preparatory Year: Children's perspectives QUT Ethics Approval Number 140000238	
RESEARCH TEAM	
Principal Researcher:	Helen Breathnach PhD Candidate Dr Lyndal O'Gorman Senior Lecturer Prof Susan Danby Professor School of Early Childhood, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology (QUT)
DESCRIPTION	
<p>This project is being undertaken as part of a PhD study by Helen Breathnach from the School of Early Childhood, Faculty of Education at QUT under the supervision of Dr Lyndal O'Gorman and Professor Susan Danby. You are invited to participate in this project because you are currently a principal of a primary school in Queensland.</p> <p>There have been significant changes in the education landscape in Australia in recent years and these changes may impact upon children's experiences of the Preparatory Year. Within early childhood, the concept of play is important. Recent research has investigated parents' and teachers' perspectives regarding play in the Preparatory Year, but less is known about children's perspectives and experiences of play within the context of recent curriculum and policy frameworks. This ethnographic study will investigate children's perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year in 2014. In seeking their perspectives, this study aims to position children as persons of value within the research agenda and contribute to research on children's perspectives of play.</p>	
PARTICIPATION	
<p>We would like to invite your school to participate in the study of children's perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year. Your participation will involve taking the time to read this information and providing consent for the Preparatory Year teacher and classroom of children at the school to be approached to participate in this study.</p> <p>You can withdraw from the study at any time during data collection and do not have to give a reason for doing so. There would be no pressure to continue. Your school's participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Any identifiable information already obtained would not be used in data analysis or publication. Your decision for the school to participate, or not participate, will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT or the school.</p> <p>For the school, participation in this study will involve the classroom teacher reading the information and consent package and agreeing to participate. The principal researcher will provide the participating classroom teacher with information and consent packages to be sent home with the children.</p> <p>Once the children and their parents/guardians have provided consent, the researcher will arrange to visit the classroom in consultation with the teacher. Researcher visits will occur one to two days per week until the end of the 2014 school year, or as mutually agreed upon by the teacher and the researcher. During the visits, the researcher will video record observations of children and teachers engaging in play and learning activities. Interactions between the researcher, teacher and children that relate to this study will also be video-recorded. All members of the classroom, including teachers, teaching assistants, parents and children will be asked to provide their consent to participate in the study. Only those who have provided consent will be filmed. Also, we are inviting children to provide examples of activities such as photocopies of writing and drawing and photographs of activities that relate to the study.</p> <p>Interactions will be video recorded discreetly so that there will be minimal impact. Participants are free to withdraw at any moment without penalty and to stop recording if ever they wish to do so. Participants are ensured confidentiality through secure storage of data and de-identification of transcribed data.</p>	
EXPECTED BENEFITS	
<p>The findings of this study will help us to understand children's experiences and their perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year. The findings will also contribute new knowledge, insight and understanding of children's perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year. The findings are important for people working with young children, including teachers, researchers, and those responsible for curriculum and pedagogy development in early childhood and primary settings. The findings will be written up as part of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis and also for publication in academic and professional journals. There will be presentations using extracts from the videos and audio recordings at academic and professional conferences, seminars, and in teaching contexts.</p>	

RISKS

There are minimal risks associated with your participation in this project. The focus of the research is on children's perspectives of everyday experiences. The data collection will take place in participants' everyday contexts, that of the school, by an experienced early childhood professional and researcher.

Minor risks may be related to:

1. Confidentiality. Video recorded data of the participants will be handled ethically. Interactions will be video and audio recorded discreetly so that there will be minimal impact. Participants' anonymity will be maintained by assigning pseudonyms in the transcription process. Informed consent will be obtained before collecting video recorded data. Participants will be given the option to request their faces be blurred and voices altered.
2. Persons who have not given consent could inadvertently be filmed during video data collection. To manage this, if for any reason that person happens to come into the frame of the video footage, their picture will be blurred out, and data collected will not be used in data analysis or publication.
3. Possible inconvenience for the teacher or disruption to classroom activities when children are involved in video-recorded activities with the researcher. To manage this, activities with the researcher will be conducted at times convenient for the teacher. Also, while the teacher is engaged in class activities with the children, the researcher will assume the role of a "quiet observer" to minimise any disruption caused by her presence.

