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Two schools of thought on play: Rethinking Ontario's educational reform

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Two schools of thought on play: Rethinking Ontario's educational reform

by

Josie Cozzolino-Lesperance

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Two schools of thought on play: Rethinking Ontario's educational reform

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ABSTRACT

The government of Ontario introduced the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten

(FDELK) program policy initiative in September 2010 in all elementary schools across

the province. This study investigated early childhood educators' and kindergarten

teachers' perceptions and practices of play-based learning in Ontario FDELK classrooms

with particular concentration given to their interpretations of the policy, documents, and

dissemination strategies. A critical analysis was conducted deconstructing play and

exposing its complexity, attributed significance, and risen issues. The results of this study

indicate a partition among practitioners and a policy/practice divide with

compartmentalization of play and learning confounded by severable variables: localizing

play, image of the child, educator's role, compound effects, and dissemination strategies.

A plan of action is suggested underscoring the importance of rethinking roles and

relationships amongst educators, students, and play and learning in order to sustain policy

effectiveness.

Keywords: Play; play-based learning; Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten program;
early childhood education; teaching and learning through play; playful pedagogy; early
years curriculum; educators' perceptions and practices

DEDICATION

To Jason – for your patience, sacrifice, and time shared in playing with ideas.
Your gift for divergent thinking guided me throughout this process
and continues to inspire me.

To Isabella, Serafina, Paolo, and Domenica – for your playful nature
revealing the many possibilities of play

To Athena & Zeus – for teaching me how to play again

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

> Some have argued that play is children's work but I would say that it is far more
> than this. Play is self-actualisation, a holistic exploration of who and what they are
> and know and of who and what they might become. (Broadhead, 2004, p. 89)

Play is a dynamic, contextual, and complex construct, which is influenced by

individual beliefs, education, era, and culture. It is a concept that, despite its complexity

and diversity, has evolved to be recognized as an integral component to children's

learning and development. The above statement by Broadhead captures the contemporary

perspectives of play advocated in current play policy initiatives, which address nourishing

the whole child and building his/her developing identities and capabilities through play.

Play is acknowledged as an empowering vehicle for children to make new discoveries

and reach new possibilities, as they become "protagonists" (Edwards, Gandini, &

Forman, 1998, p. 80) in their learning of themselves and their world around them. Its

essence and power is prevalent in childhood and flourishes throughout the lifespan into

adulthood where it continues to spark joy, resiliency, and innovation (Brown & Vaughn,

2009).

However, regardless of play's learning potential, it is often misconstrued as being

simplistic in nature. The misconception of simplicity in play may be due to a lack of

understanding of its complexity. Therefore, it is important that research portray the

complex nature of play in an accurate and comprehensive manner to best inform those

most involved in play practices and current play policy. Additionally, it is critical that

policies on play-based learning reflect current research and knowledge of play and be

clear and thorough in their description and implementation strategies of play pedagogy to

truly be effective and impart real change in society's attitude towards play.

To ensure an effective play pedagogy, policies need to clearly articulate what is meant by play, the importance of play, recognize play as a specific right for all children (Stegelin, 2005), facilitate equal access to quality play environments in local communities (Hampshire Play Policy Forum 2002, as cited in Stegelin, 2005), and clearly outline implementation strategies. Furthermore, the policy must provide sufficient resources and support for practitioners in order that they can deliver a program based on solid knowledge and a shared understanding of play.

Play policy directives are based on research addressing the need for play-based learning environments (Stegelin, 2005). In response to the research evidence asserting the importance of play in the early years for healthy child development and positive outcomes later in life (Brown & Vaughan, 2009; Dewey, 1910, 1916; Ginsburg, 2007; Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Lillemyr, 2009; Malaguzzi, 1998; McCain & Mustard, 1999; McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pascal, 2009b; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1976) countries and municipalities have taken different initiatives and approaches in educating young children. In 2010, to ensure that all children get the best start in life, the Government of Ontario made a commitment to invest in the education of its youngest students by delivering the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten program to all four- and five-year old children across the province.

To assist in the future success of this program and ultimately positive outcomes for children, it is essential to engage in a critical analysis of the complexity of play and the perceptions of major actors to determine where problems in implementation exist and where modifications are required. My journey begins with this chapter where I provide an overview of the Full – Day Early Learning – Kindergarten program in Ontario. This is

followed by the research problem that undergirds this study. Next, the rationale for pursuing this research is presented. This is accompanied by the research questions guiding the investigation and the significance of the study for key stakeholders. Lastly, the theoretical framework grounding the inquiry is discussed.

Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program

The Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten (FDELK) program is a new Ontario policy initiative that was put into practice by the McGuinty government in September 2010. It is an educational directive that was implemented over a gradual five-year phase, across all schools in the province with full operation achieved in 2014 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013a). The evidence in a recent Ontario study (Janus et al., 2012) of 690 children found that students in FDELK are better prepared for Grade 1 with reduced risks in language and cognitive development, social competence, communication skills, and general knowledge. This new strategy, which provides young students between the ages of four and five with full-day, every day (school day) learning, serves to build a stronger education system and enhance opportunities for all children.

To assist in the implementation of FDELK, Premier Dalton McGuinty appointed Dr. Charles Pascal as the Special Advisor of Early Learning in 2007 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009a). Pascal was asked to develop a comprehensive plan of action that would best implement the government's Early Learning vision. As a result, he created the report, *With Our Best Future in Mind* (Pascal, 2009b), which proposed a set of recommendations to fulfill the vision of seamless early learning and care. Within these recommendations, Pascal proposed an Early Learning program with a concentration on play-based learning and an Early Learning – Kindergarten (EL – K) team comprised of a

kindergarten teacher and early childhood educator[1] (ECE). In a joint effort, the EL-K

team works together to provide four- and five- year old children with the best possible

start by incorporating play-based learning experiences in the curriculum.

The program consists of a core day program that runs during regular school hours

and an extended day program that runs before and after school. A kindergarten teacher

and an early childhood educator deliver the core day program and an early childhood

educator is responsible for the extended before- and after- school program (Ontario

Ministry of Education, 2010b). The major goals and objectives of the program are

outlined in the FDELK program curriculum document and are as follows: (1) To build a

strong foundation in the early years through integrated learning (2) To provide a play-

based learning environment (3) To help children make a smoother transition to Grade 1,

and (4) To improve children's success in school and in their future (Ontario Ministry of

Education, 2010a).

These goals and objectives are the driving force behind the rest of the FDELK

document, which details different roles for the learning community (child, teachers/early

childhood educators, parents, principals, community partners), teaching and learning

approaches, the learning areas and expectations, assessment/evaluation/reporting

procedures, and considerations for program planning (Ontario Ministry of Education,

2010a). It is a resource and guide for teachers, early childhood educators, and

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[1] Early childhood educator is a "registered member of the College of Early Childhood Educators" (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2011, p. 29) who engages in the practice of early childhood education as defined in the Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007. The practice consists of planning, assessment, and delivery of inclusive play-based learning and care programs for preschool and school aged children, including children with special needs (Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007). Early childhood educators work in a variety of settings including, but not limited to, child care centres, kindergarten classrooms, Ontario Early Years Centres, Head Start programs, home child care programs, pediatric playrooms (http://www.college-ece.ca/en/Public/Pages/About-ECEs.aspx) colleges, universities, and government settings (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2011).

educational administrators as it provides a framework for implementing curriculum and pedagogy to meet the goals of the program.

However, program implementation has encountered some problems at the micro-level with kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators experiencing challenges (Gibson & Pelletier, 2011) in play-based learning practices (Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 1997). This claim also comes from my own experiences working as an early childhood educator in the FDELK program. My in-depth discussions with colleagues and administration, and attendance at board workshops reveal recurring themes of ambiguity, tension, and discontent generated from this new program policy, particularly in the area of play-based pedagogy. If these issues are not addressed, I feel strongly that they might adversely affect the future success and sustainability of the program and, ultimately, positive outcomes for children.

Rationale

The motivation for my research comes from my teaching experience as an early childhood educator in the FDELK program. I have worked nineteen years in the early childhood profession with two years serving as a director of an early learning center and three and half years teaching in the FDELK program. I experienced first-hand the tensions that exist in perceptions and practices. There are several areas of glaring differences. The key difference is in the area of practitioners' philosophical and pedagogical perspectives on play and learning. Particularly, the difference in practitioners' views of what play-based learning means, its importance in a school context, and how it should be put into practice has created complexity and tension in team teaching.

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Next, the established hierarchal teaching structure (Gibson & Pelletier, 2011) in which a majority of kindergarten teachers are monopolizing the delivery of the program through a "pedagogization of play" (Rogers, 2010, p. 163), is another area of contention. In this respect, play is trivialized simply as a tool to achieve specific learning outcomes rather than being valued as learning itself. It is controlled by the teacher and restricted by prescribed learning outcomes. The infinite possibilities of play can never be fully realized if it is constrained within an unequal partnership and a lack of belief in the power of play. How then can this program work if an appreciation and respect for play is not mutually shared; if despite the research, some kindergarten teachers resist or refuse the reform and have the ability to do so because they are granted teacher autonomy?

Early childhood educators understand the importance and implementation of play because much of their educational training and field experience is based on this philosophical approach. However, for kindergarten teachers, their advocacy and implementation of play rests on personal beliefs, childhood experiences, professional development opportunities, and individual research.

Therefore, it is imperative that policy dissemination efforts related to play-based learning establish a common mindset among educators in order to merge differences, ease confusion, and relieve tensions. Educators should be challenged to rethink play and learning; to branch out from their linear scope of teaching and learning in a school context and take a risk in fostering creative and innovative thinkers. After all, the scientific, technological, mathematical, and engineering fields we value in Western culture require a capacity for playing with ideas, products, and behaviours. It is unusual, then, that we do not readily nurture or take seriously the playful thoughts and actions that have been the catalyst to some of our greatest achievements in human progress (Bergen,

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2009). Take away this high form of research of what we've come to know as play

(Einstein, n.d.) and you take away the significant contributions of such playful minds as

Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Leonardo Da Vinci, Mozart, and Steve Jobs.

Imagine the gaps left to fill if we do not embrace play and elements of playful

thinking such as inquiry, imagination, creative development, problem solving,

adaptability, and innovation. Our education system hinges on these 21st century skills and

the idea of "new millennium learners" (Yelland et al., 2008, p. 1) and leaders, but out of

comfort, fear, uncertainty, and pressure educators fall back to traditional patterns of

pedagogy. It is for all these reasons that I was driven to investigate play, expose its

complexity and importance, and study it in a political and educational context.

The Present Study

As a new policy initiative, there is an absence in the research literature addressing

practitioners' perceptions, practices, and interpretations of play-based learning

specifically in the Ontario Full-Day Early Learning Kindergarten program. The aim of

the current exploratory study is to examine early childhood educators' and kindergarten

teachers' expressed perceptions and practices of play-based learning in Ontario FDELK

classrooms, particularly their interpretations of the policy, curriculum document, and

messages conveyed to them via administration, workshops, and meetings. The following

core issues are explored: 1. (a) multiple meanings of play, (b) interplay between theories

of play and practices of educators, (c) play-work dichotomy, (d) cultural influences, and

2. policy constraints and discourse.

Research Questions

The questions guiding this research attempt to investigate kindergarten teachers'
and early childhood educators' perceptions, beliefs and behaviours regarding play-based
learning within the context of their classrooms. Specifically, the questions will target the
similarities and differences among the practitioners' perceptions and practices of play-
based learning and draw comparisons between their interpretations of dissemination
sources, such as policy documents, workshops, meetings, and administration. The
questions that will be addressed in the current study are as follows:

1. What are early childhood educators' and kindergarten teachers' perceptions and
   practices of play-based learning?

2. What is the divide between policy and practice?

   i. How is the concept of play-based learning and method of implementation
       being conveyed in Ontario's new policy initiative via the FDELK program
       document, Pascal's document, workshops, meetings, and by
       administration?

   ii. How do the practitioners' interpretations of play-based learning from these
       sources compare to their own perceptions and practices?

Significance of Study

The issues investigated in the study are relevant to educators, school
administrators, and the Ministry of Education. Educators will have the opportunity to
improve their practices of play pedagogy as they reflect and examine their perceptions
and practices. They may gain a more comprehensive understanding of play-based
learning that facilitates providing their students with more fulfilling play-based
experiences in the classroom. Also, delineating front-line practitioners' interpretations of

play-based learning according to the new policy initiative will give administrators,

advisors, and policymakers insight into the direction needed to best support educators in

exercising this new policy and, ultimately, give students the best start in school.

Additionally, establishing a common understanding of play-based learning and methods

of implementation among all policy stakeholders will create more continuity in the

program, more positive outcomes for students, and policy effectiveness and sustainability.

My projected plan of action for dissemination proposed in the discussion chapter

ventures to shift knowledge and practices of play-based learning, dissolve ambiguity and

tension in team teaching, and alleviate program fragmentation.

Theoretical Framework

Grounding the inquiry is Bernstein's theory of visible and invisible pedagogy.

Bernstein (2003b, 2003c) posits that *visible pedagogy* is based on performance with

students fulfilling certain criteria of subject matter and learning that are explicitly defined

and differentiated (strong classification). In addition, the teacher holds explicit control

with knowledge transmitted through explicit pedagogic practices and students required to

comply with teacher rules and expectations (strong framing). Thus, classification refers

to the degree of control in subject/knowledge maintenance and differentiation, whereas

framing pertains to the degree of control in communication including "selection,

organization, and pacing of knowledge transmitted and received" (Bernstein, 2003a, p.

159).

By contrast, *invisible pedagogy* is recognized through weak classification and

weak framing where subject boundaries are merged and teachers have relinquished more

control to students (McInnes, Howard, Miles, & Crowley, 2011). The emphasis is placed

on child-centredness with children free to choose their own activities and explore in a

context that the teacher has arranged. The teacher's implicit control allows students more autonomy and power over themselves and their environment, thereby reducing the importance on transmitting and acquiring specific skills (King, 1979) determined by the educator and more on individual creativity and competence.

According to Bernstein (2003c), visible pedagogy underscores transmission-performance and invisible pedagogy highlights acquisition-competence. In the transmission-performance model, subjects are clearly and explicitly defined with educators controlling the communication structure by providing children with information in a unidirectional modality. Performance is assessed and graded according to the extent that a child's activity or product visibly meets the criteria.

In the acquisition-competence model, boundaries between subject areas are blurred and children are given more freedom and control over their learning and environment with educators acting as facilitators. The emphasis is not to assess through grading or an external product, but instead to evaluate children's competencies such as what they already know and skills they possess when they are engaged in an activity (Bernstein, 2003c).

In my analysis, both models parallel the current situation in FDELK classrooms whereby the new policy initiative, advocating an invisible pedagogy, clashes with the traditional method of visible pedagogy that has been exercised over many years in the education system and across many kindergarten classrooms. The progressive mode of pedagogy (Dewey, 1916), reflected in Ontario's play-based policy directive, conflicts with the standards of education that teachers have become accustomed to complying to that leads to poor implementation and/or resistance to the educational reform. As well, challenges are posed to early childhood educators in practicing a familiar pedagogy in an

unfamiliar territory with tighter regulations, standards, and expectations. For example, the PALS (Peer Assisted Learning Strategies) program is a regulatory program implemented in kindergarten to enhance early literacy development within a peer-assisted framework. In kindergarten, the focus is on phonological awareness, sound-letter correspondence, decoding, and fluency. The mode of delivery is recitation of sounds and words in whole group instruction with scripted lessons initiated by the teacher, followed by the same task completed with a peer (Fuchs et al., 2001).

This stipulated PALS program that runs approximately forty minutes models Bernstein's visible pedagogy in a multitude of ways. The lessons are presented in a prescribed manner and controlled by the teacher in terms of organization and pacing. Students are given explicit instructions on how to carry out their worksheet lesson with their peer. In addition, students are tested at certain periods throughout the year with scores benchmarked. ECEs may struggle with these stringent programs as they contradict their philosophical approach to active, hands on learning.

Adding complexity to the theoretical framework is Ball's (2006) theory of "policy as text" (p. 44) and "policy as discourse" (p. 48). Ball (2006) claims that policy is not just text or discourse but both. They are implicit in each other such that discourse creates a framework that constrains what is thought, talked, and written about and the text is set within this framework that limits but does not determine all possibilities of agency. In other words, discourse constructs and allows "what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where, and with what authority" (p. 48). Text, whether written or verbal, are interpretations, representations, and calls to action that are continually changing based on peoples' values, histories, experiences, interests, and aims. However, the language, vocabulary, and concepts articulated by verbal and written text

have already been pre-established through the confinements of discourse. Unveiling policy and pedagogical discourse and the complex nature between dissemination and implementation reveals a pedogogy/policy gap in the FDELK program.

Policy dissemination is the process of informing stakeholders of the policy in question (Delaney, 2002). It is the process of "knowledge transfer" (Knott & Wildavsky, 1980, p. 545) where individuals are made aware and develop a good understanding of the policy based on written text and verbal communication. Available through multiple sources – policy/government documents, research papers, conferences, workshops, training, brochures, media resources (Yale Center for Clinical Investigation, n.d.) – effective dissemination strategies equip major actors with the right skills, knowledge and understanding to accept public policy and actively and effectively put public policy into practice that result in policy effectiveness and real change.

The FDELK program policy and With Our Best Future In Mind report have gone through multiple dissemination strategies evidenced through documents, research papers, brochures, and media resources (Alexandrowicz, Barbini, & Hines, 2010; Babbage, 2009; Bill 242, Full Day Early Learning Statute Law Amendment Act, 2010; Grieve, Sturtevant Srnivisan, 2011; Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009b, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012, 2013a; OSSTF/FEESO, 2012; Pascal 2009b). However, while informing the public on the intricacies of the policy, the FDELK document and Pascal's report have provided those most involved in implementation, early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers, with only vague descriptions in their roles, responsibilities, and pedagogic implementation of play-based learning. The "policy as text" (Ball, 2006, p. 44), in its generality, and the existing discourse between early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers have manifested

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into the classroom creating an unbalanced partnership (Gibson & Pelletier, 2011) and a

muddled curriculum of which play-based learning is entrenched.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

There was a time when play was king and early childhood was its domain.
(Paley, 2004, p. 4)

The central premise resonating throughout this study is the importance of play in all its complexity within the realm of childhood. From historical context to current values, beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of thinking, we hold onto certain images of play, education and its participants that affect the teaching and learning that takes place in our classrooms. The policy influences discussed in this chapter demonstrate the course taken to exalt play in early childhood education classrooms. Several significant pioneers that have laid the groundwork for early childhood education and influenced our perceptions of play are Froebel, Dewey, Montessori, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Malaguzzi. Despite the variances amongst their approaches, the common principle shared was that children are active participants in their learning, which developed and took shape primarily through play (Bennett et al., 1997; Elkind, 2007; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Great value was placed on play, as was the underlying faith in children's capabilities. The early pioneers had an image of the child that bestowed confidence and respect for children as they engaged in the complex construct of play.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to deconstruct play, exposing its complexity, paradoxical status, and the imperative of an operational definition for best delivery of the new kindergarten mandate; and, to reveal the issues generated from policy dissemination and implementation strategies. To achieve this objective I will investigate the construct of play in the following sections with particular focus on the importance of play, ambiguity of play, and cultural influences. In addition, the Full-Day Early Learning

Kindergarten policy and document will be examined with attention to policy influences, constraints and discourse.