The researcher is a registered teacher with the Queensland College of Teachers. As such, she is exempt from holding a Blue Card and has been issued with an Exemption Card from the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Your school will not be identified. The video recorded data will be analysed and transcribed by the principal researcher for the study. Consent forms and raw data (i.e. video recordings and children's drawings) will be kept in securely locked filing cabinets and on computers with passwords. These will only be able to be accessed by the research team. When the recordings are transcribed, all identifying information (such as personal names and place names) will be changed. Teachers and parents can request that visual records are distorted so that participants are unrecognisable when excerpts are presented for educational, professional teaching or research purposes.

The findings will be written up part of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis, and for publication in academic and professional journals. There will be presentations using extracts from the videos and audio recordings at academic and professional conferences, seminars, and in teaching contexts. The data collected in this study may also be used in future comparative research studies. During this period, the data will be kept in securely locked filing cabinets and on computers with passwords accessible only by the research team.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

To indicate your willingness for your school to participate in this study, please complete the attached consent form and return it to the principal researcher at h.breathnach@qut.edu.au.

QUESTIONS / FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

If have any questions or require further information about the study please contact one of the research team members below.

Helen Breathnach
07 3138 9884
h.breathnach@qut.edu.au

Dr Lyndal O'Gorman
07 3138 3621
lm.ogorman@qut.edu.au

Prof Susan Danby
07 3138 3547
s.danby@qut.edu.au

CONCERNS / COMPLAINTS REGARDING THE CONDUCT OF THE PROJECT

QUT is committed to research integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. However, if you do have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project you may contact the QUT Research Ethics Unit on 07 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au. The QUT Research Ethics Unit is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an impartial manner.

Thank you for helping with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

 Queensland University of Technology Brisbane Australia	CONSENT FORM FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT – School Principal –
Play in the Preparatory Year: Children's perspectives QUT Ethics Approval Number 140000238	

RESEARCH TEAM CONTACTS

Helen Breathnach
07 3138 9884
h.breathnach@qut.edu.au

Dr Lyndal O’Gorman
07 3138 3621
lm.ogorman@qut.edu.au

Prof Susan Danby
07 3138 3547
s.danby@qut.edu.au

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this project.
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw your consent at any time, without comment or penalty.
- Understand that you can contact the Research Ethics Unit on 07 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project.
- Understand that the project will include video recordings and consent to this.
- Agree for your school to participate in the project.

Name _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Please return this sheet to the principal researcher: h.breathnach@qut.edu.au

Appendix E

Parents/guardians of children participant information and consent form

	PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT – Parents/Guardians of children –
Play in the Preparatory Year: Children's perspectives QUT Ethics Approval Number 140000238	

RESEARCH TEAM

Principal Researcher:	Helen Breathnach	PhD Candidate
Research Supervisors:	Dr Lyndal O'Gorman	Senior Lecturer
	Prof Susan Danby	Professor
	School of Early Childhood, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology (QUT)	

DESCRIPTION

This project is being undertaken as part of a PhD study by Helen Breathnach from the School of Early Childhood, Faculty of Education at QUT under the supervision of Dr Lyndal O'Gorman and Professor Susan Danby. Your child is invited to participate in this project because of their enrolment in the Preparatory Year in 2014.

There have been significant changes in the education landscape in Australia in recent years and these changes may impact upon children's experiences of the Preparatory Year. Within early childhood, the concept of play is important. Recent research has investigated parents' and teachers' perspectives regarding play in the Preparatory Year, but less is known about children's perspectives and experiences of play within the context of recent curriculum and policy frameworks. This ethnographic study will investigate children's perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year in 2014. In seeking their perspectives, this study aims to position children as persons of value within the research agenda and contribute to research on children's perspectives of play.

PARTICIPATION

We invite you to agree to your child's participation in the study of children's perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year. We are asking for your consent for your child to participate as they are currently a member of the Preparatory Year class in which the study will take place. You can withdraw your child from the study at any time during data collection and do not have to give a reason for doing so. There would be no pressure to continue.

Your child's participation in this project is entirely voluntary. Any identifiable information already obtained would not be used in data analysis or publication. Your decision for your child to participate, or not participate, will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with QUT or the school. If you agree for your child to participate, your participation will first involve talking the time to read this information and providing consent for your child to participate in the study. We ask you to read and discuss the consent script with your child.

The study will involve video recording in your child's classroom setting. The aim of video recording is to capture, as naturally as possible, children's interactions as they engage in play and learning activities. The type of questions that your child may be asked include:

- What do you like about Prep?
- What kinds of things do you learn in Prep?
- When/how do you play in Prep?

It is important that everyone who is captured on camera has provided consent. The principal researcher will visit your child's classroom one to two days per week until the end of the 2014 school year, video recording the children's interactions in activities, and their conversations with the researcher regarding their experiences of play. Photographs will also be taken of artefacts, such as classroom materials, constructions and children's drawings that relate to the focus of the study. Children will also be invited to participate in drawing activities that relate to the study. All participants are free to withdraw at any moment without penalty and to stop recording if ever they wish to do so. Participants are ensured confidentiality through secure storage of data and de-identification of transcribed data.

EXPECTED BENEFITS

The findings of this study will help us to understand children's experiences and their perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year. The findings will also contribute new knowledge, insight and understanding of children's perspectives of play in the Preparatory Year. The findings are important for people working with young children, including teachers, researchers, and those responsible for curriculum development in early childhood and primary settings. The findings will be written up as part of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis and also for publication in academic and professional journals. There will be presentations using extracts from the videos and audio recordings at academic and professional conferences, seminars, and in teaching contexts.

RISKS

There are minimal risks associated with your child's participation in this project. This is considered a "low risk" study because your child's participation will have no further risks than the potential risks that are faced during participation in school and the classroom. However, should your child become distressed during video recording, there is the option to have the camera turned off and withdraw from the study.

Other minor risks may be related to:

1. Feelings of anxiety. Your child may experience discomfort as a result of their participation in conversations with the researcher who will, initially, be unfamiliar to them. This risk will be minimised by ensuring that research activities with your child will be carried out in children's spaces, such as play areas. This is to create a feeling of familiarity with your child and to build trust and respect. Your child's continued consent will be negotiated throughout the research process with provision for your child to opt-out at any time without question. QUT provides for limited free psychology, family therapy or counselling services for research participants of QUT projects who may experience discomfort or distress as a result of their participation in the research. Should you wish to access this service please contact the Clinic Receptionist of the QUT Psychology and Counselling Clinic on 3138 0999. Please indicate to the receptionist that your child is a research participant.
2. Confidentiality. Video recorded data of the children will be handled ethically and interactions recorded discreetly so that there will be minimal impact. Children's anonymity will be maintained by assigning pseudonyms in the transcription process. Informed consent will be obtained before collecting video recorded data. Parents will be given the option to request their children's faces be blurred and voices altered.
3. Persons who have not given consent could inadvertently be filmed during video data collection. To manage this, if for any reason that person happens to come into the frame of the video footage, their picture will be blurred out, and data collected will not be used in data analysis or publication.

During classroom visits, all school protocols will be followed by the researcher at all times. During interactions with the children, the researcher will respond as an early childhood teacher would. The researcher is a registered teacher with the Queensland College of Teachers. As such, she is exempt from holding a Blue Card and has been issued with an Exemption Card from the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Your child's classroom and school will not be identified. The video recorded data will be analysed and transcribed by the principal researcher for the study. Once transcribed, all identifying information (such as personal names and place names) will be changed. The findings will be written up part of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis, and for publication in academic and professional journals. There will be presentations using extracts from the videos and audio recordings at academic and professional conferences, seminars, and in teaching contexts. The data collected in this study may also be used in future comparative research studies. During this period, the data will be kept in securely locked filing cabinets and on computers with passwords accessible only by the research team.

This project involves video recordings. Confidentiality will be maintained and you should be aware that:

- All comments and responses will be treated confidentially unless required by law.
- Your child will have the opportunity to comment on their drawings and creative work prior to final inclusion.
- Only the research team will have access to the video recordings during the transcription and analysis phase.
- Electronic copies of original video recordings and transcripts will be stored on password protected computers, accessible only by the research team.
- Hard copies of consent forms and original video recordings, transcripts and drawings will be stored by the principal researcher in securely locked filing cabinets, accessible only by the research team.
- The video recordings may be used after completion of the project in comparative research studies or as instructional aides. This includes using the video recordings for conference presentations, teacher professional development, research training and research and teaching publications. You and your child have the option to request that their face be blurred or their voice digitally altered to maintain anonymity.
- It is not possible to participate in this study without being video recorded.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

If you consent to your child's participation in this study, please sign the attached written consent form. We also ask you to discuss with your child their agreement to participate in the study. If they agree to participate in the study, could you please ask them to sign the attached written child consent form. Ongoing consent will also be negotiated with your child throughout the study. Please return the consent forms to your classroom teacher.

QUESTIONS / FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROJECT

If have any questions or require further information about the study please contact one of the research team members below.