Construct of Play

A review of the literature has revealed that there are multiple meanings of play (Cheng, 2010; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). In fact, it is a difficult term to universally define because it is a complex construct (Briggs & Hansen, 2012) that can mean different things to different people. Theorists across different time periods have contributed to this difficulty by postulating their own theories of the nature of play Further, educators develop their own definition of play as it relates to their philosophy, education, experiences, and aims in education.

Multiple interpretations and controversy in the field of early childhood education have arisen because play is "studied in different forms, contexts, times, and philosophical orientations" (Fung & Cheng, 2012, p. 19). However, amongst the different perspectives, there is consensus that play has value and is important for children's learning and development (Dewey, 1910; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1967, 1968). The following section addresses this belief and reinforces the competing notion that play is complex, critical, and the ideal way for learning and development. For the purpose of this research, Piaget and Vygotsky's theories will be the central focus because of their influential work on the role of play in children's learning and development.

The Importance of Play

The role of play in children's learning and development has been well documented in the literature (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Dewey, 1910, 1916; Elkind, 2007; Garvey, 1990; Golinkoff, Hirsch-Pasek, & Singer, 2006: Howard, 2010a; Johnson & Dinger, 2012; Lillemyr, 2009; Malaguzzi, 1998; Moyles, 1989; Myck-Wayne, 2010;

Oliver & Klugman, 2002, 2004; Piaget, 1962; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Singer, 2006; Vygotsky, 1967, 1978; Walsh et al., 2006; Wood, 2010a; Wood & Attfield, 2005; Zeece & Graul, 1990). Through play, children acquire new skills and learn about themselves, their culture, and the world around them (Wood & Bennett,1997; Zeece & Graul, 1990). They develop mastery over their bodies (Zeece & Gtaul, 1990), learn to cope with emotions in social situations, develop self-regulation, exercise language and numeracy skills, and learn the fine art of cooperation, empathy, and problem solving (Myck-Wayne, 2010, Briggs & Hansen, 2012). Play enables "possibility thinking" (Craft, McConnon, & Matthews, 2012, p. 48), the driving force behind creative thinking, innovation, imagination, and risk-taking (Craft et al., 2012). It provides young children with an opportunity to develop a sense of who they are, what they understand, and areas that require further inquiry for understanding. Due to children's natural curiosity and active exploration of their environment, play engages children, making it the most effective way for children to gain physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and creative benefits that enhance their development and learning capabilities.

Essentially, play engages the whole child optimizing learning opportunities in all areas of development – cognitively, physically, socially, emotionally (NCCA, 2007; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006), personally, linguistically, creatively, aesthetically, morally, and spiritually (NCCA, 2007). It is a personal journey of self-discovery that empowers children to embrace their uniqueness (Canning, 2007), interests, and potential as they actively interact with others and the environment.

However, with play introduced in the academic institution of school, its value to holistic development is often overlooked and undervalued in comparison to cognitive

development. As a result, it is being minimized or replaced by more academic curricula

such as "alphabet drills and quiet desk work" (Steinhauer, 2005, para. 6). Cognitive

development, such as literacy and math skills, is important but it is only one component

of human development (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006). The process of

compartmentalizing development into different components, with primary importance

given to certain areas, provides a fragmented view of learning and development and fails

to recognize the interplay between all areas. This narrow view compromises supporting

children's multiple needs and desires, and does not reveal a complete picture of students'

capabilities. In addition, it deters balance and does not capitalize on maximizing

students' potential. Adopting a "whole child approach" (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006,

p. 21) through play-based classrooms broadens the perspective on the value of play and

creates many possibilities for teaching and learning.

     In early education, play provides a natural context to enhance students' learning

as it engages the whole child in meaningful situations that are of interest to them.

Through personal interest and active involvement, students generate more motivation and

investment in their learning. They reach higher and pursue deeper learning because they

are genuinely interested in the topic that stems from their own experiences and

observations.

     The affective quality of play – enthusiasm, motivation, and willingness to engage

(Moyles, 1989; Wood & Bennett, 1997) separates play from other forms of pedagogy and

makes it an effective tool for teaching and learning. Lifter et al. (2011) expand on this

idea by suggesting that play provides engagement, context, and correlates to development

in other domains. Play promotes engagement and inclusion in natural settings through the

use of classroom materials and social interactions with peers and adults. It supports

developmentally appropriate and contextually relevant activities that stem from children's interests, choice, and skills (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith & McLean, 2005 as cited in Lifter et. al, 2011, p. 290). As well, play encourages a connection with all areas of development as children involve multiple domains in their playful experiences.

Theorists. Two important theorists who have influenced play research particularly in terms of children's development and learning are Jean Piaget and Lev S.Vygotsky. Piaget (1962) provides six criterions of play - orientation to behaviour, spontaneity, pleasure, lack of organization, freedom from conflicts, and overmotivation.

Piaget's influence in early childhood is based on his constructivist theory of learning and play, which is grounded in children's cognitive development (Lillemyr, 2009). Piaget's (1962) theory postulates that children construct their own knowledge of the world based on their active interactions with the environment. Children form schemas (mental representations) and through the adaptive processes of assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration, playing and learning occurs.

Assimilation occurs when children incorporate new information or experiences into their existing schemas by modifying the new information or by picking out certain aspects that correspond to their prior knowledge, thereby strengthening it. *Accommodation* is when children modify their existing schemas as a result of new information or experiences, thus creating new schemas. The lack of equilibrium or cognitive balance in accommodation motivates children to adapt until a state of equilibrium is reached and in this way learning occurs (Piaget, 1962).

According to Piaget (1962), play occurs only during assimilation where children repeat their behaviours "for the mere joy of mastering it" (p. 162). Thus, play and learning complement one another with play actively contributing to learning as children

alternate between both processes (Lilleymr, 2009: Wood & Attfield, 2005). Figure 2.1

illustrates that when children are exposed to new situations they assimilate the idea to fit

into their existing schema. They play with the idea through repetition and active

exploration until it fits into their prior knowledge and experiences. However, when the

new information cannot be fitted into existing schema children must accommodate and

adjust their thinking with new knowledge. Hence, play offers children the opportunity to

consolidate and strengthen what they already know, as well as, challenge them to learn

something new.
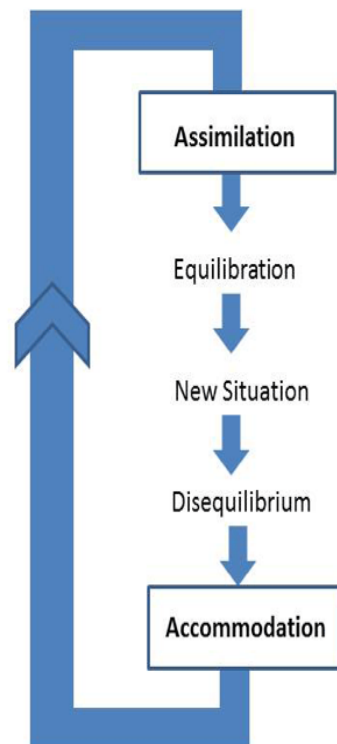
Figure 2.1. Theory of cognitive development. Source from "Jean Piaget" by Saul
McLeod, 2009. Retrieved from http://www.simplypsychology.org/piaget.html.

Piaget's concepts of active engagement and child-centered learning are

fundamental principles that underscore preschool and primary education classroom

practice. Primarily ideas such as: educators creating environments where children can experiment, create, and solve problems through active exploration and learning; children engaging in activities that they have initiated or that are of interest to them; and educators who are responsive and facilitate children's initiatives (Wood & Attfield, 2005).

However, Piaget did not advocate for intervention in children's learning. In fact, he proposed that learning is a solitary function with children internally constructing their own knowledge based on their interpretations and experiences in the environment coinciding with their age. In Piaget's view, if an individual were to impart their knowledge on a child before they were ready (age) it would prevent them from learning something and progressing to the next level of understanding (stage). Piaget's *ages and stages* model of development implies a reactive and passive role for teachers – where they are 'watching and waiting' for children to initiate experiences (Bennet et al., 1997; Dockett, 2011).

The social-constructivist theory of Vygotsky emphasizes a more proactive and complex role for teachers with teachers 'shaping and moulding' children's experiences (Bennett et al., 1997; Dockett, 2011). Vygotsky regarded social interactions with peers and adults as integral to the learning process as it helps children construct knowledge within a cultural framework (Bennett et al., 1997).

Communication in social interactions, particularly language, helps children acquire information and tools necessary for learning and development (Lillemyr, 2009). Play is a vehicle for socialization (Bruner, 1991 as cited in Bennet et al., p.12) as it propels children to use verbal and nonverbal communication to express their thoughts, needs, and desires. It also is social in origin because it provides a context for children to

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learn about roles, relationships, rules, and societal conventions (Bennet et al., 1997) with the assistance of an adult or "more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

In addition to the importance of language, Vygotsky (1978) also argued that learning occurs within a zone of proximal development (ZPD). See Figure 2.2. This represents the distance between the actual developmental level and the level of potential development with "functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation" (p.86). Thus, children can perform tasks on their own (actual level) except within the zone of proximal development, which requires assistance from a more skilled individual. Through teacher guidance or collaboration with peers children have an opportunity to master a task that they were not able to achieve on their own. By identifying a learner's ZPD and providing scaffolding, a teacher leads a child to his or her
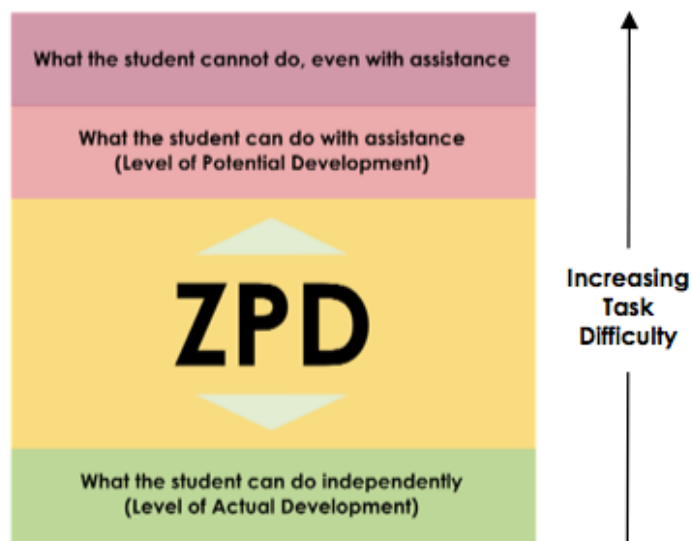
Figure 2.2 Zone of Proximal Development. From "Teaching in the Zone" by Angela Lui, 2012. Retrieved fromhttp://www.childrensprogress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/free-white-paper-vygotsky-zone-of-proximal-development-zpd-early-childhood.pdf

potential level, which is ahead of his or her present development (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Through the benefit of scaffolding and the child mastering the task, the scaffolding can be removed with the student completing the task independently (McLeod, 2010).

Play provides an opportunity to carry out the scaffolding, as its social context enables children to interact with others and learn from them. In addition, the motivation and incentives generated by play boosts students to move beyond their current level of development and understanding and into the zone of proximal development (Bennett et al., 1997). Vygotsky (1978) claimed that "play creates a zone of proximal development for the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age…in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (p.102). In play, students are motivated to learn because they are engaged in an activity that is self-initiated, self-chosen, and meaningful to them. Include the support and guidance of a teacher or peer and play becomes a powerful vehicle for students to learn and achieve their highest potential.

Both theories have different implications for classroom practice. Piaget's constructivist theory of learning and play opposes teacher-directed teaching and regards knowledge that children have constructed on their own, from interactions with the environment, as the most important form of knowledge (Lilleymr, 2009).

In contrast, Vygotsky's social-constructivist theory of learning places more emphasis on a social-cultural process where everything (social, historical, cultural, and biological) around children works together to influence children's learning and development (Wood & Attfield, 2005). This concept has prompted shifts in a new pedagogy of play in early childhood education programs that favours social interactions

and co-construction of knowledge, over solitary knowledge construction, with teachers holding a more active and complex role.

Educators' perceptions and practices of play-based learning. The importance of learning through play remains strong in the literature, however to fully address the nature of learning through play, it is argued that the nature of teaching through play must also be addressed (Bennett et al. 1997). Anchored in the nature of teaching is teacher's thinking, which "precedes and leads, to action" (Bennett et al., 1997, p. 19).

My intention is to investigate educators' perceptions of play and the importance they place on play as learning, which influence and guide the teaching practices within a kindergarten classroom. These perceptions are characterized by knowledge, thinking, attitudes, beliefs, theories, values, principles, and frames of reference (Bennett et al., 1997) comprised of culture, education, and experiences. Practices of play are also examined to determine if and how they coincide with educators' perceptions. By exploring the relationship between educators' perceptions and practices of play-based learning in the classroom, issues and concepts will be clarified leading to a more comprehensive understanding of play and its challenges.

The research (Bennett et al., 1997; Cheng, 2010; Cheng & Stimpson, 2004; Dockett, 2011; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Martlew, Stephen, Ellis, 2011; McInnes, et al., 2011; Ranz-Smith, 2007) demonstrates that educators continue "struggling in making sense of learning through play in the classroom" (Cheng & Stimpson, 2004, p. 341). Their ambivalence about play and pedagogy is amplified by conflicting perceptions of governing theories, the role of the teacher, image of the child, nature of learning, and constraints. As a result, uncertainty, doubt, and disaccord encumber pedagogical approaches leaving teachers and early childhood educators implementing an ineffectual

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play program for kindergarten students. The discussion that follows aims to demonstrate the disarray in perceptions and practices of play-based learning compounded by educators' beliefs, values, culture, and theories.

The two theories that are prevalent in education today are Piaget's cognitive constructivist theory and Vygotsky's social-constructivist theory. Both theories of cognitive development postulate their own beliefs on how children construct their knowledge and progress in their learning processes. Similarities and differences reveal key concepts and fundamental principles that influence teaching practices and beliefs on how children learn.

Both theorists argue that children play an active role in their learning through discovery and exploration. However, Piaget (1962) emphasized children constructing their own knowledge through their experiences and interactions with the environment, whereas Vygotsky (1978) placed significance on social interactions with others. In conjunction, Vygotsky (1978) believed that "learning and development are interrelated from the child's very first day of life" (p.84) with children "learning long before they attend school" (p.84). Thus, children come to school as competent individuals with skills and abilities variable due to familial cultural differences and innate predispostitions.

Piaget (1962), on the other hand, argued that development and maturation must precede learning with children having to move through universal stages before being able to acquire higher cognitive processes. Moving through the stages is an independent function with teachers 'watching and waiting' for children to initiate experiences (Bennet et al., 1997, Dockett, 2011). In contrast, Vygotsky's assertions on the importance of social interactions place teachers in the position of a guide where they participate in 'shaping and moulding' children's experiences (Bennet et al., 1997; Dockett, 2011). In

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comparing and contrasting both theorists' notions of children's cognitive development, similarities and differences will inevitably surface in kindergarten classrooms depending on the theory teachers choose to govern their play-based curriculum and pedagogies.

Differences in theories create tension among educators as they exercise their beliefs and philosophy in their role as a teacher. Some educators maintain an adherence to the Piagetian view that learning through play is achieved in a solitary fashion without the interference of an adult (Ranz-Smith, 2007). Whereas, other philosophies, such as the Reggio Emilia approach, embrace Vygotskian principles and perceive play and learning arising from collaboration, negotiation, and dialogue among students and teachers (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002).

In brief, the Reggio Emilia philosophy is an approach to early education that believes in a powerful image of the child as "competent, strong, inventive, and full of ideas" (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002, p. 11). It is a complex system that values the interrelationships of the environment, materials, people, and learning approaches (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002) in a co-constructive process of making meaning and building knowledge (Rinaldi, 2006).

Teachers following the Piagetian principles provide children with activities in their environment that allow physical manipulation of objects and mental manipulation of ideas, such as projects and experiments (Gredler, 2005 as cited in Woolfolk, Winne, Perry, & Shapka, 2009, p. 46). Focus is on discovery learning where teachers observe students in their play, rather than teaching didactically, to gain insight into their thinking strategies (Woolfolk et al., 2009). With this information they can create play opportunities for students that match their development and then, when ready, challenge their thinking to stimulate growth. In Piaget's (1972) words "What is desired is that the

teacher cease being a lecturer, satisfied with transmitting ready-made solutions; his role should rather be that of a mentor stimulating initiative and research" (p.16). Mentoring takes the form of encouraging students to ask their own questions and find their own solutions by using the resources made available to them.

With respect to Vygotsky, teachers are also regarded as a mentor or guide. However, they are also seen as a collaborator, facilitator and 'scaffolder' to children's learning. They "consider themselves to be partners in the process of learning" (Gandini, 1997, as cited in Hewett, 2001, p. 97) and value reciprocal exchanges in the co-construction of knowledge (Hewett, 2001) during play experiences. Aside from a partner and co-learner, the teacher's role as facilitator and 'scaffolder' places him or her in an active role to provide students with provocations and tools necessary to achieve their goals and advance their thought processes (Hewett, 2001).

Provocations are the means by which a teacher provokes children's thinking or further investigation of a topic of interest (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002). Provocations can come in the form of a book, an event, nature, a question from the teacher, or an area set out with materials. The purpose of the provocations is to spark interest, questions, conversations, ideas, and theories among students and teacher. In listening closely to the students, the teacher gains insight into their students' goals and level of abilities providing an opportunity to facilitate their students' learning according to their interests, capabilities, and current understandings by method of scaffolding.

In providing support and skilled assistance during playful experiences the teacher helps students master tasks that they are currently unable to master on their own by building on prior knowledge. Once new skills and concepts are internalized the teacher gradually decreases support to provide the student with more independence in developing

their expertise (Coffey, 2010, Wood & Attfield, 2005). In contrast to Piaget's theory, the Vygotskian model sets teachers out to be more actively involved in children's play and learning and carry out more complex strategies that reflect reciprocity in interactions in order to keep children's interest, motivation, and involvement in challenging tasks.