Helen Breathnach
07 3138 9884
h.breathnach@qut.edu.au

Dr Lyndal O'Gorman
07 3138 3621
lm.ogorman@qut.edu.au

Prof Susan Danby
07 3138 3547
s.danby@qut.edu.au

CONCERNS / COMPLAINTS REGARDING THE CONDUCT OF THE PROJECT

QUT is committed to research integrity and the ethical conduct of research projects. However, if you do have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project you may contact the QUT Research Ethics Unit on 07 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au. The QUT Research Ethics Unit is not connected with the research project and can facilitate a resolution to your concern in an impartial manner.

Thank you for helping with this research project. Please keep this sheet for your information.

	CONSENT FORM FOR QUT RESEARCH PROJECT – Parents/Guardians of children –
Play in the Preparatory Year: Children’s perspectives	
QUT Ethics Approval Number 14000002398	

RESEARCH TEAM CONTACTS

Helen Breathnach 07 3138 9884 h.breathnach@qut.edu.au	Dr Lyndal O’Gorman 07 3138 3621 lm.ogorman@qut.edu.au	Prof Susan Danby 07 3138 3547 s.danby@qut.edu.au
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STATEMENT OF CONSENT

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this project.
- Have had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw your consent at any time, without comment or penalty.
- Understand that your child is free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty.
- Understand that you can contact the Research Ethics Unit on 07 3138 5123 or email ethicscontact@qut.edu.au if you have concerns about the ethical conduct of the project.
- Have discussed the project with your child and what is required of them if participating.
- Understand that the project will include video recordings and consent to this.
- Agree to your child participating in the project.

If you have any concerns regarding the video recording and wish to have your child’s face blurred or voice digitally altered in the video recordings, please contact the principal researcher on 07 3138 9884 or h.breathnach@qut.edu.au.

Name of parent _____

Full name of child _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Please return this sheet to your classroom teacher

Appendix F

Child participant information and consent form

Consent form for QUT research project – Children

QUT Ethics Approval Number 1400000238



Hello,



My name is Helen.
I am from Queensland University of Technology.

I would like to find out what Prep is like and about all the things you do there.
I will be coming to your Classroom one or two days a week for six months.



I am filming the activities you do in your Class.
I will be talking to you about what you learn and the things that you like to do in Prep.

If you would like, you can also draw pictures of the things that you do in Prep.



I will write about the things that I have filmed.
I will tell other people about what children think about Prep and the kinds of things they do in Prep.

I will only film you if you say it is okay.
You can ask me to stop filming whenever you want.



Please tell me if you are happy to be in the project.

Tick **YES** or **NO**

YES I want to be in the project.

NO I don't want to be in the project.

Please write your name or make your special mark:

Thank you!

Please return this consent form to your classroom teacher

Appendix G

Information poster

QUT Ethics Approval Number 140000238



Hi everyone, my name is Helen Breathnach. I am a researcher with Queensland University of Technology. I have also worked as a Prep teacher in Queensland, and I am a mother of two young daughters who are both in primary school.

I am interested in how young children experience Prep and, in particular, play in Prep. In my research study at [REDACTED], children will participate by talking with me, sharing their drawings and allowing me to film their play.

Further information on my study has been sent home with your child. I would be very grateful if you could read this information and provide consent for your child to participate. I will also be seeking your child's consent to participate.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any aspect of the study, I would be more than happy to discuss those with you.

If both you and your child consent to their participation in the study, please return signed parent and child consent forms to [REDACTED] as soon as possible.

Thank you!

Appendix H

Question prompts for parent conversations

	Main Questions	Follow up Questions (if needed)
1	How do you define play?	Can you give examples?
2	Does your child play at home?	What does it look like? Are you involved in your child's play? Why? Are others involved in your child's play?
3	Does your child play in Prep?	How do you know? Have you witnessed it? Can you give examples? What does it look like? Does your child play alone, with other children, with adult involvement?
4	Does play have positive benefits for your child?	All play or only certain types? Can you give examples of how it benefits him/her?
5	Does play have negative consequences for your child?	Can you give examples of how it negatively affects him/her?
6	Do you expect play at home to be different from play at school?	Why? If yes, in what way?
7	What place do you think play has in a Prep classroom?	Inside/outside?

Appendix I

Sample descriptor page (2nd September 2014*) from Microsoft OneNote™ notebook

2nd September

03 September 2014
13:17

September 2nd

Teacher is reading a Mr Magee book with the children. She talks about the blackberry jam and that they will do a tasting later in the week.

Some of the children have brought their own Mr Magee books. Teacher holds them up and they look at the covers. She chooses one to read.

TA is organising an activity "I love my Dad because..." She and Teacher talk about the logistics of it. The children sit and wait. *Child* jostles for position and pushes in between *Child* and *Child*.



20140902114821
20140902 114839

Child gets up to look at the books.
Child: Sit down *Child*!



Child leaves early. The children say goodbye to him.

Teacher reads "Do not feed the animals". Teacher points out the sentence structure and that Mr Magee always wears the same clothes. She also points out the word "too".

They talk about why animals might not be able to eat certain things.

Child is passionate about animals and is very knowledgeable. She volunteers the word "omnivore". Teacher asks her what do you call an animal that eats plants? "Omnivore" (which is technically correct).

Teacher mouths "h" - *Child* offers "herbivore".

Print out Page 2

* Names have been removed



Teacher asks her "what do you call a meat eating animal?" "Carnivore"



Teacher: And what do you call an animal that eats both plants and meat? (no response). It's that word you just used. Omni.."

Child: Omnivore.

T: Good girl, that's very interesting information that *Child* has just shared with us.

Child sits up straight with pride and folds her arms. *Child* looks at her and smiles.

Print out Page 3



Teacher asks *Child* what's happening in the picture. *Child*: The parrot bites his finger and it bleeds.

Teacher tells the children that the beak of the bird "is the same material as our fingernails".

Child asks what a noticeboard is. Teacher asks *Child* to explain. Teacher points to it in the picture.



Child watches me videoing. Interesting, Teacher also regularly glances at me.

Child shouts out what will happen next. Teacher signals to zip his lips so he doesn't spoil the surprise.



Child frowns at *Child*.

Print out Page 4



Child covers his eyes at the next part of the story in anticipation - this is the part he was telling Teacher about.



Child: Child and me know this story.

Child gasps and puts his hand up to his mouth.



Using rising intonation with excitement in her voice, Teacher points out how the ellipses means the sentence isn't finished until the next page.

Child and Child put their hands up to her mouth. There are gasps in the group. Child, Child, Child and Child are kneeling up.

Print out Page 5



Teacher: We have one more rotation to do. Then we will have some inside time. *Child pumps his fists.*



Child bends backwards and looks at me videoing.



Teacher organises which group is going to which rotation. [Duplo, writing, work on the carpet, cups for father's day, cards for Dad.]

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Print out Page 6

Child glances up at me.



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I go to Child, Child, Child and Child who are putting letters on the magnetic board. Teacher is talking to the rest of the class.



I whisper: Are you doing work or play?

Child - Work

Child - work

H to Child: Is this work or play you're doing?

Child: Work. You didn't know!

H: I didn't know because it kind of looked like fun play.

Teacher calls the group away.

Child - we're doing some words first.

- Teacher asks me to go to another Prep classroom (taking Child and Child with me) to get another set of Duplo. Child, Child and I go the other classroom in the block next door. I don't know where I'm going so I ask them to show me and I'll follow them. When we go into the class, the teacher is sitting on the floor with her class engaged in an activity. I'm not sure she recognises me - I've seen her around lots of times. I introduce myself and ask to borrow the duplo sets which she points me to. When we get back, Teacher asks me to do the duplo spelling activity on the carpet.

I try to set the boxes up in the middle of everyone. I explain this is so that everyone can reach. I tell them to "move back" and "watch your toes".

Child goes to take a letter. Child tells him he can't because they are the end ones. She points to which ones are beginning ones and which ones are end ones.

Print out Page 7



The children look to me for help. I try and defer to have a go.
Child: I need a w.
H: Have a look for it.

Child spells out "work" with the duplo.

H to *Child*: So *Child*, is this work or is it play.

Child: play

Child: work. On Wednesday's we're doing work. We don't do work on Monday but only Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

Child is trying to spell "friend". She asks me if it's right. I tell her it's close, that she's missing a letter. (i). I tell her it's tricky because you can't really hear it.

Child comes around to look through the camera.

I ask the others if they know. They don't. So I tell her.

Child suggests to *Child* making "wombat" together.

Child leans in to them: I am.



Child watches on as the others sound out their words and take blocks.



H: So do you think this is work or play? *Child* says it's work because it's Tuesday and Tuesday is a work day.

Print out Page 8

Child: Yep.
H: What do you think?
Child: Monday isn't a work day. Not Monday.
Child: Actually it is a work day.
H: So if this happened on a Monday and Monday was a play day, would this be play?
Child: Yes.

- In trying to tease out what it's depending on a work day or play day, I don't think anyone is particularly interested. *Child* and *Child* are vying for blocks. *Child* still watches on.