Each one of us holds an image of the child that stems from our own personal experiences as a child and our objective experiences in observing and working with children in the classroom. But, the strongest image of all is the cultural one that is shaped by the values and beliefs about what childhood is or what it should be (Fraser & Gestwick, 2002). In the North American context, young children are constructed as "immature, incomplete human beings at the beginning of a process of biologically determined development consisting of universal stages that will lead them to adulthood- and complete human status" (Moss, Dillon, & Statham, 2000, p. 240). These claims of childhood as incomplete and undeveloped produces an image of the "child in need" (Moss et al., 2000, p. 243) with no rightful position in society. Such an image of the child encourages a deficiency model of children as passive, dependent, and incompetent with minimal rights and capabilities because they have not reached "complete human status". However, this is not to say that all North American teachers accept or share such an image of the child, but it does propose that culture has an influence in shaping how we define children, which precedes our views of how children learn and, subsequently, how we teach them.

This image of the child in the North American context stands in sharp contrast to Reggio educators who, from its origins, behold the "the rich child" (Moss et al., 2000, p. 250) as strong, competent, rich in resources, and possessing rights. Their optimistic view demonstrates the confidence and respect they have for children as they engage them

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in play experiences and inquiry learning that they believe they are socially and cognitively capable to participate in and that they trust will unravel student potential, enhance student learning, build relationships, and contribute to knowledge.

Connected to the image of the child is the perception and belief of how children learn. Two proposed oppositional beliefs in learning according to Rogoff, Matusov, & White (1996) are transmission of knowledge and acquisition of knowledge. Learning as transmission is adult-led with the belief that knowledge is transferred to a child through direct instruction and demonstration from adults. Children play a passive role in this process of learning as they are viewed as 'in need' of receiving and storing information that adults dispense. Similar to Bernstein's theory of visible pedagogy, transmission is regulated and the context in which students learn is controlled.

Conversely, learning as acquisition is child-led with the belief that knowledge is acquired and extended through exploration and discovery (Rogoff et al., 1996). Pedagogy is invisible with implicit instruction and children are given more autonomy to reveal their competence and "unique nature" (Bernstein, 2003b, Class and the Invisible Pedagogy, para 1). Children are viewed as competent individuals capable of constructing their own knowledge through an active process, such as play. Thus, educators holding such beliefs about learning will provide play opportunities in their classrooms because they believe that children learn best by actively engaging in their learning. In contrast, educators who perceive learning as transmission will initiate a pedagogy where children are engaged in more passive activities carrying out instructions that have been designated by the teacher (Rogoff et al., 1996), such as completing worksheets and flashcard drills.

In the latter, educators have a curriculum perspective towards learning with focus given to meeting curriculum expectations through regulated instruction, individual

activity, and progress. In the former, educators have a play perspective with emphasis given to understanding and interpreting children's choices, meanings, and intentions (Wood, 2010b) as they engage in self-directed play. Early childhood educators, with a philosophy and educational background that encourages free play (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2012) embrace this perspective. Kindergarten teachers who are accustomed to planning lessons (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) according to curriculum document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b) expectations pay heed to a curriculum perspective that provides less time for play and more prescriptive attempts to teach.

Provisions for play in an educational context that underpins children's learning and development within a curriculum framework (Wood, 2010b) raises concerns for educators regarding constraints. Attitudinal constraints brought on by educators' perceptions and attitudes towards play impact on the provisions of a play pedagogy in the classroom, as do structural and functional constraints (Kagan, 1990 as cited in Dockett, 2011, p. 41). Structural constraints pertain to the structure of the learning environment, such as lack of enough time to cover the material, heavy workload (Fung & Cheng, 2012), not enough space or resources available, and curriculum expectations with teachers feeling that play interferes with achieving specific outcomes (Dockett, 2010). Functional constraints apply to functional elements in the school context, such as group dynamics requiring class management, minimal support from school administration and colleagues, parental expectations with some parents not valuing play as a means for learning (Dockett, 2011) or wanting to see evidence of academic achievement (Fung & Cheng, 2012), and top-down system pressures requiring accountability and reporting outcomes through assessments and high-stakes testing (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010).

Also, educators feel that even though they have received training on the theory of learning they have not had adequate training on the theory of play (McInnes et al., 2011). Therefore, they do not always understand how to plan for play (Bennet et al, 1997), how to shape play to fulfill school directives and the deep learning of children (Anning, 2010), or what their role is in such a pedagogy (Anning, 2010; Bennet et al., 1997).

The pedagogical approach that educators pursue is contingent on educators' perceptions of their role as a teacher, the image of the child, the nature of learning, and the perceived constraints. Play-based pedagogies range from child-initiated to teacher-initiated play. The former perspective regards play as non-directive and entirely child-centered with children planning their play and pursuing their interests. Learning is believed to occur spontaneously through free play without the interference of a teacher (Bennett et al., 1997; Gimitrova & Gimitrov, 2003). The latter perceives play to be work-oriented with the teacher playing the dominant role and directing children's activities (Ranz-Smith, 2007; Gimitrova & Gimitrov, 2003).

Implicit in both perspectives are characteristics of play as pleasurable, symbolic, active, voluntary, process-oriented, and self-motivating (Barblett, 2010) versus play as work, directed, product-oriented, and teacher motivated. These contrasting views of play create boundaries between work and play and conflict among practitioners leading to a play/work dichotomy. The challenge is creating a balance between these two competing pedagogies while maintaining continuity and progression in children's play experiences (Kelman & Lauchlan, 2010).

Play-work dichotomy. Play and work are often perceived as polar opposites (Rieber, 1996; Sue Rogers, 2011) with "learning through play" and "learning through work" being competing modes of instruction (Adelman as cited in Romero, 1989, p. 401). In Polito's

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(1994) ethnographic research, children and teachers articulate play to be optional, chosen, and undefined and work to be required, assigned, and defined. The play/work divide reveals differing characteristics, as well as, distinctions between the role of the teacher and student and child-initiated versus teacher-initiated activities (Bennett et al., 1997). These distinctions are expressed through teachers' and children's perceptions of play and work with play occurring with little adult involvement and under the child's control (Howard & McInnes, 2010; Romero, 1989). Activities labeled as play are seen as fun, easy, creative, pleasing, voluntary, and initiated by children. Play activities are devoid of any pressure or stress (Romero, 1989) because they focus on process (Papatheodorou, 2009) and do not demand an evaluation of an end product (Romero, 1989).

 In contrast, work activities are perceived as boring, tedious, uncreative, and "imposed on children against their will, interests and preferences" (Romero, 1989, p. 406). These tasks are considered stressful given that they target outcomes (Papatheodorou, 2009), are mandatory and evaluated (Romero, 1989). The focus is on performance, a visible pedagogy, that Bernstein suggests gives attention to the product itself. This is in opposition to play, a basic element of invisible pedagogy (Bernstein, 2003b), where educators focus on meanings within the child's activity or product as representations of children's learning and development, in essence their competency (Rogers & Lapping, 2012). Further dichotomizing the notion of work and play is the view that play is a waste of time in comparison to the important task of work (Golinkoff et al., 2006). Work is equated with learning and play is seen as something you do once work is completed. This division between work and play may prevent the integration of play into classroom practice (Rogers, 2011).

 To fully embrace play-based learning it is important to shift to a more blended

view of play recognizing that play and work are intertwined. Elkind (2007) articulates

that play, love, and work function together and when all three are involved in learning

and development, they are most effective. But, this requires more than just a mixed

pedagogy, where play is positioned in the outskirts and allowed to mix in the program

during free choice and reward time, while adult-directed activities take precedence

(Wood, 2007). It requires an integrated pedagogy, which is represented in the following

model (Figure 2.3).
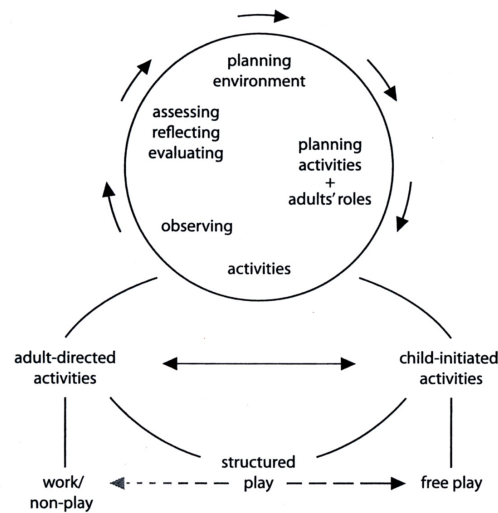
Figure 2.3 A model of integrated pedagogy. Source from "Developing Integrated
Pedagogical Approaches to Play and Learning" by E. Wood, 2010a, p. 21. In
P. Broadhead, J. Howard, & E. Wood (Eds.). Play and learning in the early years:
From research to practice. London, England: Sage.

An integrated pedagogy "combines the benefits of adult-directed and child –

initiated activities" (Wood, 2010a, p. 20). Educators move along a continuum and

develop a bi-directional relationship between work and play (Wood, 2007) allowing for

elements of playfulness and a flow of information between the two pedagogical zones of

adult-directed and child initiated activities. In the child-initiated zone, students engage in free play with little intervention from educators, no pressure for outcomes, and full choice and control over their play. In contrast, the adult-directed zone involves focused instruction with predetermined outcomes, more educator control, and no choice for the students (Wood, 2010a).

In looking at the centre of the continuum, structured play is a blend of the two zones with educators and students incorporating qualities and characteristics of both pedagogical zones. Hence, educators' may structure activities, with a playful orientation and a degree of flexibility in response to children's interests, capabilities, and knowledge. Likewise, children may choose activities that are more structured such as playing a game with rules or they may choose activities that are 'work-like' such as playing a mathematical game on the computer (Wood, 2013).

The interactions that take place between educators and students are responsive, flexible, and inform pedagogy with further planning occurring through a recursive cycle as demonstrated in Figure 2.3 (Wood, 2010a). Educators respond to children's initiated play by observing, reflecting, evaluating, extending interests and working theories, and returning to planning. Children's responses to adult-initiated activities are observed by educators and follow a similar pattern (Wood, 2013). Through shared observations, reflections, planning, and evaluations educators and students participate in a co-constructive process of teaching and learning, "where the focus is on the dynamic interactions of the people, resources, and activities in the setting" (Wood, 2010a, p. 12) rather than a "one way transmission of adult/more knowledgeable other to the child/learner" (Wood, 2013, p. 73).

Educators' perceptions of play-based learning and pedagogical strategies affect

their students' experiences in the classroom (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson, & Rogers, 2010) and ultimately their learning and development. Therefore, it is important for kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators to reach a consensus on *what* criteria constitutes play-based learning and *how* they plan to implement play in their classroom to optimize their students' learning. The starting point would be to understand play through the eyes of the players themselves – the children.

Children's perceptions. Educators' perceptions of play are based on what the act of play looks like. But, their views do not capture the full spirit of play, which also includes what it means and feels like to the students. Children associate certain characteristics with play, which differ from those associated with work. They use environmental and emotional cues in relation to an activity to help make play-work distinctions, as well as, to determine how playfully they will approach an activity (Howard & McInnes, 2010).

The study performed by Howard (2002) revealed that children differentiate between play and work according to *emotional cues* linked to positive affect (whether the activity is fun and its level of difficulty), choice and control, and *environmental cues* linked to space and constraint (where the activity takes place), nature of the activity (academic versus play materials, physical/not physical), skill development (process versus product), and teacher presence (Howard, 2002; Howard et al., 2002). Table 2.1 provides an overview of the emotional and environmental cues used by children with play encompassing activities that are freely chosen, voluntary, under children's control, easy, fun, occurring on the floor, little adult involvement, process oriented, and physical.

These cues in accordance with playfulness are the factors that children use to determine how play-like an activity is. Playfulness is an internal state consisting of

Table 2.1

Children Use to Distinguish Between Play and Work Activities

Play		Work	
Emotional cues	Environmental cues	Emotional cues	Environmental cues
Voluntary	On the floor	Compulsory	At a table
Under child's control	Lacks adult involvement	Under adult control	Includes adult involvement
Easy	No adult evaluation	Hard	Includes adult evaluation
Fun	Can be continued – focus on the process	Can be fun	Has to finish – focus on product
	Physical		Not physical

Note. From "Thinking through the challenge of a play-based curriculum: Increasing playfulness via co-construction" by J. Howard & K. McInnes, p. 35. . In J. Moyles (Ed.). *Thinking about play: Developing a reflective approach* (pp. 30-44). Berkshire, England: Open University Press.

qualities that children bring to an activity (Howard et al., 2002). Playfulness towards an activity maximizes learning potential (Howard, 2010b; Howard & McInnes 2010) because it is an attitude of the mind (Dewey, 1910) that harnesses enthusiasm, motivation, engagement (Howard & McInnes, 2010; Howard et al., 2002), focus (Howard & McInnes, 2010), and self-preservation (Howard, 2010b). These intrinsic qualities of play separate it from other activities (Howard, 2010b) and support learning (Howard & McInnes, 2010) with students performing better in playful environments than in formal environments (McInnes et al., 2011). Therefore, it is equally important to understand what children believe to be play and how their perceptions and feelings of playfulness develop (Howard et al., 2002) because their "perceptions shape expectations and… expectations influence participation and outcomes" (Georgeson & Payler, 2010, p. 36).

Overall, listening to children and working with their cues and notions of playfulness provides educators with a different lens of which to view play-based learning. It offers educators a new perspective on play that comes from the players themselves. Children's view of play persuades educators to reflect on their perceptions of play, their practice, and their role in a play-based classroom. From these reflections educators gain insight in centralizing play in the classroom and offering opportunities of playfulness in the curriculum that evoke enthusiasm, engagement, and motivation to learn.

Utilizing children's view of play to inform practice enables educators to create a playful environment that has meaning for children, thereby facilitating learning and development. Implicit in this idea, however, is that children's view of play and the meaning they derive from their play and their environment stem from cultural influences. In order to provide truly meaningful play experiences it is important for educators to understand play in relation to the culture of the children in the classroom. The importance of culture shaping interpretations of play is examined later in this chapter following a discussion on the ambiguity of play.

The Ambiguity of Play

The ambiguous nature of play first lies in its definition. There is no single, unified definition of play. In fact, play is described by Ailwood (2003) as "an elusive concept that refuses to be pinned down" (p. 288). The elusiveness of play has resulted in multiple meanings as theorists, philosophers, and educators struggle to achieve a shared understanding of play. Many definitions of play have been narrowed down to three classifications: categorization, criteria, and continuum (Howard, 2002; Howard, Bellin, & Rees, 2002; Howard & McInnes, 2010).

The categorical approach of play distinguishes play by type. According to Piaget (1962), play was discerned as functional, symbolic, or games with rules, which correspond to developmental stages (Howard, 2002; Howard & McInnes, 2010). Difficulties in adopting a categorical approach point to subjectivity and diversity (Howard, 2002). That is, children's progression through the stages of play is individual and the categories suggested do not encompass all types of play (Howard, 2002; Howard & McInnes, 2010).

The criteria approach focuses on certain behavioural and dispositional characteristics that are required to be present before an activity can constitute as play. Common criteria that have been proposed (Barblett, 2010; Zeece & Graul, 1990) are that play is (1) intrinsically motivated, (2) process-oriented, (3) voluntary and controlled by the child, (4) symbolic (pretense that is meaningful to the child), (5) active, (6) pleasurable, and (7) not bound by formal rules. However, a problem with the criteria approach is that not all characteristics will be present during an activity because play is context dependent and contexts vary (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Likewise, specific activities may be described as play despite the absence of one characteristic feature (Howard, 2002). Also, there are discrepancies as to whether certain features are characteristic of play. For example, Vygotsky (1978) claims that play does not always give pleasure to children and certain activities may provide more pleasure than play. Furthermore, pleasure is not restricted to play activities with children gaining pleasure also from work tasks (Brooker, 2011).

In response to these complexities, a continuum approach is posited by Pellegrini (1987) where children move along a continuum of "pure play" (p. 201) and "nonplay" (p. 201) depending on where their behaviour falls on the scale during a playful task. These

observable behaviours are compared to the list of criteria. The more criteria that are displayed by children's behaviours the more play-like an activity is deemed to be (Howard & McInnes, 2010). Not only does this approach minimize a play-work dichotomy (Bennett et al., 1997), but the varying degrees of play decrease the potential for straightjacketing (Howard, 2002). Nevertheless, this model is criticized based on the validity of the criteria defining play (Howard & McInnes, 2010), which stem from adult interpretations and observations of play (Howard, 2002, McInnes et al., 2011) and not the players themselves.

Thus, it can be argued that no theory, "definition or approach can truly capture the full range of behaviours that could be construed as play" (Howard, Jenvey, & Hill, 2006, p. 380). Play in its complexity has many descriptions that overlap one another (Lifter, Mason, & Barton, 2011), behaviours that vary across the lifespan (Brooker, 2011), and different functions for children and adults (Lillemyr, 2009). If a universal definition were put forward it would overlook children's definition of play (Wood & Attfield, 2005) and limit the many possibilities of play as constraints and restrictions would inevitably occur.

However, without an operational definition of play, identifying potential benefits in children's development becomes complicated (Howard, 2010). As Howard (2010) explains, without a definitive definition it is challenging to isolate play and prove it to be the specific cause influencing children's development. Also, the absence of a practical definition of play challenges educators in implementing a play pedagogy as they are left to rely on personal knowledge, education, experiences, values, beliefs, and culture.

The paradoxical status of play creates further ambiguity to the nature and value of play. The two competing discourses prevalent in society are that play is simplistic, trivial, and a waste of time (Brown, 2009; Golinkoff, Hirsch-Pasek, & Singer, 2006;

Rieber, 1996) or that play is complex, critical, and the ideal way for learning. According to the first inference, play is seen as something only children engage in and, therefore, is regarded as a childish activity (Brown, 2009). In fact, as we get older play is not viewed as respectable, but work is (Rieber, 1996). Work is serious business (Wood & Attfield, 2005) and a more logical means to prepare for life's challenges, in comparison to the "deceptively simple" (Johnson & Dinger, 2012, p. 12) act of play. Through guilt, we drift away from play towards 'more productive' endeavours losing sight of the power of play that was familiar to us when we were young.

Thus, the centrality of play in children's lives seems to invoke the misconception that play is easy and irrelevant in the adult world. It is something only children do to pass the time when more important tasks such as work and homework have been completed. The tremendous amount of learning that takes place with play is sometimes difficult to see and, subsequently, it does not look like much to adults (Johnson & Dinger, 2012).