She offers *Child* blocks but she doesn't take them.



Child suggests joining all the words together. *Child* doesn't like that idea. She wants to join hers and *Child's* words only - because of other *Child*.

Child - I hate my sister.
H: Oh you don't really do you?
Child: I really hate her (pointing). She really don't let me in her bedroom or *Child*. *Child's* B.
H: Oh really. Is she your sister?
Child: yes *Child:* our big sister.
Child: Those 2 are twins but their big sister is grown up.

Child: She's rubbish.
Child: She's the boss of her bedroom.

Do you and *Child* share a room?
Child: No. When we and *Child* were born and four we shared bedrooms and then we were 5 and we shared bedrooms too... *Child's* in our family but she's crazy.

H: They say that about me and my family too!

H: Who had wombat? Good job!

Some has made "van".
H: You say "ven", I say "vaan".
Child: I say "vahn" (trying to copy me!).
Child smiles a little - but she has remained an outsider in the group.
She gets up and leaves.

Child says something about *Child* and laughs. *Child* makes a face at him.



Child looks into the camera and sticks out her tongue.

Child and *Child* laugh, then *Child* does it.



Then they do it together. *Child* laughs.



Is this work or play now?

Child – play!

Child – working.

Child comes back.

Child points - they're pl... those two. Those two are playing (indicating to *Child* and *Child*), we're working (her and *Child*).

The conversation gets interrupted as *Child* starts to tickle my toes.

The girls blow raspberries into the camera.



The girls come up close to the camera. I move it on to a shelf "so it's not disturbing us".

Child: can you find an "n" for me please.

I pick up a "u" thinking it was an "n". I ask what the difference is between the two. *Child* explains it to me.

I offer lots of praise as they make words. "You are so good at making words you guys".

I sound out "brown" with *Child*.

Child – I made the word brown. Hey! I maded the word brown.



H: Are you sure this isn't a Grade 1 or a Grade 2 class?

Child: No.

Child: Prep!

Child: It's Prep.

H: You're spelling is sensational!

Child spells "egg". *Child* grabs it from him. *Child:* Hey! And he reaches across to take it back.

H: I love eggs. Do you like eggs?

Child: No.

H: You don't like eggs?

Child: Yeah I don't like eggs. I tried eggs and it was...(ugh!)

Print out Page 11



The children start making their names.

H: Whose going to make "Helen".

Child: You have to.

H: No.

Child: Write Helen.

H: the fastest name maker makes my name.

Child: Who?

H: Whoever is the fastest.

Child: I am!

H: Whoever makes their name first. Quick!



Child pushes Child out of the way.

Child is first.

Child: I can't make it.

H: Yes you can!

Child and Child want to make it.

I help Child sound out "shout" (she had spelled it showt)

Child spells my name but incorrectly (Hellen). I try to give her clues to spell it properly. I can see she is disappointed at not having got it right straight away.

Child comes over and asks me if I can spell his name. His distracting me from Child has upset her. I didn't notice but the camera picks up on her face dropping as I talk to him about spelling a word.



Child takes blocks out of the wrong tray – he wants to use a blend at the end. Child and Child get angry. I try to calm them down "relax, relax, gentle hands".



Teacher calls for the activity to end. The children tidy up the blocks. I ask *Child* how she spelled my name.

Child: Hi...

Zane steps in front and her face begins to drop.



I look around *Child* and spell it for her.

H: Next time! She smiles.



Child asks me to tie her laces really small.

H: I hate when my laces are long.

Child comes over: I can tie a bow.

H: Can you? You guys are so clever in this class.

Child comes over. I notice his hair cut and tell him its very stylish.

He tells me his "nine" cut it.

H: who's your nine?

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Child: It's his grandma.

Child comes over and says that Teacher said they are having inside play and they need to take off their shoes for their circus.
H: Were you not playing at the tables?

Child: No.

H: What were you doing at the tables?

Before he can answer, *Child* comes over very close to me.
She asks me what her name is.

H: *Child*...



Child: What's my really end name?

H: I've no idea.

Child: Do you know what my second name is?

H: It's *Child*.

Child gives me the first and last letters of her name.

H: *Child*?

Child: Yes! *Child*.

Child: (pointing) camera



Child and *Child* get into trouble in the background for trick acting.

Child to Teacher – I said stop it *Child*. I don't like it.

Child is looking around the back of the camera.

Child: I can see my hand.

I'm sitting on a chair and a number of children (*Child*, *Child*, *Child*, *Child*) are around me.