Play is perceived as having no purpose and does not carry equal status as work does, particularly in teaching (Sandberg & Heden, 2011). This is evident in Piaget's (1962) comment that "play has always been considered, in traditional education, a mental wasteland…without functional significance" (p. 151). Some adults, including teachers, have difficulty believing that children can learn when they play because they do not see any direct teaching taking place. The childhood education of the adult's holding this view revolved around passive learning instead of the active learning processes involved with play. Therefore, the idea of learning taking place without the direct lead of a teacher is difficult for some adults to comprehend (Johnson & Dinger, 2012).

However, play is essential not only for children's learning and development, but also for adults in achieving fulfillment (Brown, 2009), balance, and more productivity in

life. The competing discourse recognizes the benefits of play and appreciates its complexities. Play is viewed as a catalyst for acquiring knowledge and developing in all areas of development. But, it is important to value play beyond learning potential (Appleby, 2011) measurable only in curricular terms (Rogers, 2011). Play has therapeutic capabilities for meeting the mental health needs of young children suffering from emotional and behavioural issues (Bratton, 2010). Play also benefits children's moral development and formation of ethical identities (Edmiston, 2011; Rogers, 2011), which are not addressed in early childhood policy documents (Rogers, 2011).

Brown & Vaughan (2009) truly capture the essence of play in their book title when they propose that play "shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul". Play is a goal in itself and holds special value to children. It is a natural way of being that needs to be respected and has much to teach us particularly in the field of education (Lillemyr, 2009).

Cultural Influences

Play is not only a universal concept, but it is also a culturally defined construct (Marfo & Biersteker, 2011) with cultural groups constructing and interpreting play according to their own "culturally shaped frame of mind" (Hyun, 1998, Culture Shapes Sense Making of the Phenomenon, para. 8). Culture adds complexity to the construct of play as different cultures place emphasis on different characteristics (Azuma, 1986 as cited in Izumi-Taylor et al., 2010) based on cultural values, beliefs, and cultural goals of child development (Sanagavarapu & Wong, 2004).

In a cross-cultural study of American and Japanese kindergarten teachers conducted by Izumi-Taylor et al. (2004) results demonstrated that teachers from both nations regarded play as fun and an opportunity to learn and develop. They differed,

however, on play as the power of living, child's work, and exploration of nature. Japanese teachers highly regarded play as a power of living that nurtured children's feelings, desires, and attitudes in a group-oriented setting. According to Japanese teachers, "Play is the child's life itself, and children learn how to live through play….Thus, they learn the sources of living and become *yutakana* (empathic, receptive, open hearted) human beings" (p. 315).

Conversely, the American (U.S.) teachers did not view play in this manner, rather they described play as child's work. Also, they claimed that children explore their environment through play and no distinction is made between a natural and an artificial environment. The view of nature and play is more a means to an end. In Japanese culture, there is an interdependent relationship between humans and nature. Living with nature is highly desired and consequently, Japanese teachers integrated nature and play in school activities.

This study reveals a contrast in various features of play with Japanese teachers placing high priority on qualities promoting holistic (social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and moral) development and American teachers underscoring cognitive, social-emotional development. In essence, cultural diversity adds more uncertainty to defining play as specific features of play are highlighted depending on the values and educational goals of a society.

Cultural values, beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of thinking shape perceptions of play, education, knowledge, and its participants that affect the teaching and learning that takes place in classrooms. For example, North American societies have an individualistic attitude towards learning based on the value given to competition. Almost the entire school curriculum is designed around the learning, play, and work of the individual such

that "children generate individual products that express their individual identity while teachers devote individual attention to individual children. Personal goals often take precedence over communal goals" (Krechevsky & Stork, 2000, p. 62). With so much focus on personal expression, individual skill development, and the uniqueness of the individual, it is not surprising to see the amount of attention our culture and schools give to the individual (Krechevsky & Stork, 2000).

This cultural pattern of thinking differs considerably from the Italian culture where emphasis is placed on group activity and social affiliations. Italian educators in Reggio schools believe that the learning that occurs in a group provides students with a deeper and richer understanding of themselves and the world because they share diverse points of view, ideas, and ways of thinking. In addition, the educators believe that group inquiry-based activities and play-based experiences enable a broader spectrum of learning because they engage the 'whole child'-socially, cognitively, emotionally, aesthetically, and ethically in solving problems and creating products that are meaningful to them (Krechevsky & Stork, 2000). Therefore, the perceptions that educators have regarding learning are influenced by the values and beliefs important in their culture. The embedded cultural values and beliefs about how children learn affect the nature of play-based experiences provided, as well as, the prevalence of certain types of activities in the classroom.

The type of play activities that are prominent in early childhood settings and that are encouraged by educators differ across cultures depending on what the purpose of play is believed to be. For example, children's socio-dramatic play in Western cultures involves imagination and fantasy, whereas in other cultures the focus is on imitating adult behaviours.

A study conducted by Brooker (2006) revealed that four-year old children from Bangladseh families would spend their time in the house centre around the kitchen table pretending to cook or tending to dolls. But, when staff attempted to engage the children in imaginative rather than imitative play, the children refused to join in and left the area. This example highlights the importance of teachers to engage in reflection on their perceptions of play from their personal/cultural background and recognize how their perceptions are influenced by the dominant culture. It is necessary to attain a sense of cultural awareness and understanding as the first step for educators in moving away from homogeneous settings and play opportunities to more culturally appropriate play that is reflective of their local context and diversity of their students.

Educators engaging in culturally appropriate practice recognize culture's influence on play and the importance of moving away from a broad understanding of play and pedagogy. Their pedagogies of play are not only integrated but also inclusive so that all children in the classroom have an equal opportunity to play and learn irrespective of their development and culture. In order to achieve this level of inclusiveness educators provide play experiences and employ strategies in their settings and interactions with students that correspond to what Hyun (1996) has cited as cultural congruence, cultural relevance, and cultural responsiveness.

Cultural congruence refers to seeking *consistency* between home and school whether it be through materials, activities, or experiences. Cultural relevance pertains to helping students create *meaning* in their experiences by using cultural references that they can relate to and connect with. Cultural responsiveness involves being *perceptive and sensitive* to diverse ways of thinking, doing, and learning and building on that foundation (Hyun, 1996).

In utilizing these strategies educators demonstrate their understanding of play from multiple perspectives and challenge the universal conceptions of learning, development and play. Their perceptions of play and its players has been broadened to appreciate and see children in relation to their culture, context, and social diversity (Wood, 2010b). Thus, they recognize the universal and local aspects of children's play, which prevents a deficit view of children (Brooker, 2010). They understand that each child is a "rich child" (Moss et al., 2000, p. 250) and when provided with "meaningful contexts" (Andrews, 2011, p. 39) can demonstrate competence and skill that may not appear visible when only looking through a monocultural lens. They disregard assimilation and the dilution of other cultures to reach a comforting "sameness" (Andrews, 2011, p. 38) and embrace offering culturally diverse play experiences that will reach every student and make learning more meaningful and effective.

To extend our knowledge of play beyond Western theories the following section examines Aboriginal children's play with emphasis on the *Te Whāriki* approach practiced in New Zealand, and the Reggio Emilia approach practiced in Italy. The rationale for focusing on these two specific cultural practices in early childhood education is because certain elements foundational to these approaches are slowly being integrated within the FDELK program.

Aboriginal children's play. The research on cultural aspects of children's play in Aboriginal society is lacking with limited sources available. Further research is warranted in this area to extend our knowledge of play beyond Western theories and reach children of Aboriginal descent.

Johns (1999) unfolded various characteristics of Aboriginal children's play in Australia. They are risk-taking, survival mechanism, humour, play fighting, and

responsibility. Risk-taking involves adults standing back and letting children experiment on their own. Some of these experiences may be considered unsafe by other cultures and would not be allowed, such as a two-year-old using a meat knife from the kitchen to pry side bags from a toy motorcycle while his grandfather watches. However, in Aboriginal culture risk-taking is an important learning process for a child and is acceptable in the presence of an adult with children understanding the rules (Johns, 1999). Children are encouraged to explore and learn from their mistakes.

Play as a survival mechanism entails learning about directions (knowing where to go and how to get there), observations (being aware and assessing surroundings), decisions (determining what to do), and actions (carrying out an activity or task). This thought pattern derives from traditional Aboriginal education where playing and learning was for living and survival (Neegan, 2005). Aboriginal children, by the age of five, were taught to respect the environment "through observation and practice. This included learning the arts of trapping, hunting, fishing, food gathering, and preparation" (Leavitt, 1993, p. 106).

As for humour, children relish in getting the 'better of adults' as playful fun and this is not seen as disrespectful in Aboriginal culture. Play fighting denotes rough and tumble play and being very physical. This type of play creates concern for non-Aboriginal educators. But, those familiar with Aboriginal children know that it rarely becomes a safety issue because children understand the rules, and respect and care for one another. Lastly, responsibility in play is comprised of Aboriginal children being responsible for themselves and those around them by watching after and taking care of younger children. Thus, through play they learn who they are, where they fit in, and what is expected of them (Johns, 1999).

Aside from the characteristics of Aboriginal play, there is much to learn from Aboriginal culture, particularly their holistic approach in "ways of knowing, being, and doing" (Townsend-Cross, 2004, p. 2). Behaviours, events, and concepts are not categorized or viewed as segments of life, but rather everything and everyone is seen as connected and balanced through their relationships and reciprocity. The core principles and values based on relationships and balance are inherent in the culture and reflected as well in their educational philosophy (Townsend-Cross, 2004).

In Aboriginal education, balance is important and learning activities are designed (Hill, 1999) and carried out to develop all aspects of a child's being (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). According to Hill (1999), the child is viewed as a whole person consisting of "spirit, heart, mind, and body – the capacity to see, feel, know, and do" (p. 100). The concept of holistic education is a traditional theory and practice used by Aboriginal peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996) that addresses all four aspects in balance (Bell, 2011). It is believed that a child that grows in a balanced way becomes a healthy individual creating "healthy families, communities, and ultimately nations and world" (Bell, 2011, p. 378). It is the responsibility of the education system to foster the interconnected relationship a child has with his or her world so they may become "whole and healthy children and ultimately adults" (Bell, 2011, p. 379).

An exemplary model adopting a holistic approach and accentuating family, community, and relationships is *Te Whāriki* in New Zealand. Te Whāriki, which translates to "the woven mat" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011, para 3), is New Zealand's national curriculum for the early childhood sector. The term signifies the interweaving of the curriculum's principles and learning strands by teachers to form intricate patterns unique to each individual child's learning story (New Zealand Ministry

of Education, 2011), as well as, to each local context. Thus, the curriculum is not prescribed in content or method, but rather crafted by teachers to represent the diversity of the children and families within their setting (Alvestad, Duncan, & Berge, 2009).

The curriculum emphasizes the sociocultural context of learning for children through reciprocal and responsive relationships among people, places, and things (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009a) – adults, peers, the physical environment, and resources (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009b). It is a bicultural curriculum that incorporates curriculum for Māori immersion in early childhood education (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009c). Māori are the aboriginal people of New Zealand (Māori Tourism, 2013) and their cultural heritage is reflected both in text and structure in the curriculum document (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009a).

The four principles that form the foundation of the curriculum are empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships. The learning strands that arise from these principles are well-being, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996). Holism is at the core of the curriculum where "cognitive, social, cultural, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of human development are integrally interwoven" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 41).

The notion of play is embedded in the curriculum particularly through the strand of exploration, which asserts the value of "playing with ideas and materials" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 84) as a meaningful approach to learning. Play promotes children to interact with their world through active, reciprocal, and interdependent means. The act of play uses multiple domains of development simultaneously stimulating the whole development of the child. The document links play

to holistic development, empowerment, and relationships demonstrating play as an integrated mode of learning.

The concepts of holism, empowerment, and relationships evident in Aboriginal education and play parallel the principle beliefs of the Reggio Emilia approach discussed in the following section. However, where Aboriginal education places emphasis on holism, balance, and relationships, the Reggio Emilia approach resonates democracy, collaboration, and relationships in children's play and learning.

Reggio Emilia approach. The Reggio Emilia approach is an educational philosophy in early childhood education that was initiated by Loris Malaguzzi and a group of parents in the small city of Reggio Emilia, Italy, after WWII. Grounded in social-constructivist theory and drawing from many theorists such as Piaget, Vgotsky, Dewey, Gardner, and Froebel (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002), this approach offers innovative ideas and methods to teaching and learning that is being adopted globally by early childhood educators and elementary school teachers.

Embedded in its philosophy of education is an image of children, families, and teachers playing and working together to create "dynamic and democratic learning environments" (New, 2003, p. 34). In an effort to create such an environment this approach is guided by nine fundamental principles that educators worldwide have come to recognize and value: (1) the image of the child, (2) hundred languages of children-children's multiple means of expression and understanding, (3) the teacher's role as learner and researcher, (4) partnership with parents (Gandini, 1993; New, 2003), (5) long-term projects also referred to as "progettazione" (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 113), (6) learning in the context of relationships, (7) the role of space in children's learning (environment as the 'third teacher'), (8) negotiated curriculum, and (9) documentation

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(Gandini, 1993; New, 2003). These guiding principles although listed separate are all interwoven with one another demonstrating the holistic approach of this philosophy and the importance of interconnection and relationships. However, for the purpose of this study I will only be examining a few of the principles mentioned - the image of the child, hundred languages of children, role of the teacher, partnership with parents, and long-term projects.

The *image of the child* as possessing rights is the fundamental belief of the Reggio philosophy. Inherent in this belief is that children are strong, capable and full of potential. Their nature, thoughts, play, and work are taken seriously and respected and the act of truly listening to them is emphasized (Hewett, 2001). The concept of children having rights, possessing strength, competence, and potential informs a view of children as playing an active role in their education. Thus, children are viewed not as targets of instruction but as being "authors in their own learning" (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 55). This focus on an "active process of education" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 66) is influenced greatly by Jean Piaget's theory of constructivism, which proposes that children construct knowledge by actively interacting with the environment (Piaget, 1962).

However, where Piaget contends that this construction of knowledge takes place independently, the Reggio Emilia approach strongly emphasizes children's social construction of knowledge through their relationships, dialogue, and interactions with peers, teachers, members of the community, and their environment (Malaguzzi, 1993). This communication through language is seen as an integral part of children's learning and its importance can be attributed to Vygotsky, whose ideas concerning language propose that thought and language operate together to form ideas representative of children's culture and development (Bennett et al., 1997).

Extending the concept of children communicating through language is *the hundred languages of children* - one of the most important contributions Malaguzzi has made to education. This principle stems from the idea that children have multiple ways of expressing themselves and representing their world. Through the use of graphic, verbal, literate, symbolic, imaginative play, and a hundred more languages, children make meaning of their world (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002). This parallels with Gardner's view of intelligence as encompassing a wide range of cognitive abilities and valuing "multiple intelligences" beyond only the mathematical and linguistic aspects of intelligence (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002).

This idea that no domain of intelligence or subject is more important than another is also shared by Dewey (1916) who states that "the attempt to inventory a number of values attaching to each study and to state the amount of each value which the given study possesses emphasizes an implied educational disintegration" (p. 253). Dewey's statement articulates the importance of schools integrating subjects in order to provide children with a holistic education. This aim of education is also emphasized by Noddings (2005) who believes that educating the whole child involves pursuing their "physical, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic aims" (p. 10).

In developing the whole child *the role of the teacher* is to serve as a guide, facilitator, co-learner, and researcher. The teacher's insight of their students' goals and level of abilities provides an opportunity to facilitate their students' learning according to their interests and current understandings (Hewett, 2001). This insight and action leads the teacher into the role of researcher as she develops a deeper understanding of *how* students learn.

A *partnership with parents* and the community is a long-standing commitment in the Reggio Emilia program. Teachers support a home-school relationship and believe children's education is a shared responsibility between the teacher and parent(s). Parents' involvement extends beyond the classroom to include decision making at the school and community levels (New, 1990). Through participation at the Parent-Teacher Board and the Educational Committee, parents are involved in influencing local government policy in child education (New, 1990). This intimate involvement and collaborative effort by parents reflects their continued commitment to maintain an educational system that was originally developed by Malaguzzi and a small group of parents.

The process of dialogue and collaboration that is embedded in the Reggio Emilia philosophy is one of the reasons for the program's success. As teachers, parents, and community members work together they are strengthening the group as a whole. The process of dialogue and collaboration resonates with Paolo Freire's (2009) work as he articulates the power of dialogue in education as "practice in freedom" and "true education" (p. 150). Freire (1970) believes that the "act of knowing" (p. 210) occurs when teachers and students engage in authentic dialogue. This dialogue unites them together in a shared understanding of the topic under study.

This is evident in the Reggio approach as students and teacher engage in reciprocal exchanges of their views, beliefs, and knowledge of the project under investigation in an effort to reach a common understanding of their research. This co-construction of knowledge demonstrates the students and teacher as equal partners in interaction, "so that each is both listening and contributing, and neither is dominating the field of shared meanings " (Egan, 2009, p. 46). This "listening pedagogy" (Egan, 2009, p. 43) enhances one's freedom to speak and one's freedom to be actively involved in

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learning and education. Reggio educators recognize and value communication not only as a means of expression and understanding, but, also as vehicle for action and change in pedagogy.

In the Reggio Emilia approach, students are given the freedom to direct their own learning through inquiry. The value given to active inquiry is clearly evident in the Reggio classrooms as students are given the opportunity to explore, discover, and experiment in a variety of situations with a multitude of materials. Active inquiry unfolds in the form of *long-term projects* (Rinaldi, 1998). This method of inquiry, research, and learning occurs among students and teachers viewing the child and teacher as both researcher and learner.

The overarching principle of reciprocity is evident as children and teacher collaborate, play, and work together to discover solutions to meaningful questions and problems (Hewett, 2001). As children pose hypotheses, teachers create conditions where children can explore and test their ideas through projects. While engaged in this process, children have the opportunity to observe, question, discuss, and represent their observations, ideas, and hypotheses (Hewett, 2001). Teachers in observing the students and listening closely to their conversations learn the reasons behind the students' interests, their beliefs about the topics to be investigated, and the source of their knowledge (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002), which in turn shapes future discussions, inquiry, and experiences. Children are encouraged to revisit their projects in order to clarify their understandings, possibly frame new hypotheses, and provoke further inquiry. Inherent in this idea is that students are given the opportunity to participate in dialogue with one another and the teacher because they are viewed as strong, capable individuals with the right to be heard and taken seriously. Through shared decision-making and equal

participation witnessed in the process of projects, learning is made meaningful and knowledge is constructed. Hence, it is this ideal place that values students as free, active agents with the right to participate in their own learning and with the capability and competency to contribute to the construction of knowledge.

The Reggio philosophy grounded in social constructivism, and sharing historical ties to socialism, postulates that knowledge is created through connections, collaboration, and relationships. Reggio teachers regard schools as social institutions and, therefore, the ideal place to involve all its participants in a process of cooperation and collaboration evident in play and projects. Building relationships and group affiliations are not only valued in the Reggio schools for its importance in knowledge construction, but it is also regarded as an integral way of life in the Italian culture. Malaguzzi best articulates this point in the following statement, "I believe there is no possibility of existing without relationship. Relationship is a necessity of life" (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002, p. 65).

This belief contrasts with the North American school culture, which emphasizes competition. Competition sustained through high-stakes testing, reward systems, and educator language is a method used to motivate members of a group (Firlik, 1996). This stems from our capitalistic societal structure where self-interest, profit and 'staying ahead of the game' are the predominant mindset.

Reggio educators perceive knowledge as socially constructed through a continuous process of inquiry and research. They do not see it as static, but rather, dynamic and continually changing as individuals participate in discourse, debate, and negotiations. Connected to this view is the understanding that no ultimate truth exists, but rather "multiple forms of knowing" (Hewett, 2001, p. 98). Likewise, there are "multiple ways of expressing" (Hewett, 2001, p. 98) knowledge as students are encouraged to

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represent their plans, ideas, and understandings using one or more 'languages' including drawing, painting, sculpture, and drama (New, 1990).

Also, knowledge is considered whole where students' ideas, feelings, and thoughts are expressed, revisited, reflected upon, and expressed again in an effort to consolidate them into meaningful and cohesive wholes (Hewett, 2001). Projects facilitate this connection as different subjects are integrated through meaningful activities (Edwards & Springate, 1995 as cited in Hewett, 2001, p. 99).

With respect to North American perceptions, knowledge is considered independently constructed which is clear given the focus on the individual and individual learning activities. As such, the spectrum of learning becomes much more narrow leading to the conclusion that there are singular truths, or facts, that need to be passed on or replicated, particularly from teacher to child. Also, the method of teaching through isolated subject areas or segregated learning centres (inhibiting free-flow play) creates a fragmented construction of knowledge where students may have more difficulty in making meaningful connections and consolidating information. However, this area of concern is being addressed as more teachers are trying to incorporate more cross-curricular activities and teaching methods (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010c).

In examining the Reggio Emilia approach, the practices reflect principles of democracy that are exemplary. The philosophy and pedagogy resonate images of children, teachers, play, learning, and knowledge that are considerably different from the views and perceptions of mainstream North American kindergarten. There are many aspects to this approach, as well as Aboriginal philosophy that deserve consideration, particularly within the realm of play pedagogy. It is important to appreciate the

differences in play across cultures and their value in teaching us that there is more than one way to play and learn.

As teachers and educational administrators, we need to be cognizant of our contemporary beliefs, values, and attitudes and assess the impact they have on our students, teachers, and educational system. We need to re-evaluate our aims in education and play pedagogy by determining what our purpose is, what our objectives are, and if we are enhancing the potential of individuals in the classroom.

We have many lessons to learn from the philosophy and practices of the Reggio Emilia approach and Aboriginal education that warrants us to broaden our knowledge, advance our thinking, and learn to deliver a play pedagogy from multiple cultural perspectives. In doing so, we not only prepare our students for the future, we empower them to be successful in life, and we create a culture of teaching and learning that embraces democracy, diversity, and endless potential.

Play Policy

This section will examine the Full Day Early Learning – Kindergarten (FDELK) program policy and documents and the dilemmas that have arisen from policy constraints, interpretation, and discourse. This exploration will provide the groundwork for the recommendations/plan of action that will be offered in the discussion section. However, in order to fully appreciate and understand the particulars of this newly implemented policy it is important to address the course taken by early policy influences, which directly and indirectly helped shape the current Ontario policy initiative and exalt play in early childhood education classrooms. The FDELK program initiative along with the curriculum document have their roots in the Early Years Study report, Toronto First Duty, the Early Learning for Every Child Today resource, and Every Child, Every Opportunity

curriculum and pedagogy document, which are described in the following section. Additionally, it is important to recognize and discuss the Hall-Dennis Report (Ontario Department of Education, 1968), *Living and Learning*, whose aims of education resonate with the fundamental principles and views set forth in the FDELK program policy and documents.

Policy Influences

Hall-Dennis Report. The Hall-Dennis (Ontario Department of Education, 1968) report, *Living and Learning*, was a ground-breaking document that helped shape Ontario's contemporary educational system (Dolik, 2012). Publicized by the Toronto Daily Star in 1968 as "a revolutionary blueprint for education" (as cited in Bennett, 2012, p. 5), the Hall-Dennis report was a cutting-edge document in its time. The list of recommendations advocating a student-directed, inquiry-based model aimed to steer education in a progressive direction centred on "self-realization" (Gidney, 1998, p. 72) and "personal discovery" (Charters, 2012, para. 3).

The fundamental change in methods reflecting a child-centred philosophy intended to replace the regimented subject-driven model emphasizing mindless rote with flexibility and individualized, hands-on learning focused on students' needs and interests (Charters, 2012). The report reflected a new pedagogy favouring democracy, the individual child, and a love for learning that involved the heart as much as the head (Ontario Department of Education, 1968). NDP critic Walter Pitman stated it best in his comment to the Globe and Mail (Sagi, 1968), "It will change the face of education. Instead of being subject-oriented, it will be experience-oriented….It will produce a more sensitive compassionate person who sees learning as a delight rather than a job" (p. 1).

However, Walter's sentiment was not shared by all. In fact, the report sparked controversy in different parts of Ontario and Canada with a backlash of comments stemming from a misleading impression that the report was an open invitation "for an 'anything goes' brand of education" (Bennett, 2012, p. 7). The public notion that students are able to "do their own thing" (Bennett, 2012, p. 6) in school was misguided by public media such as the Toronto Daily Star in 1968, which proclaimed that the report "advises us to let every school child 'do his own thing'" (as cited in Bennett, 2012, p. 6). The basic premise of the report became misconstrued with such a tag line that inevitably public opposition evolved that incited heated assertions and protest from educators and industries.

Scrutinizing comments began with three university academics including the Chairman of York University, R. W. Nicholls (1968), who expressed concern in his Letter to the Editor of the Globe and Mail with "the apparent naiveté" (p. 6) of the recommendations that "squandered on trivialities and fads" (p. 6) and proposed "removing the structure from the school system" (p. 6). Many Ontario teachers felt threatened by the report's implication of abandoning prescribed curriculum and they feared losing control of their classes with inadequate provision of resources and training (Bennett, 2012). Likewise, industries opposed the report because it touted personal fulfillment over "marketable skills" (Vaughan, 2004, p. 158). In other words, the recommendations promoted a curriculum that did not fall to the demands of the industry, but rather the needs, interests, and motivations of the students. However, Vaughan (2004) noted this did not exclude the possibility of becoming a skilled worker or scientist only that it was the choice of the student instead of an "imposed agenda" (p. 158) set by education and society.

The opposition continued with a crusade lead by Dr. Daly, a McMaster University history scholar immersed in educational conservatism (Bennett, 2012). Daly's (1969) stinging criticisms echoed throughout his booklet *Education or molasses*?, which described the whole report as a "bucket of molasses, sticky sentiment couched in wretched prose" (p. 1). He asserted that there would be "dangerous consequences far beyond the schools. The general public would be the eventual victims of what one must regretfully call an assault on civilization as we know it" (Daly, 1969, p. 1). According to Daly the report was a call to arms against traditionalism (Bennettt, 2012) with the mistake of placing more importance on how children learn and think than what they know and remember (Daly, 1969).

Daly's crusade eventually fizzled out as few came to the defence of Daly in his public debates. Moreover, secondary schools began experimenting with some of the report's recommendations and, in March 1969, Minister of Education Davis moved forward in transforming Ontario education system according to the Hall-Dennis model (Bennett, 2012).

Early Years Study. The early years have been recognized as the most important years in a child's life for health, development, and positive outcomes later in life. McCain, Mustard, and Shanker (1999, 2007) provide a culmination of scientific evidence, in their Early Years Study reports 1 and 2, that "experience-based brain development in the early years sets neurological and biological pathways affecting lifelong health, learning, and behaviour" (McCain et al., 2007, p. 4). In other words, early experiences and environments stimulate different parts of the brain responsible for movement, language, cognition, immunity, and hormones, which influence and shape a child's developmental course throughout the life cycle (McCain et al., 2007). Play-based

experiences strengthen and support the neurological and biological connections creating opportunities for learning and development (Scarfo & Littleford, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative to capitalize on this critical life stage whereby children, right from the start, are offered stimulating environments that facilitate progress and the best education and care that steers their future in the most opportune and positive direction.

To establish a good quality environment and positive experiences, McCain et al. (2007) suggest establishing a national framework of early childhood programs where childcare, early education, and parenting supports are integrated into a single comprehensive service. This reorganization would deliver programs and services under one framework providing all parents and children with 'seamless' accessibility and additional benefits of improved program quality, flexibility, and enhanced parent participation (McCain et al., 2007).

Toronto First Duty. Toronto First Duty is a municipal project initiative that was put into action, in 2001, in response to the research evidence and recommendations put forward by the first Early Years Study report in 1999 (Corter et al., 2009; Corter & Pelletier, 2012). The project proposed to create a universal model of integrated services for early childhood with the intent to improve accessibility and quality of existing fragmented services. The goal was to provide families with universal accessibility to services that promotes healthy child development from conception through primary school in order to support parents in their parental role and in their work or studies (Corter et al., 2009). The project was designed to inform provincial policy on the feasibility and effects of combining regulated child care, kindergarten, and parenting supports into a seamless full-day service located in school-based community hubs (Corter & Pelletier, 2012). Results from the Toronto First Duty findings demonstrated that

consolidating childcare, education, and family support programs into a unified, seamless service created positive outcomes for children and families. Evidence pointed to increased program quality and coherence, greater parent involvement, reduced stress on families (Corter & Pelletier, 2012), equitable access for all families, and developmental success for children (Patel & Carter, 2012).

Early Learning for Every Child Today (E.L.E.C.T.). Early Learning for Every Child Today is a Best Start initiative that emerged from works of the Best Start Expert Panel (2007) on early learning. Informed by the Toronto First Duty project model, Best Start was established by the provincial government, in 2005, as a long-term strategy to put the Early Years Study recommendations into action, particularly the consolidation of programs and services into a coherent system.

This led to the development of the E.L.E.C.T resource, which guides practitioners on curriculum and pedagogy in early childhood settings such as child care centres, kindergarten classrooms, Ontario Early Years Centres, parenting centres, and early intervention centres (Best Start Expert Panel, 2007). It provides a common framework on how children learn and develop within the first eight years by focusing on the five domains of children's development (social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language) across an eight-year continuum (Best Start Expert Panel, 2007). This fundamental document laid the groundwork for *Every Child, Every Opportunity*, a compendium report to *With Our Best Future in Mind*.

Every Child, Every Opportunity/With Our Best Future in Mind. Charles Pascal was appointed Special Advisor of Early Learning by the premier of Ontario in 2007. He developed *Every Child, Every Opportunity* as a preliminary curriculum and pedagogy for the Early Learning Program for four- and five- year old children. It builds

on the ideas and principles of the E.L.E.C.T. document and, in conjunction with the Kindergarten Program 2006 document, helped shape the new FDELK program curriculum (Pascal, 2009a).

A companion document to this report is *With Our Best Future in Mind*. A comprehensive plan of action created by Charles Pascal at the request of the Ontario premier to develop the best implementation strategy for the government's Early Learning vision. The vision of a new integrated child and family service system in Ontario focuses on transforming the 'current chaos' of programs and services for children into a blended system of Best Start Child and Family Centres and Community Schools (Pascal, 2009b).

Governed under a single ministry, the Ministry of Education, the proposed model suggests having schools as "community hubs" (Pascal, 2009b, p. 6). That is, a 'one-stop' place offering a seamless continuum of support, care, and education to the community, particularly parents and children from birth to 12 years old. The FDELK program for four- and five- year old children is an integral component of this model and is situated within the context of the Community Schools. As such, Pascal (2009b) has included implementation recommendations for the FDELK program with concentration on play-based learning programming, curriculum reflecting principles and approaches of the E.L.E.C.T. resource and the Kindergarten program, a staffing team consisting of a teacher and early childhood educator, and parent engagement.

Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program

The Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten program is not a separate or parallel system for education and care of four- and five- and year children, but a system integrated within a continuum of services for children from birth to 12 years old (Ontario Municipal Social Services Association, 2008). It is an Ontario policy initiative that, although

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provides full day/every day learning to 4- and 5- year old children, strives for a broader

vision of optimal early learning opportunities and experiences for children beginning at

birth. In addition, there are also social and economic benefits such as families freed of

paying daycare costs benefitting disadvantaged families the most and a calculated 7 to 1

return on investment with long-term savings in justice, health, and social service

compensatory costs (Pascal, 2009).

The strong link between play and learning and the positive outcomes playful

experiences creates for children, sparked advisors and policymakers to incorporate play-

based learning in Ontario kindergarten classrooms. This new policy initiative, which

involves a partnership between early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers, aims

to provide students with the best learning environment comprised of play and

opportunities for learning through play. Both child-initiated free play and more

structured, teacher-directed play-based learning activities are described in the curriculum

document as "integral parts of the early learning classroom" (Ontario Ministry of

Education, 2010a, p. 13). It is believed that a combination of offering children choices of

learning activities and learning activities that are designed by the Early Learning –

Kindergarten team provide students with opportunities to progress in their learning and

development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a).

In addition, educators' combined experiences and knowledge in the areas of child

development, play, and elementary curriculum offer students the optimal environment for

guidance, learning, and support. Therefore, it is imperative that the Early Learning –

Kindergarten team work together to integrate their knowledge and practices in order to

capitalize on opportunities that expand children's play experiences and enhance and

extend their learning. However, in order to effectively provide such experiences it is

important for the kindergarten teacher and early childhood educator to fully comprehend

their roles, responsibilities, and best practices for play-based learning.

Role of Educators: Policy as text and policy as discourse. In examining the

educator responsibilities outlined in With Our Best Future in Mind (Figure 2), it is

apparent that the teacher and early childhood educator shared responsibilities,
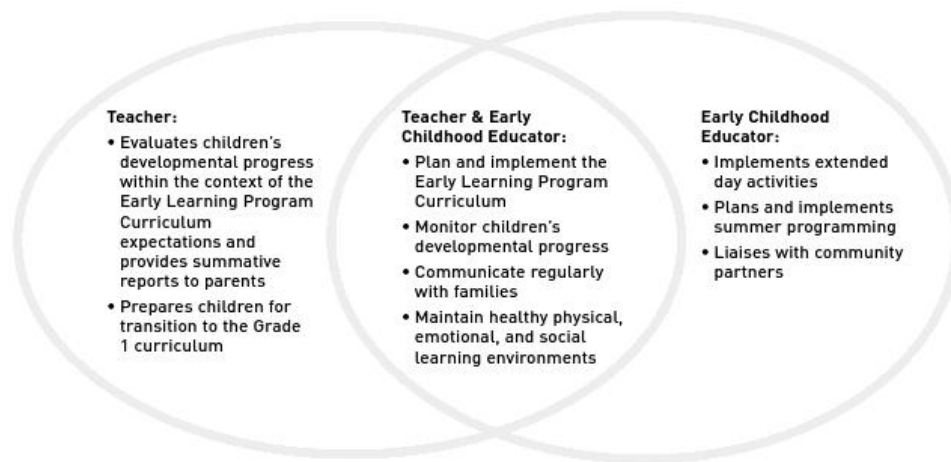
Figure 2.4 Early learning program educator responsibilities in the half,
full, and extended day. From "With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early
Learning in Ontario" by Charles Pascal, 2009b. Retrieved from
http://www.ontario.ca/ontprodconsume/groups/content/@onca/@initiatives/
documents/document/ont06_018899.pdf, p. 34.

concentrated in the centre, are where the confusion and tensions have become evident.

The "policy as text" (Ball, 2006, p. 44), in its generality, has left both educators to their

own interpretations, conceptions, and representations of text based on individual values,

interests, experiences, and training and based on the discourse that exists between

teachers and early childhood educators. With text and discourse implicit in one another

(Ball, 2006), the power and relationship dynamics enveloping both educators have manifested into the classroom creating an unbalanced partnership.

The power and relationship dynamics that have become evident parallel the findings in Gibson & Pelletier's (2011) survey study of 28 early childhood educators (ECEs) and 32 kindergarten teachers. They are hierarchal teaching structure, authority, delegation of tasks, decision-making, and classroom responsibilities. Some classrooms have become subject to a hierarchal teaching structure with early childhood educators performing duties and being delegated tasks similar to teaching assistants, rather than equal partners. Though not all FDELK classrooms have a hierarchal structure the Gibson & Pelletier findings suggest that a hierarchal structure is occurring in one quarter to one third of classrooms. Their results revealed half the kindergarten teachers reporting having more authority than their ECE partner with one-quarter delegating tasks to their partner. Nearly 35% of ECEs reported acting as assistants.

ECEs have less influence on program decisions relative to the kindergarten teacher with kindergarten teachers making decisions and changes without discussing it with their partner. In Gibson & Pelletier's (2011) findings, half the ECEs reported they had less influence making decisions related to the program with 17.9% indicating a discussion of changes did not occur before the changes were implemented.

There is also a discrepancy in classroom responsibilities such as daily planning, providing instruction, communication with parents, organizing the environment, and communication with parents. The kindergarten teachers in Gibson & Pelletier's (2011) study reported they felt they had a greater share of responsibility whereas the ECEs indicated a shared division of responsibilities.

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Differences in education, salary, and prestige may be contributing to the power and relationship dynamics with kindergarten teachers having greater access to pay and prestige and thus, potential dominance in the relationship (Calander, 2000).

In Ontario, the educational requirement for a kindergarten teacher is an undergraduate degree with one or two years of teacher education in the primary/junior division. The educational requirement for an ECE in the FDELK program is a two-year diploma from an Ontario College of Arts and Technology or a five-year ECE diploma/B.Ed. degree in the primary/junior division (Akbari & McCauig, 2014). However, many ECEs hold bachelor's degrees in child study, development, or psychology (Gibson & Pelletier, 2011). Both professions require professional certification from governing bodies. The kindergarten teachers must be certified with the Ontario College of Teachers and ECEs must be certified with the College of Early Childhood Educators. The discrepancy in salary is significant with teachers earning an average annual salary of $87,780 and ECEs earning 44% lower at $38,979 (Akbari & McCauig, 2014).