Child comes over and sits very close holding on to me. I try and distract them by asking what we're doing now.



H: Let's all sit on the ground so that everybody can sit next to everybody.



Child: and everybody can sit next to Helen!

Child and Child move closer and *Child and Child* hug me.

Child - Can you help us do the circus?

H: I'll help everybody. How about that?

Child cheers.

Child: could you help us first?

Child reaches in to touch the camera arm, watched by *Child*.



H: (Whispering) don't touch the camera.

Child looks into the lens.



Child: Are you going to sit at the back? (so she can sit beside me).
H: Yes. I'm going to sit on a chair so you guys can concentrate on [Teacher].

Teacher and children sing a counting (using hands) song.



Teacher points out that a blink is a double wink (referenced in the song). Teacher talks to TA about the next activity.



Child and Child talk about winking. *Child* watches me.

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Teacher moves to the whiteboard so I take her seat (now at the back of the group). *Child* watches me.



Child smiles at me whilst singing.



Child glances around.



Child keeps looking up at me (not the camera) smiling.



He puts on an extra special effort before he looks around - as if performing for me.

They sing/say "Five Little Monkeys jumping on the bed". Teacher points out how the numbers are getting small - "less".

Teacher opens up the Learning Place Prep Maths on the whiteboard.



Five little monkeys sitting in a tree. Once the music starts the children start to wiggle and clap to it.



Teacher and the children sing and do the actions to the music, counting down.



Teacher thanks the children for joining in. She tells them that "rhyming is really important for learning how to read, maths and the amazing writing we are doing".

Child: And for Naplan.

M: Oh yes, and for Naplan. Very important. And then there's also QCS. Don't forget QCS. So much to do when you grow up.

- It is interesting that Teacher mentions this because it is a Year 12 exam - much more "irrelevant" to the children than NAPLAN which they will do in 3 years time. Is there a suggestion that doing NAPLAN means the children will be grown up?

Teacher uses her hands to indicate how much time the children have for inside play. "Yesterday we had quite a generous amount of time.



T: My hands can't be as wide today. They are middle sized.



Teacher talks about how crowded things got in the play area and the children need to talk. *Child* tells Teacher how many people are in their area now. She wants *Child* to come out.

Teacher suggests the children play alongside each other but in two separate areas so that it is not as crowded.

If you're in an area and you don't think people are cooperating, then you need to get an adult. Of course you can often solve it yourself by talking. We never solve things by snatching. We always talk about things.

Child starts to have a meltdown, crying.
Teacher tells everyone to listen. "*Child* can you hear anybody else crying?"



Is there any reason for *Child* to be crying?
Children: No.

Teacher explains that the group is talking to see how we can play with our friends with some on one side and some on the other.

Teacher sends the original castle group off and calls the other group over to sort out the *Child* issue.



Child gives me money.

Me: Is this real money or fake money.
Child: Fake.

Me: I was hoping it was real!

Child, *Child*, *Child*, and *Child* have an argument over resources.
Child gives [it] to *Child*.

H: That's such a nice thing to do. That's lovely. Well done.

Teacher comes over to the girls: There doesn't seem to be a lot of cooperation today. There seems to be lots of grabbing. Look at your friends *Child*, is anyone else crying?

The boys (*Child*, *Child*, *Child*, *Child*, *Child*, *Child*, *Child*) start practicing and planning for their circus.

I asked them if they remembered the girls' performance and reminded them they needed a presenter and that everyone needs to decide what they're doing.

Me: You need to get your skates on.

Child: no we're taking our shoes off.

I help *Child* write a sign for "circus".

Child: *Child* is doing my job.

H: Remember when the girls were doing it there were lots of jugglers.

H: Have you guys talked to each other and made an agreement?

Yeess, nooo

Print out Page 21

H: I think you need to talk and be sure that you all know what you're doing.

The boys are focused on what they themselves are doing.

Child: We're all doing the same thing.

Child: Have you ever been to a circus? All the performers don't do the same thing.

Oscar - always the voice of reason!!

H: That's not my decision. That's something you need to work out.

H: Child, move into the shade [\[02:23\]](#)

Child: Watch this Helen [\[02:24\]](#)! Helen watch this!

Child calls me "Helen!!" to show me his moves.



H: What? Show me! Ooh!

Everyone starts spilling out from the classroom. Child gets cross : "Everyone!"

They're coming out to watch.

Child: It's not finished yet!

The boys have been using an egg timer so they know how much time they have to practice.