The discourse in power and professionalism is further strengthened in the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program curriculum document with terminology in text giving kindergarten teachers more influence and authority in the classroom (Table 1). Phrases such as "*responsible* for the long-term planning", "*management* of the Early Learning – Kindergarten classes", "*responsible* for student learning; effective instruction; formative assessment", and formal reporting indicate a more authoritative, delegate, and professional role than "*bring a focus*", "*facilitate* experiences" and "*contribute t*o formative assessment" assigned to early childhood educators, which connotes more passive and assistive functions. Such terminology contradicts and polarizes any

Table 2.2

Kindergarten Teacher and Early Childhood Educator Responsibilities

Kindergarten Teacher	Early Childhood Educator
Teachers are **responsible** for the long-term planning and organization of the program and the **management** of the Early Learning–Kindergarten classes. In addition, teachers are **responsible** for student learning; effective instruction; formative assessment (assessment for learning) and evaluation, based on the team's assessments of children's progress; and **formal reporting** and communication with families.	Early childhood educators **bring a focus** on age-appropriate program planning to **facilitate** experiences that promote each child's physical, cognitive, language, emotional, social, and creative development and well-being, providing opportunities for them to **contribute** to formative assessment (assessment for learning) and evaluation of the children's learning. They are also responsible for implementing the integrated extended day.

Note. Adapted from "The Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program, Draft Version" by the Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a. Retrieved from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/ kindergarten_english_ june3.pdf, p. 8.

resemblance of partnership and cooperation that both documents insist upon for program

quality and effectiveness. In essence, the text in the curriculum document reinforces the

discourse that exists between teacher and early childhood educator and the discourse

superimposes constraints and prescriptions on the vaguely outlined responsibilities, in

Pascal's report, that have constructed and continue to shape the roles, responsibilities, and

relationship dynamics between both educators.

To add complexity to the issue and exasperate tensions are the challenges of

boundaries. Battles over resources, space, and 'turf' are common in situations where new

personnel are being integrated into an already established classroom (Desimone, Payne,

Fedoravicius, Henrich, & Finn-Stevenson, 2004). Kindergarten teachers may display

resistance in sharing space and relinquishing some ownership and control over a

classroom that they have become accustomed to managing on their own. Whereas, early childhood educators have had past opportunities to adjust to cooperative working environments due to most preschool classrooms having two teachers (Shim, Hestenes, & Cassidy, 2004).

Role of play. The role of play in learning is briefly explained in both the curriculum document and Pascal's implementation report. In the curriculum document, "providing a play-based learning environment" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 1) is listed as one of the goals of the FDELK program. In addition, play is one of the six fundamental principles, derived from the E.L.E.C.T. document, that guides the program and is outlined as a "means to early learning that capitalizes on children's natural curiosity and exuberance" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 2). It is further reinforced as a "vehicle for learning" (p. 13) in that it creates a context in which children are engaged and receptive.

The document continues to encapsulate the important role of play in learning, articulating a balance between "child-initiated free play and more structured play-based learning opportunities" (p. 13) to support learning. But in doing so, does not supply a definition, explanation, or narration of what "free play" or "structured play-based learning" looks like or sounds like. Different forms of play are outlined and the connection between play-based learning to learning through inquiry is explained. Examples are presented in *The Learning Areas: Program Expectations* section that illustrate ways that children might demonstrate their learning and, consequently, ways that educators can respond and interact.

Pascal's (2009b) report also emphasizes the "serious business" (p. 25) of play to children's learning and development based on research evidence. However, the FDELK

document and Pascal's report do not provide a clear operational definition of play stipulating and detailing constituents that need to be present in order to create a shared understanding among educators. Given that early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers come from different academic backgrounds and have received different educational preparation (Desimone et al., 2004), there exists a pedagogy/practice gap in play-based learning approaches due to differences in philosophy.

The value of play within the classroom, for kindergarten teachers, is apparent when play has "educational value" (Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 300). That is, it is planned by the teacher, intentional with objectives, and has purpose for learning. Early childhood educators value 'free play' as they have received training in designing, implementing, and evaluating play-based learning curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2012). Free play is spontaneous and initiated by the child with no pre-determined objectives, but rather, learning arising from the process itself.

The differences in perception of play-based learning make for a fragmented, inharmonious teaching and learning environment that can have negative consequences for both educators and students. Continuity of play-based learning approaches that integrate both child-initiated free play and more structured play-based learning opportunities is critical for optimal learning experiences, quality education, and ultimately student success. If educators do not have a clear understanding of what constitutes play, particularly the conditions for free play and structured play-based learning, and they do not work together and provide a balanced, integrated context for learning, students in kindergarten will flounder, be ill prepared for Grade 1, and have a poor foundation for their school trajectory.

The commitment to a play-based curriculum rests on educators' acceptance, knowledge, and intentional practice of play in the school context. Planning and delivering a high quality play-based program requires educators to have sound theoretical understanding of play and be able to connect it to their everyday practices. However, based on early experiences, culture, training, and education individuals vary in what constitutes play and how it is best practiced in a formal educational setting.

As a result of contrasting perspectives, it is important that a new policy initiative, such as the FDELK program, be clear and thorough in its policy directives and implementation strategies in order to convey a unified message and create program continuity. But, one must question do educators accept the premise of this new policy – that children learn through play? Do they thoroughly understand, and are they able to explain the learning that takes place through play? Are both educators able to meet on common ground and share a common understanding and practice of play-based learning that is conducive to learning? Lastly, has the document and policy dissemination strategies done enough to inform front-line practitioners on what play is, its value, and how it can be effectively incorporated in a school context?

It is imperative then that these issues be addressed, solutions explored, and discourse and text challenged. In doing so, allows for more possibilities, new directions, and forward thinking to propel creative social action and direct us towards real change in education.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY & METHODS

There are limits to what the rationalizing knowledge epitomized by statistics can do. No matter how precise, quantification cannot inspire action, especially in a society whose bonds are forged by sympathy, not mere calculation. (Mary Poovey, 1995, p. 84)

The previous chapter demonstrated the fundamental construct of play evident throughout the literature, particularly its complexity, ambiguity, and paradoxical status. Attitudinal, structural, and functional constraints were addressed with implications to the provisions of play. Also presented was an analysis of play policy with concentration on the role of educators confined in discourse and the role of play based on dissemination and educators' interpretations. The conclusive argument drawn was that practitioners' differential backgrounds and distinct perceptions of play, in combination with a lack of an operational definition of play, influence a policy/practice divide.

This chapter discusses the research methodology and methods foundational to this research project. A rationale is initially provided for the method of inquiry and research design. This is followed by the selection of participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis. This chapter concludes with considerations given to the delimitations and limitations of the study.

Rationale

The methodology used in this study is qualitative research. A qualitative approach was selected based on the nature of the research questions, which are framed to *explore* the topic under study rather than *confirm* explanations or trends (Creswell, 2012). According to Creswell (1998), a qualitative study has the potential to provide a detailed, rich understanding of the phenomenon with the researcher painting a "complex, holistic picture" (p. 15). The multiple dimensions of such a representation encompass all the

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narrative and visual data collected from participants' perspectives and behaviours while in their real-life context, with an accompanying analysis from the researcher. Thus, the data are analyzed inductively with the researcher formulating theories or assumptions after the evidence has been collected (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009).

Further to inductive strategies and naturalistic settings, and "thick descriptions" (Tracy, 2013, p. 3) qualitative research places an emphasis on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or quantifiable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Emphasis is placed on "concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things" that capture the "essence and ambience" of a phenomenon rather than a precise count or measurement (Berg, 2007, p. 3). Information gathered through such descriptive accounts provides researchers with an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon in its natural context, particularly "the way things are, why they are that way, and how the participants in the context perceive them" (Gay et al., p. 12). Participants' perspectives and the meanings that they attribute to particular bits and pieces of their lives is what interests qualitative researchers. Researchers immerse themselves in the research setting through observation and interacting with participants in order to develop a rich understanding of the setting, participants, and the processes by which meanings are created (Gay et al., 2009). Briggs (1998) posits:

> To understand what a life means to the person living it, we must be able to
> observe the processes through which the person conceives and creates the life:
> its purposes and goals, dangers and desires, fears and loves. What motivates a
> person, cognitively and emotionally, to retain and build on *this* or *that*
> experience out of all those that she or he participates in, while ignoring or
> forgetting others? What imbues these special experiences with meaning? How

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are motives created? I argue that the formative experiences and the emotions they give rise to strongly influence not only the shapes of motives, wishes, and fears but also how they operate in everyday life (p. 2).

The passage expressed by Briggs stresses the socially constructive nature of qualitative inquiry and the pursuit of researchers to discover how social experiences are created and given meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). A qualitative approach is relevant for this research study as a key aspect is to understand educators' interpretations and practices of play within the social context of their kindergarten classrooms. The diversification of social worlds of each individual educator influences the meaning, conception, and sustainability of play in the program.

It is my aim to explore the representations of play that are being implemented in the classroom and to compare them, as well, to what is being expressed in policy. Through participants' descriptive accounts and policy interpretations, I delve deep into motives, meaning, and thinking regarding play. The voices of the participants echo throughout this inquiry as data reveals their interpretive and subjective stance on play-based learning in the kindergarten classroom.

However, the interpretive nature of qualitative research also extends to myself, the researcher, as I acknowledge my own personal biography and how it shapes the way I conduct, approach, and interpret my research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Tracy, 2013). As Denzin & Lincoln assert "Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of –and between – the observer and the observed" (p.29). Thus, through self-reflexivity, I strive to locate myself in this inquiry with careful consideration given to my own subjectivity and biases and how they guide

my observations, interactions, interviews, recordings, and interpretations of data (Tracy, 2013).

In addition to an interpretive framework, this study utilizes a multiple case study design in order to gain insight into early childhood educators' and kindergarten teachers' interpretations, experiences, and behaviours regarding play-based learning in the new kindergarten program context. According to Yin (2009), case studies investigate a contemporary phenomenon in its natural context when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are unclear.

Multiple sources of evidence are gathered in a "triangulating fashion" (p. 18) for assurance of results and "to gain a fuller and more robust picture of the case" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 2). Gerring (2004) states that "case study is best defined as an in-depth study of a single unit (a relatively bounded phenomenon) where the scholar's aim is to elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena" (p. 341). With the term 'case' defined as a bounded phenomenon or system, case study researchers are interested in studying how a system operates, particularly how the parts interact and come together (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Researchers uncover the interaction of parts characteristic of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998) with vivid descriptions and explanations capturing key components of the 'case' (Hamilton, 2011). As holistic entities, case studies tell a story about the bounded system (Stake, 1997 as cited in Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 406) offering insights that expand the readers' experiences (Merriam, 1998).

In a multiple case study, the individual cases in the collection are bound together through a common characteristic (Stake, 2006). Furthermore, the multiple perspectives acquired from the involved cases are examined through a comparative analysis that expands the view of the topic and yields more compelling and robust results (Herriott &

Firestone, 1983; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). Utilizing an embedded design, the present study explores both educators' expressed perceptions and behaviours in the FDELK program across several schools for the purpose of providing a deeper understanding of the concept of play and offering a framework for program and policy evaluation.

Procedure

Selection of Participants

The target population for this research study was Full-Day Early Learning kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators employed with a district school board in Southwestern Ontario. Currently, there are 35 elementary schools affiliated with the school board that are offering the FDELK program. The participants were purposely selected based on the belief that they will provide thoughtful, informative, and articulate information given their experience and knowledge with the research topic and setting (Gay et al., 2009).

Upon the Research Ethics Board approval, a total sample of seven educators was recruited (three kindergarten teachers and four early childhood educators) at three different sites. Thus, there were three EL – K teams, each comprised of a kindergarten teacher and an early childhood educator except for one team that consisted of a kindergarten teacher and two early childhood educators. This additional early childhood educator, designated as a floater, remained in the classroom for the mornings and then dispersed to another classroom for the afternoons.

The superintendent from the school board was contacted by e-mail and given a brief overview of the research intent with a detailed description of the logistics of the study. Upon approval from the superintendent, participants were recruited through direct invitation. One hundred and fourteen invitation letters were e-mailed out to all Full-Day

Early Learning kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators through the school board's BBS system. The purpose of the invitation letter was to make a connection with potential participants, explain the purpose of the study, emphasize its importance and benefits, and reveal ethical considerations, such as confidentiality and voluntary participation.

The sent invitation letters yielded twenty positive responses. Three groups of individuals were purposely selected from this sample based on the criteria that they currently worked together as a team. Once the designated number of participants was obtained the principal of each school was informed of the details of the study, the potential research value, and the positive impact the findings may have on administrators, policymakers, educators, and students. This endeavour aimed to secure their permission and obtain strong support and cooperation (Gay et al., 2009). Upon principal approval, designated times for observations and interviews were coordinated with each of the three EL – K teams and the letter of information was forwarded to each participant for review prior to the site visit in order to address any concerns or questions.

Data Collection

In order to obtain a thorough understanding of play-based learning, multiple strategies of data collection were employed through a process referred to as triangulation. Denzin (1989) postulates triangulation to involve the use of multiple data sources, methods, investigators, and theories. The approach of measuring the same phenomenon with various data-gathering techniques enhances the confidence in findings (Berg, 2007). In addition, by combining several views on the same reality one obtains a more substantive and complete picture of the topic in question (Berg, 2007). In this study, through the observation of both educators in the classroom, interviews, policy document

analysis, and the researcher's own journal entries, each method will reveal a slightly different perspective on the concept of play in the kindergarten classroom and provide a more well-rounded view of play pedagogy and policy.

Journal entries. A daily journal was kept of my experiences as an early childhood educator in the FDELK program spanning different schools and classrooms. Entries began the first day of school and include workshops, staff meetings, and daily interactions with children, colleagues, and administrative personnel. The entries provide a description of daily events, as well as, personal reflections on discussions and play-based activities shared with the students, colleagues, and administration. In addition, connections were made from discussions and events that paralleled or contradicted the extant research.

Observations of educators. The advantage of observation is that it gives the researcher the opportunity to record and study actual behaviour in its natural context (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, it reveals participants' true perceptions and practices, which may be portrayed differently in the interview process.

Prior to commencing the observations, participants completed a short demographic questionnaire outlining their education, training, and job experience. Observations took place over two consecutive full days for each of the three classrooms during regular school hours. The researcher played an unobtrusive role with concentration on recording descriptive and reflective field notes (Creswell, 2012). Observations focused on the set-up of the environment, and child-initiated and teacher planned activities. The recordings pertained to the structural elements and design of the classroom, activities, events, teaching strategies, and conversations. More specifically, data gathered included the learning centres set-up (design elements, layout, functionality),

the type of activities students engaged in, what educators planned and the process involved for planning and initiating activities and circle time, who initiated activities, and topic and elements of conversation. Completed questionnaires and field notes were secured in a locked filing cabinet. Field note transcripts were secured on the researcher's password protected personal computer.

Interviews. The semi-structured interviews consisted of a specified set of open-ended questions with the intention of obtaining detailed, descriptive, and elaborate responses on perceptions, interpretations, and practices of play-based learning and policy. The seven participants (three kindergarten teachers and four early childhood educators) were asked to respond to questions concerning: (1) their perceptions of play-based learning, (2) implementation strategies of play pedagogy in their classroom along with presented benefits and challenges, and (3) their interpretations of play-based learning as explained in the FDELK program document and conveyed in workshops, meetings and by administration. Early childhood educators' and kindergarten teachers' interpretations of the document were compared to determine similarities and differences in policy interpretation of play-based learning and the resulting implications on implementation and policy effectiveness, particularly dissemination.

All educators were interviewed after school in a private conference room on school site. One-on-one sessions were audio recorded, in addition to the researcher taking notes, to affirm accuracy in responses. Audio recordings were later transcribed with transcriptions reviewed by participants for member checking. The recordings of the interviews and transcriptions were secured on the researcher's password protected personal computer. The hardcopies of the interviews along with written records were secured in a locked filing cabinet.

Policy document. The Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program

document and With Our Best Future in Mind report were analyzed according to

descriptions and explanations of play-based learning, implementation recommendations,

and strategies, as well as, the role and responsibilities of both educators.

Data Analysis.

The process in organizing data is an interpretive activity with the criterion chosen

by the researcher influencing the researcher's attention to certain themes and issues while

disregarding others. The organizational process, therefore, affects the topics interpreted

as most prevalent and meaningful in the study (Tracy, 2013). In this particular study, the

organizational method used encouraged the researcher to make comparisons among

educators' perceptions, interpretations, and practices of play-based learning and policy, in

addition to content and terminology in the FDELK program document and With Our Best

Future in Mind report. Figure 3.1 illustrates the data analysis used for this study.

Initially, the data collected was organized by *type* and *source* of data (Tracy,

2013). The types of data are the interview transcripts, field note transcripts, policy

documents, and journal entries that were divided into separate files. The sources of data

are the interview transcripts and field note transcripts that were linked to the educators

and EL-K teams respectively. Analysis of interview transcripts involved coding words,

sentences, and phrases according to patterns. The focus was on description of data

through assigned words or phrases rather than providing interpretation or analysis. The

interview questions were organized and clustered according to the research questions with

the codes assigned to educator's responses listed separately in a table format. Then, with

the codes already identified and patterns noted, the researcher developed categories and

compared them across the data using cross-case analysis. In this strategy the relationships

among the categories were compared across multiple cases with commonalities and differences (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) revealing recurring themes. A detailed description of themes is provided in the following chapter.
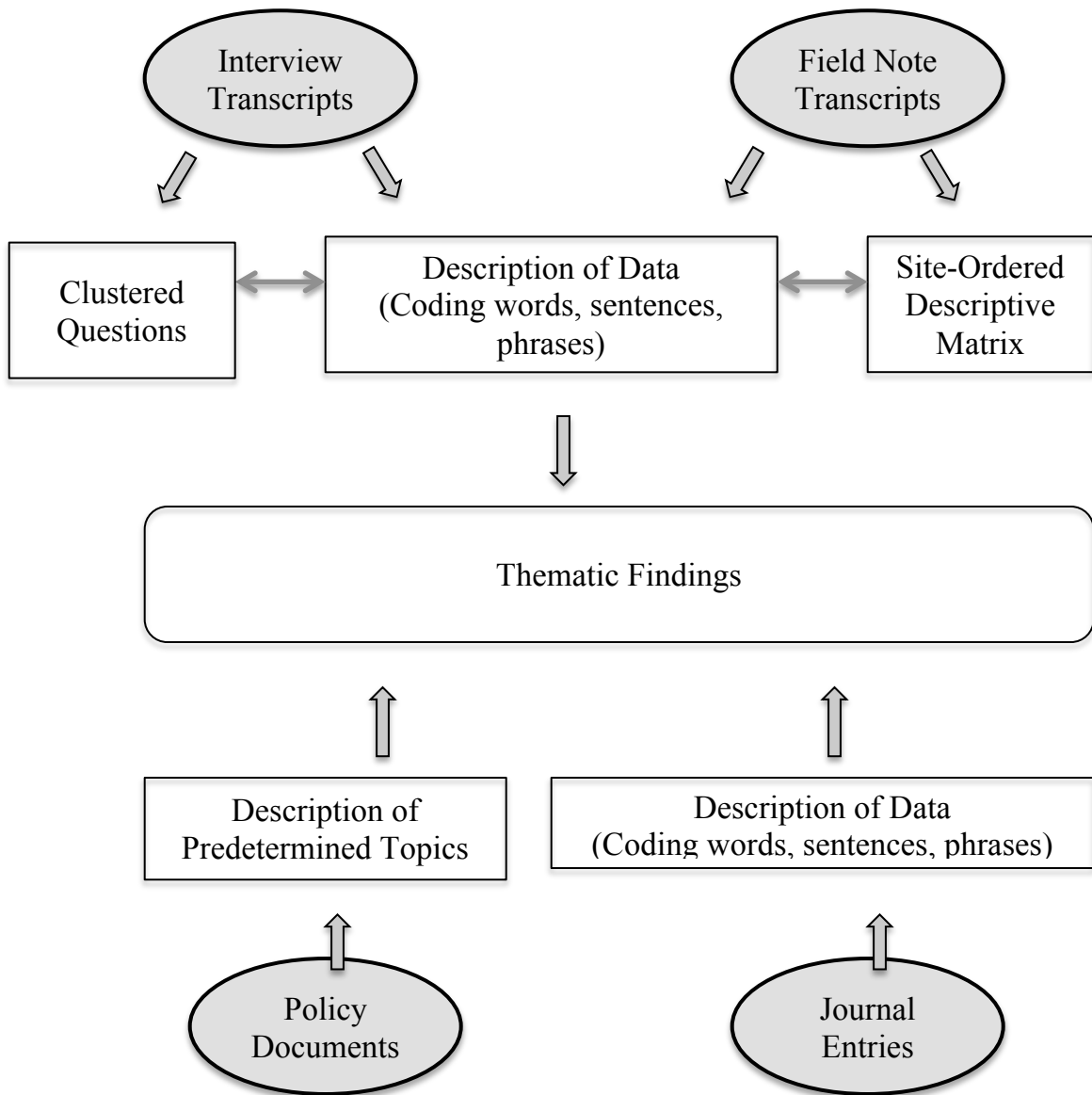
Figure 3.1 Data analysis flow chart

Analysis of observations involved coding words, sentences, and phrases in the field note transcripts and linking them to the developed categories from the interviews. In addition, program structure, classroom design, type of activities, teaching strategies, and conversations (topic, elements) were compared across sites in a site-ordered descriptive matrix.

A content analysis was conducted on the FDELK program document and With Our Best Future in Mind report. The focus of analysis pertained to the explanations and descriptions of play-based learning, implementation recommendations, strategies, and roles and responsibilities of both educators. The findings were compared to the educators' interview responses to determine commonalities and/or discrepancies according to their personal beliefs and philosophy, as well as, their interpretations during workshops, meetings, and by administration.

Analysis of the journal entries included coding words, sentences, and phrases according to the developing themes to strengthen validity and to determine the presence of additional themes.

Delimitations and Limitations

Several factors comprise the delimitations and limitations of the study. They include geographical area, target sites, small sample size, and researcher bias.

One of the delimitations of this study was that it was conducted in Southwestern Ontario, which limits the data findings to this specific area. This region was purposely selected based on convenience. Also, since this study was case-based selecting a bounded area, such as Southwestern Ontario, helped create a cleaner study design and report on a coherent phenomenon. In addition, the study involved schools affiliated only with a particular school board within this region. This selection was also based on

convenience, accessibility, and familiarity with staff and school board administration. It is suggested that further research consider examining this phenomenon across a larger geographical area to build upon the current data generated and increase the potential to generalize findings.

Despite methods of triangulation used in data collection to strengthen validity, and provide multiple perspectives, a notable limitation in this study was the small sample size studied. The time constraint was the main reason for the small sample of participants. To provide a deeper scope of understanding of play policy and pedagogy among educators it is suggested that subsequent research consider studying this topic among a larger population sample.

Another limitation of the study was my own biases, subjectivities, and voice in the study. Complete neutrality by the researcher, in qualitative research, is impossible as the researcher approaches the study with a background that "can't be turned off" (Diebel, 2008, p.555). Thus, my perspectives, values, and experiences inevitably influenced the research process from the initial research problem framed to the analysis and final conclusions drawn. However, I have situated myself in this study through a self-reflexive lens where I remained critically aware of my potential biases and predispositions. My personal entries and reflections in my daily journal writings helped deepen my self-awareness and further challenge my biases. In addition to this strategy, I used data triangulation and theory triangulation (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) to establish a "balance of perspectives" (Diebel, 2008, p.556) and facilitate neutrality.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

> Data are just summaries of thousands of stories – tell a few of those stories to make the data meaningful. (Heath & Heath, 2008, p. 1)

The purpose of this research was to investigate educators' perceptions and practices of play-based learning in Ontario Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten classrooms. Through the interview and observation process educators voiced and presented their perspectives and experiences of play-based learning, play pedagogy, and play policy within the conditions of their classrooms. Their shared stories were integral in yielding meaningful data that revealed the theoretical, practical, and cultural significance attributed to play and learning. In addition, the data provided insight into understanding play within a school context and the dissemination efforts made to inform practitioners and sustain play policy.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the participants' demographic profiles. This is followed by the thematic findings that emerged from the data. The main theme discovered was the compartmentalization of play and learning with localizing play, image of the child, educators' roles, compound effects, and dissemination strategies as the subsidiary areas of focus. These themes are presented in more detail in this chapter and provide the foundation for the plan of action offered and discussed in the subsequent chapter.

Participants' Profiles

This section provides a brief description of the participants' educational background, training, and professional experience obtained through a short demographic questionnaire that was completed by participants prior to the interview process (See

Appendix B). To protect the confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms generated by the researcher, are used throughout the study.

There were seven female participants involved in the study, three of which were kindergarten teachers and four were early childhood educators. All four early childhood educators received a Bachelor degree in the Arts (General, Psychology, Family and Social Relations) and a diploma in Early Childhood Education with two participants acquiring an additional Bachelor degree in Education. All three kindergarten teachers earned a Bachelor degree in the Arts (Child Studies/French, English, and Psychology/History-minor) and a Bachelor degree in Education with one participant obtaining a Master degree in Education.

All seven participants reported receiving training in kindergarten curriculum, child development, and play-based learning, with the exception of one early childhood educator who noted they did not receive any training in kindergarten curriculum and one kindergarten teacher who reported to have not received workshop training in kindergarten curriculum or child development.

In relation to the number of months/years teaching in a kindergarten classroom, the timeframe for the early childhood educators ranged from 7 months to 3 years 9 months. For the kindergarten teachers the range was 2 years 8 months to 18 years. The timeframe for the early childhood educators is understandably lower than the kindergarten teachers given that early childhood educators were not inducted into a kindergarten classroom until the initiation of this program, which was only four years ago.

Thematic Findings

Participants were presented with a series of interview questions during the interview process, which were later organized and clustered according to the two research questions investigating educators' perceptions, interpretations, and practices of play-based learning and policy. As illustrated in Appendix C, the names of the participants and their responses to the corresponding questions were coded into words or simple phrases. Repeated codes were colour coded revealing patterns among the participants' responses. These patterns were developed into categories and were noted at the bottom of the table. Cycling back and forth through the initial categories and readings of the transcripts resulted in a categorization of themes that were studied in connection to the data derived from the field transcripts.

Observations of educators in their classrooms along with classroom elements were recorded as field note transcripts. These transcripts were coded into words or phrases relevant to the predetermined topics (program structure, classroom design, type of activities, teaching strategies, and conversations) and plotted in a descriptive matrix according to the topic and site. Repeated codes among the three sites were colour coded and identified at the bottom of the table. The patterns were compared to the responses given to corresponding interview questions. Appendix D illustrates the descriptive matrix used for the predetermined topic of teaching strategies. In this case, the topic of teaching strategies was compared to the questions – how do you use play in teaching and describe your role in a play-based learning environment. The patterns in the stories told and the practices observed were developed into categories with further analysis from the policy documents and my journal entries revealing the recurring themes discussed in the following section.

Compartmentalization of Play and Learning

The main theme identified was the compartmentalization of play and learning. It was a common thread throughout the participants' responses and the identified subsidiary themes – localizing play, image of the child, educators' roles, compound effects, and dissemination strategies. Even though these themes are listed and explained separately, it should be noted that they are all interconnected with one another, further reinforcing the play-learning dichotomy.

Localizing play. The position and direction of play are important factors to consider when determining its role in the classroom. In terms of position, one must consider where, when, and how play is occurring in the classroom to determine where it is situated among teaching and learning and essentially its importance and value for educators. In my observations I examined three different categories: (1) program structure (free play time, group time, and flexibility in schedule), (2) classroom design (centres available, centre layout/functionality, wall displays, and provocations), and (3) type of activities (free play time, group time, child-initiated/teacher-initiated).

The findings revealed that each of the three classrooms had the children participate in free play in two separate blocks of time – once in the morning and once in the afternoon. The duration of play for each of the three classrooms in each block period was a maximum of 45 minutes despite the designated time stipulation of at least one hour for each play block (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario [ETFO], 2010; par health nexus santé, 2012). The amount of time students spent in whole group time ranged from four to six times per day with one of these times allocated daily for Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS). All three classrooms demonstrated flexibility in scheduling to accommodate students' needs and interests by shortening whole group instruction,

stopping midway through a storybook and continuing later in the day or the following day, adding whole group time for students to share their creations and the knowledge learned, and adding whole group time to read a story found related to the day's events or current students' interests.

The classroom design across all three classrooms revealed similarities in centres available and layout, and differences were noticed in the wall displays and the introduction of provocations. Provocations are a means to provoke student inquiry, questions, explorations, and theories.

The centres set up across all three classrooms consisted of a large block centre, dramatic play centre, paint easel, sensory, manipulative centre (playdough, puzzles, small building materials), and book centre. A writing centre, art centre, and technology centre (computers, iPads) were set up in two out of three rooms and only one classroom had a quiet centre available to students all day. A quiet centre is usually situated in a separate area to provide students with some privacy and relief from the rest of the group while they engage in quiet activities (Shipley, 2008). The layout of the centres allowed free-flow play between centres such that students could manoeuver easily and materials could be used in adjacent centres. This elimination of centre boundaries allows complementary learning to take place with learning gained in one centre being transferred to another centre (Shipley, 2008). There were a variety of materials available in each centre with predominantly more close-ended toys suggesting function and use. Two classrooms had natural materials (such as tree cookies/disks, shells, rocks, and sticks) for students to explore.

The wall displays in all three classrooms consisted of student work, photo documentation panels, wonder questions, and a word wall. Two out of the three

classrooms had a calendar chart up and one classroom included commercial posters. Provocations,were provided in all three classrooms, but with different methods used – set up of materials (table set up with caterpillar habitat and related materials), a question (a student's question about the function of the heart), and an event (a nature walk of collected materials).

The type of activities in which students engaged during free playtime was consistent across all three classrooms. The play activities that students demonstrated while playing at various centres included creative play, fantasy play, socio-dramatic play, manipulative play, physical play, games with rules, and language play (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009; Queensland Government, 2014). During whole group time the central focus was on literacy through the use of books, conversations, and teacher-directed instruction such as morning message and PALS. The play-like activities observed during whole group time were language play through the use of songs, physical play in the forms of creative movement, dance, and yoga, and manipulative play through handling (banging, pressing, shaking) musical instruments.

Other than whole group time most of the activities during free play were child-directed with the exception of one classroom where, on the second day of observation, the kindergarten teacher set up literacy-based centres, for a duration of 15 minutes, with students assigned to designated tables. On another occasion, she also performed teacher-directed assessments as she called over students one at a time to complete a task she had prepared.

In examining the program structure, classroom design, and type of activities it would appear that value is attributed to play. Educators prepared the environment offering various play opportunities in different spaces of the classroom. They displayed

documentation of children's play and work, on the walls, making the learning visible through photos, descriptions, and connections to the curriculum. Also, there were play time blocks allocated for free play or child-directed play. The interview questions that coincided with these observations (what is the role of play in kindergarten and how important is play as a mechanism for learning?) revealed educators expressing play as the main role in kindergarten with all educators indicating play as very important as a mechanism for learning. However, the following response by Lucy, an early childhood educator (ECE,) indicates the lack of importance attributed to play with some educators using it as an indirect means of fulfilling curriculum outcomes.

Well, I guess we could look at what the role of play should be and what the role is. So, I think the role in kindergarten should be that children take the lead, get to pursue their interests, have the freedom to really **own t**he classroom and follow what **they** want to do with assistance and extensions provided by adults. We can kind of help, help provide those extensions and further and deepen thinking. But, in my experience because I've been in several schools. In some classrooms it's still thought of as what kids just go and do while the teacher sits at a desk and does small group work, which is often sheet work or the play is just what occupies the larger group while I [kindergarten teacher] do something with the smaller group. It's not seen as valuable. There's no learning to its own end. There's still focus on literacy and numeracy so I find teachers still try to inject that literacy and numeracy lesson in all play activities.

The course of play in the trajectory of learning brings us to the direction of play. The direction of play points to the aims of play, as well as, where it is leading its travellers, through a journey or to a destination. In other words, is play guiding its

players through a process or to an outcome? Reflecting on the aims of play the question is, does play inform practice with links made to the curriculum or does the curriculum and teacher's agenda direct students' play opportunities? When play informs practice with connections made to the curriculum it stems from the children's interests, "prioritizing the child" (Rogers, 2011, p. 14), trusting and knowing that learning expectations also will be met. Therefore, play spaces are inviting with open-ended activities purposely chosen by the educator based on knowledge of the children's interests and capabilities. This knowledge is acquired through conversations and observations of children while engaged in play. On the other hand, if the curriculum informs children's play, as Lucy (ECE) suggested, then play spaces are arranged and controlled to prioritize curriculum and conformity (Rogers, 2011) with close-ended activities that meet the educator's timetable and predetermined learning expectations.

A common component defining play expressed by all the participants was that it is based on children's interests, which becomes visible through educators' observations. Anya, (ECE), in the following quote, explained how she plans for play-based experiences in her classroom.

> Well once we observe the children playing with the materials we have in the classroom, I will write down anecdotal observations and I do it as soon as possible so that way everything is fresh in my head and record their conversations. And from there I look at it and I try to find commonalities in the classroom to see [what] the majority of them are interested in. I have a morning meeting or an introduction on a certain topic based on their interest and/or I'll leave something in the classroom for them to go over, without saying anything, go over and just

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explore and see what they do with the materials and then go from there and…see where their play goes.

Genevieve, a kindergarten teacher (KT) of 18 years, shared a similar sentiment, "Rather than forcing things down them we need to be more aware of their interests and base our teaching and our environment and the things that we provide to them on their interests and we'll see greater gains".

But, the extent of children's interests is limited to the materials and toys made available to them. Thus, if the majority of materials and toys are close ended, as was observed for this study, methods should be employed to gather information of children's interests and allow them to explore their interests. This may come in the form of wonder questions, inquiries, and provocations.

Lucy (ECE) reinforced this idea in the following comment:

I'm not a fan of the materials that we have in our classroom. I think the materials that the board supplies all the kindergarten classrooms with are not as open-ended as they could and should be. It doesn't lend itself to inquiry. It doesn't lend itself to student involvement and to students, because to me it's restrictive. It's too much of the same stuff all the time and it's a little bit too close-ended…They're used at the same time of the day and you can only explore so much with those materials. If we were doing true inquiry what was in the room would be changing all the time because we'd be feeding that inquiry, we would be bringing things in from the outside that are different and new and that come from the children's questions and wondering…and I'm not sure what to do about that because it's an expense thing, isn't it?

Both the early childhood educators and the kindergarten teachers who participated in the study claimed to use observations to determine children's interests with the intention of informing their practice. However, where the differences become apparent is in kindergarten teachers' preoccupation with covering curriculum and fulfilling teacher objectives. Grace (KT) remarked "teachers get so bogged down on curriculum that they don't realize that they'll get so much more from their kids if they can just allow them to play and explore, than they would making them sit down and teach them the way they want them to learn". She distinguished the different approaches taken by teachers and the early childhood educators when she stated that,

> When we [teachers] were planning our lessons we would look at the document, what expectations do we need to cover and we would provide an opportunity to make sure that that expectation would be covered and even now still in centres. An ECE comes from now we've provided this opportunity where does it fit into the document…So for us [teachers] curriculum drives instruction or it drives the play, for her play drives the curriculum.

This "conflict of interests" (Rogers, 2011, p. 6) between the direction of play and its competing counterpart, the curriculum, was also expressed by Lucy (ECE):

> Here's the big difference with curriculum, the teachers look at the curriculum and go - ok we have to do this, we have to do this, and we have to do this. Where I won't look at the document, I will look at what the kids are doing and I'll go look at the curriculum document. So, I go to the kids and see what they're doing and try to find it in the curriculum document whereas, I think, the teachers mind is well here is what we have to cover, how are we going to do it?

Thus, despite the expressed emphasis on children's interests to inform practice kindergarten teachers fall back to relying on the curriculum to provide direction, rather than the children. Evalyn (KT) clearly strengthens this argument when she claimed, "my focus comes from the curriculum documents". This mindset may stem from the way teachers have been educated while pursuing their degree in teaching. They have been trained to refer first to the curriculum standards and then plan and implement their lessons accordingly given their knowledge of the subject, knowledge of learning, and knowledge of their students. Genevieve (KT) professed,

I always come in with an idea or a goal or something in the program [curriculum document] that I've looked at that I haven't covered yet, that I somehow am going to fit into their play and want to have a direction. But much of what happens is based on where the kids are at, what their interests are.

This contradictory statement claims to uphold children's interests, but the children's interests are foreseeably overshadowed by the teacher's agenda to track curriculum coverage. The notion of fitting in an expectation in the child's play indicates that play itself has no merit and is lacking in learning potential if one must infuse it with a learning goal. It also reveals that more attention is given to an outcome rather than concentrating on the learning process taking place along the way during play. This is perhaps due to teachers being accustomed to teaching in a prescriptive manner with a learning objective always in mind. As Evalyn (KT) reiterated,

We're teachers but we still have to know what steps to take to get to a certain outcome. When you're planning a lesson for students to learn you have to have an objective and then you plan your steps to help them hit that objective.