TA gets everyone to face her so they can't see the practice. TA is telling the children that she can stay longer this afternoon because her daughter has been dropped off and she doesn't have an appointment. TA says she takes her daughter to a speech pathologist.

Meanwhile, the boys are still practising.



Child: I do the speech!
H: Do you?
Child: And *Child*... sometimes I get too tired (rubbing his head).



Child: Time is out!



TA: Where would you like us to sit?
Child tries to organise the audience: Can everyone just sit there! *Child!*



Child: Child, you need to be separating from Child.



Teacher takes control -thanks the audience for coming - and reminds the boys what the girls did last week.

Child asks me to help him put the bags on the grass.



As the boys get themselves set up, Teacher reminds them again of what the girls did last week.

With scaffolding from Teacher, Child welcomes everyone and introduces his performers.



All the boys come out for a clap.



Teacher reminds *Child* to face the audience when he is speaking to them.

Child and *Child* start tightrope walking but *Child* pushes *Child* back until he is finished.



Child is talking about when the movie starts he "will blow my whistle".



Child goes next. Child is about to start but stops, realising he should wait.



Once Child finishes, Child starts.



Before Child can finish, Child pulls the rope away.



Teacher: I think *Child* is still doing his act.
Child tries to continue.



Teacher: *Child* you are so great not to have fallen off. *Child*, how about you lie it down.



Teacher: That was death-defying.

The children clap after each performance.

Child: Now it's me.

This involves *Child* running and throwing himself on the ground.



Child and *Child* get excited and start tumbling and running around.

Child introduces *Child*, *Child* and *Child* "doing the funny stuff". And *Child* is doing the hula hoop".

Child tumbles around.

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In the background, *Child* and *Child* are doing their thing. Teacher asks if we can see it again. "Oh the steady hand as *Child*..."



Lots of 'woah's from the audience.

Child is introducing the next performance - he and *Child*. But *Child* and the others are continuing on in the background.



Child takes a couple of gos. He falls once or twice. The boys are getting giddy now.



Child tries to bring things back under control. "No talking while it's on. I told people before."



Teacher tells *Child* to introduce his jugglers - that once they are done the circus is finished.
Child introduces himself. "Now I'm doing some jumping".
Teacher: Are you introducing anyone else?
Child: No.



Child asks if Teacher can get some music because they are doing a dance. Teacher says it will take too long - that they can do it next time. *Child* suggests doing the dance without the music.

Child introduces "a funny dance".



The audience laughs.

While he struggles in social situations, *Child* is very good at tumbling and jumping.

Teacher tells the boys to stand in a line, bow and the audience claps.



Teacher tells me about an article she saw in The Australian.

Teacher and I laugh about some of the funny things *Child* said ('I told the audience no talking!').

Teacher talks about *Child* being on the spectrum and how the different boys struggle – *Child* may repeat next year. I ask if it's a problem in particular with boys or just generally.

Child, *Child* and *Child* ask me what I am doing. I talk to *Child* and *Child* about the consent forms and I give *Child* another form to take home.

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Child asks me to help him make a costume.

What kind of costume I ask?

Mandy calls the children to the carpet.

Child – are you going now?

H: It was too short today. Next time I'll try to stay for longer.

Child – stay for the whole day!

Me: I'll try.

I talk to Teacher about handing out consent forms. She reckons I won't get one for *Child*.

September 2nd Reflections

Children were really excited to see me. Boys ran up and asked me if I would be involved in their play. *Child* and co were doing a circus and some of the girls (*Child* & *Child*) were doing a castle which they asked me to be part of.

I said I'd be part of everybody's play.

They identified me immediately as someone who played with them and it reminded me of a conversation with *Child* when I asked her if she played with Teacher and she said no. Even though I'm an adult, I'm different and see as somebody who can play with them.

During carpet time when children were counting, Teacher was commenting how good they were and what might be expected in year 1 and *Child* mentioned Naplan.

Teacher and I talked about the boys and some of their difficulties – Teacher commented about *Child* and how young he was - "he's just a baby" - and might repeat Prep. Speech issues that *Child* has.

The group of *Child*, *Child*, *Child*, *Child*, *Child* - talking about them in the context of having gross, fine motor, speech and sensory issues...appropriate types of learning? In the context of some of the social and emotional problems that boys in particular in Prep are experiencing – does Teacher consciously structure her class to provide alternate or less structured activities so that kids like this can cope?

Out of a class of 25, children with lots of difficulties – representative of average Prep class? What's appropriate for these kids in terms of learning environments?