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The direction of play, based on the dichotomy of outcome and process, raises the question of the aim of play within a school context, and consequently, the aim of education (Papatheodoru, 2009). Is play just a means to deliver the curriculum standards with students meeting predetermined outcomes or is there intrinsic value in the process of play itself? Evalyn (KT) remarked,

> Play in a school context is that I believe that play should have a purpose. There should always be an end result. You want to go from just playing to developing their play and guiding them towards an outcome or a learning goal, an achievement in their play not just play for the sake of play. But that there's a purpose behind what it is they're doing whether it's to develop a certain skill – fine motor, gross motor, whether it's an investigation to start questioning or if it's just dramatic play where they're acting out the roles that they see in their everyday life. Play has a purpose.

To encapsulate this point Evalyn (KT) professed, "If you want them to play you say go play. If you want them to learn you say go play with a purpose". In contrast, Lucy (ECE) expressed her viewpoint:

> Play is learning. Play has its own purpose to its own end because it reflects what children are doing at their stage of development. So, I can't take play and use it as a tool to try to teach them something. They're already learning. But, we have to have faith in understanding that, believing that they are learning while they're playing.

This faith in play needs to come first in trusting the players, the children, as competent individuals active in their own learning and, secondly, trust in oneself as an educator while traversing in the unpredictable world of play.

Image of the child. This catchphrase, synonymous with the Reggio Emilia philosophy, has been widely adopted in the early childhood profession. It implicates that our view of children influences the way that we play and work with them. If we have an image of the child as strong, capable, and possessing rights than their nature, thoughts, play, and work are taken seriously and respected (Hewett, 2001). They are seen as "authors in their own learning" (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 55) rather than mere targets of instruction.

In examining the educators' response to describing the child's role in the classroom, it would appear that the children in their classrooms are well respected with their described roles being to ask questions, wonder, socialize, be a kid, be critical thinkers and problem solvers, be happy, and engage in activities without fear of failing. Lucy (ECE) responded,

> I think the children's natural curiosity and an environment that's rich with things
> that lend themselves to exploration, they would drive the curriculum in the
> classroom. Their interests and what they want, what they're interested in and what
> they want to look at, and what they want to do would be your guide to where
> you're going. Again, it's hard for me I'm speaking abstractly…I think that
> children need to feel that they are in control of their process of their own learning
> and their own exploration and we're there to help them understand where they're
> at and where to take that a little bit further. But, it needs to come from them.

Lucy's (ECE) comment below suggests the basis on why she was speaking above in abstract terms.

> Again, I struggle, I struggle with that…I really don't think it's [play-based
> learning] happening in our classroom. Although I think my teaching partner

thinks that it is and I don't think it is. I think maybe we have different ideas of what play-based learning is.

The disparity may be due in part to teachers' need to fulfill the curriculum expectations, as mentioned previously by Grace (KT) in her statement "So for us [teachers] curriculum drives instruction or it drives the play, for her [ECE] play drives the curriculum". Teachers' motivation to fulfill the curriculum expectations does not leave much room for children to explore, ask questions, and be critical thinkers. Confined within the constraints of the curriculum, children's ownership of "their own learning" is not always taking place. In fact, responses to other questions revealed teacher's agenda to fulfill curriculum objectives and a view of a child in need, with teacher's filling them up with knowledge, rather than a strong, capable child full of ideas. For example, Genevieve (KT) declared,

> So I think it's important that you know your curriculum, your program, the expectations and have some idea of where your children are at so you know what they need. So, while they're at play we're bringing the teaching and the learning to them.

The above comment signifies that children are not learning while they are playing unless the learning is brought to them by a teacher familiar with curriculum. The main premise underlying the comments from the kindergarten teacher participants was the importance of curriculum for instruction. This notion unfolds a depiction of children who are in need of instruction from a teacher rather than appreciating the potential and capability of children to direct their own learning.

The main focus on setting specific curriculum goals for students to meet, in and of itself, implies a deficiency model of children who are passive, dependent, and

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incompetent. This may explain the high frequency of whole class instruction time observed in a given day by all three classrooms and the shortened allotted time for play (45 minutes or less rather than the required full-hour). Further, with curriculum interjected into their play, value is not given to the learning already taking place while the children are in play. Hence, even though all the educators expressed positive descriptions of the children's roles and were familiar with the appropriate jargon, alternate questions brought forward their true beliefs and practices, particularly among the kindergarten teachers. This is not to say that kindergarten teachers did not engage students in asking questions, expressing their ideas, and participating in problem solving because all educators used these methods during my observations. However, it does suggest that the image of the child was sometimes compromised at the expense of educators struggling with their roles and striving to meet curriculum expectations.

Educator's Role. The struggles that educators are currently experiencing in their roles may be due to the competing constructs of their own images (Sisson, 2009), in addition to their aims of education.

In North American culture, education is viewed as an economic good (Keeley, 2007) with teachers fine-tuning students' skills and competencies so they are well prepared to contribute to the market economy as skilful and productive workers (Papatheodoru, 2009). The objective is to achieve economic prosperity and growth in order to compete with other countries globally. The steps taken to reach this goal begin with education and assurance that "measurable learning outcomes" (Wien & Dudley-Marling, 1998, p. 405) are attained via high-stakes testing.

Thus, play, which is process-oriented, is situated within a context that is driven by results with some kindergarten teachers behaving as "mere technicians" (Wien & Dudley-

Marley, 1998, p. 410) when delivering their instruction dominated by curriculum outcomes. This is a challenge, especially in the new program, which is inspired by a key Reggio Emilia principle of teacher as facilitator, researcher, and partner in learning. Early childhood educators, on the other hand, are familiar with this principle and accustomed to process-based learning in their practice, but are positioned in a school environment that is directed by outcomes-based learning.

In describing their role in a play-based learning environment educators offered responses such as facilitator, scaffolder, observer, listener, mediator, and partner. In my observations I found the participants engaged in most of the aforementioned roles with two of the ECEs employing limited scaffolding techniques to extend children's learning, during play and whole group time. This may be due to their restricted knowledge of the Full-Day Kindergarten program document, which would, otherwise, allow them to make connections and provoke children's thinking further.

Also, the notion of partner, I believe, is not a term that should be used lightly as it connotes a negotiated curriculum among educators and students that embraces democracy where "no one has a monopoly on what children need or need to know" (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002, p. 168). It supports educators and students as co-constructors of knowledge and "theory builders" rather than "theory consumers" (Kreschevsky & Stork, 2000, p. 64). The participants' descriptions as partners is questionable considering the number of whole class instructional time noted, the content of lessons focused on literacy and numeracy learning expectations, and the injection of curriculum expectations into the children's play implicating kindergarten teachers' roles as providers of knowledge. This was also evident in some of their responses such as "you give them the little bits of

teaching to build for the expectation that you want covered" and "while they're at play we're bringing the teaching and learning to them".

Kindergarten teachers also expressed a responsibility to prepare students for Grade 1 and this meant less time for play and more time given to 'learning' through teacher instructed whole group time and worksheet tasks. As Genevieve (KT) explained,

Come now March and April I'm not going to lie I feel I need to be getting these kids ready for Grade 1 and that means pencil, paper stuff because come September 7th they're going to sit in a desk and be given pencil, paper.

Grace (KT) also expressed concern that skills such as cutting "needed" in Grade 1, which are not being practiced in kindergarten, will hinder her students or there will be repercussions when they reach Grade 1, such as having to stay inside for recess. Also, Grace (KT) admitted to apologizing to a Grade 1 teacher, stating that she [Grade 1 teacher] will not be getting the same children as last year, but rather 21st century thinkers. Her concern was that the Grade 1 teacher would be overwhelmed that the entry students "aren't ready, they don't know how to write, they don't know how to sit".

Lucy (ECE) claimed to be struggling in her role. She described her role to ideally be "a facilitator to the children's play". She continued with,

"It's different because there's the curriculum and the teachers are always worried about curriculum and always worried about them being ready for Grade 1…We're still doing centres in our classroom that are 100 percent teacher-directed that I have a hard time with. My teacher partner will say to me what did you have in mind for centres next week? And I never know how to answer that because it shouldn't be what I have in mind for centres next week and I don't think we should be telling kids they have to go to a centre and what they need to do at that

centre and I understand why she's doing that. I get that's where she's coming

from because that's how it's always been historically. It's very hard for teachers to

let go of that role because than I think they feel that they're not doing their job and

they want to do their job.

Thus, Lucy's account revealed her struggle as an ECE in a teacher-directed,

curriculum-driven program. It also reinforced the pressures that kindergarten teachers

feel to prepare students for Grade 1, which in addition to other constraints compound the

compartmentalization of play and learning.

Compound effects. This pertains to elements in the kindergarten program that

contribute and intensify the dichotomy of play and learning. Class size, resources, space,

and co-planning time were the top four challenges reported. Followed by a hierarchal

teaching structure with unbalanced power and relationship dynamics evident in the policy

analysis, participants' comments, and my personal experiences as expressed in My Lived

Reality (journal entries) in the following chapter.

Currently, there is no cap on class numbers in the FDELK program. The average

class size that is required to be maintained by school boards is 26 children (JK and SK

combined) paired up with one kindergarten teacher and one early childhood educator.

But, some classrooms are crammed with as many as 40 children (Alphonso, 2014). This

is a far cry from Pascal's recommendation in With our Best Future in Mind (2009), which

suggested up to 20 children with one kindergarten teacher and one early childhood

educator.

All the participants reported the number of children in the class as a challenge.

Sami (ECE) expressed the difficulty in teaching with a high class size, "The

numbers…sometimes it's just all crowd control. Its's hard to do your job as an ECE and

really implement that play-based learning…when you're trying to watch 20 other children". Compounding the challenge of high numbers, half the participants, such as Anya (ECE) and Evalyn (KT) noted high needs as a concern. Anya explained, "It's hard with 30 kids in a classroom and our needs in our particular classroom, they're so high and there's not much support for those kids". Evalyn (KT) expressed a similar sentiment,

> But how am I supposed to do it with 30 kids, half of them don't speak English, some of them have severe issues. How do you want to run this program of play-based learning when you would have to be running a hundred different centres to accommodate every child because there's so many kids in the room and there's not enough materials to go around.

In this type of environment play becomes compromised as teachers settle for more quiet, passive activities such as whole class group time and table activities to control what "can be chaotic" (Grace, KT) and implement what they feel is 'learning' rather than a 'free for all'. The quality of play and learning also diminishes, as there is not enough resources or time to interact with each student individually, to observe their play, and extend their learning, despite two educators in the room. This, in essence, can create, as Grace (KT) said, "alot of missed opportunities",

> In terms of resources, this refers to funding and materials. According to all the educators, there is not enough funding to purchase materials needed to support the investigations and inquiries expected from the program. As Evalyn (KT) reported, "There's not enough resources to create these authentic, wonderful investigations and inquiries that are being touted as the way to go. Whose pocket is it coming out of". In addition, some schools are receiving more funding than others with the more

disadvantaged schools, surprisingly, receiving the least support and educators supplying the resources themselves such as Amelia (ECE) reported,

> I think, would be resources. Sometimes it gets to the point where as a first year employee financially I can't bring in all the materials. It gets a little expensive to put materials out there that the children want to play with…It's hard to ask the parents because they're trying to support themselves where that money they waste on these materials could go for food or their clothing or gas or their bills. It's hard for me to ask the parents while for us we should have the resources to provide for children to have this play-based opportunity.

The low funding for certain schools may be due to lower enrollment in these schools as Ontario provincial funding is based on a per pupil basis (People for Education, 2014). Regardless, quality of education for students in relation to child-staff ratios has been compromised at the expense of money. With so many children, there is, as Evalyn previously mentioned, "not enough materials to go around". These materials pertain to toys, furnishings, outdoor equipment, and materials to carry out inquiry-based learning activities. Educators unable to afford the materials needed to carry out certain play inquiries or elements of the program are left feeling frustrated and, possibly, unmotivated turning to 'cookie-cutter' activities based on learning outcomes.

Space is another element of the classroom that has an effect on the play-learning dichotomy. With so many children in a confined space they are just "stepping over each other" as stated by Sami (ECE). The older buildings have small rooms that do not allow for many play opportunities, as students do not have enough room to fully engage themselves. Anya (ECE) works in a small room in an older building and she mentioned,

I know it's hard to change whatever school you're at. But, just with the classroom size and the small space we have…if it was a smaller number of students in the space we have, it would be easier. But, it's hard to fit a lot of things into the classroom with what we have going on.

Unable to accommodate all the children during play some educators, particularly kindergarten teachers, resort to assigned small group work to keep the classroom dynamics at bay. Also, the notion of "environment as the third teacher" (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002, p. 11) falls short due to financial constraints. The environment as the third teacher addresses the role of space and its importance and influence on child development and learning. Educators try to maximize the environment's potential in order for children to acquire skills with every aspect of the space carefully planned so that children have the optimal environment to work and learn. Commercialism is absent and displays of found objects, documentation of children's work, and photographs are presented to reveal the rich nature of the learning environment (New, 2009).

Limited space in some of the classrooms, particularly those situated in the older buildings where renovations have not taken place, and limited resources to add to the space, diminish opportunities to enhance children's play-learning experiences. Educators dissatisfied with the classroom space and without access to sufficient resources feel hindered in their roles and the quality of play-based learning experiences/materials they can offer their students leaving them to use prefabricated structured materials or worksheets they already have on hand. These close-ended materials add little value to children's active role in play and, in fact, separate the nature of play from learning.

Co-planning time was another main challenge disclosed by the participants. This will be discussed in connection to educators' differing approaches and philosophies. All

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participants claimed they wished they had planning time with their partners. ECEs wished they were given some planning time as their teaching partners are allotted six 40 minutes prep times per week and ECEs are not granted any prep time. Anya (ECE) expressed both sentiments in the following statement:

I know the kindergarten teacher I work with she has her prep, but ECEs don't. I wish we had more time with them, on her prep. So that way we can relay information and team teach that way, and have a discussion about our day went well or what we can work on for tomorrow, things like that. But I don't think during the school hours in a day, we don't. It's either morning when everybody arrives and we're taking down chairs and we're busy getting everything set up. But, it's hard to have that time to talk.

The majority of participants expressed "planning on the fly" or the teacher and ECE planning their own activities with some ECEs using their own time to plan. Both these approaches do not support quality programming for kindergarten students because they do not involve thoughtful, reflective discussions and collaboration. Instead, they support hasty and pressed decisions held in balance by fragmented planning and teaching.

In addition to kindergarten teachers and ECEs planning separately, children's play-based learning experiences become divided as both educators exercise their different philosophies, training, and approaches to learning in their practice. ECEs plan and deliver inclusive play-based learning and care programs for children between 0-12 years old to promote their well-being and holistic development (Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, 2010). Teachers are responsible for instruction, assessment, and evaluation of student progress in relation to curriculum outcomes (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Hence, ECEs come from a background of implementing play and

kindergarten teachers come from a background of implementing curricular learning outcomes. If there is never any opportunity in this program to discuss, inform, and collaborate ideas and theories of play and learning, both constructs will always remain divided.

The unbalanced power and relationship dynamics that exist between ECEs and kindergarten teachers (Gibson & Pelletier, 2011) has created a hierarchal teaching structure. As such, kindergarten teachers may not consider their ECEs' philosophies and approaches to play-based learning, viewing it as Evalyn (KT) articulated, "just play" and not "play with a purpose", which is commonly associated with learning tied to the curriculum expectations. This leaves the kindergarten teacher, who inevitably holds more influence and power in the 'partnership', to pursue their own version of play-based learning. This version, as implied by all kindergarten teacher participants, is inadvertently tied to meeting curriculum objectives with play as just a mode of achieving that expectation rather than being viewed as intertwined with the learning.

The underlying tone attached to the discourse is the unequal value attributed to the role of the ECE in a school context compared to the kindergarten teacher. This assertion comes from the dominant discourse terminology in the policy documents, participants' comments, and my own personal observations and experiences. As discussed in my policy analysis in Chapter 2, the text language used polarizes the equality of both educators' roles. Kindergarten teachers are given more dominant terminology, such as "management", "responsible" and ECEs are given more passive terminology, such as "facilitate", "contribute".

In response to a question regarding what administration was communicating regarding play-based learning and implementation led Lucy (ECE) to divulge information on the treatment of ECEs and principal support. This is what she shared:

It's never Mrs. X's (ECEs) room, it's always Mrs. Y's (KT) class. We had an incident last week and I got really, really ticked off because it was our walk-a-thon and the walk-a-thon happened during the teacher's prep time. So, I'm outside with the kids, and Mrs. Y's on her prep and they call the classrooms. I'm the one physically standing right next to the person with the microphone, with the kids…Mrs Y's class proceed to the track. Is it really that much to ask to be addressed? If you look at our envelopes in the classroom they all have Mrs. Y's name…Everything has Mrs. Y's name…I've put Mrs. X next to it [on the attendance] in marker as just my own silent form of protest. You look at meetings with families, I'm not given a time to attend meetings with families…I complained about it. Our administration asked the ECEs to be more flexible and understanding. That we can't always attend these things and my response was – are we even making an effort to include the ECEs in these things because we work with those children every bit as much as the teacher does. Why are we not included on meetings about children or meetings with families? We should be.

Lucy (ECE) further elaborated, "it comes down to what your principal supports" and "it sends a message throughout the staff when you're excluded". Principals set the tone of the collegiality in their schools by what they allow or do not allow to happen and, also, by the issues that they choose to address or not address. In their leadership role, their actions send a clear message to the school community, including parents, of the value and significance they assign to their staff. This claim comes from my experience

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with a principal who did not allow me to sign the term report card. It was the first time I was not permitted to place my signature alongside the kindergarten teacher despite the equal time spent in completing documentations and assessments of students. The justification was that it was never done in the past and some other principals were not allowing it. This type of response from a principal places ECEs in a precarious position as they are left to justify their equal roles with the rest of the school community without the support and advocacy of their principal.

I have witnessed and have been part of other experiences that parallel the same sentiment as described by Lucy (ECE). These include, but are not limited to, my (and other ECEs) name not appearing on the class attendance or school website ; ECEs listed as support staff on school websites; not being addressed on the announcements when it pertains to my class; teachers calling out to students the names of their class, but excluding the ECEs names in the process – for example, 'Mrs X's class line up' instead of 'Mrs X's and Mrs. Y's class line up'; kindergarten teachers made decisions regarding events and field trips in consultation with themselves instead of with their partners; kindergarten teachers sent notes/letters home to parents with only their names on it; notes sent in by my parents only addressed to the kindergarten teacher.

These gestures, even though small, signify the value not accredited to the ECEs role in the kindergarten classroom. In addition, they all help contribute to the discourse, which compound the delivery of the program. The discourse that prevails in the planning and delivery of the program is subject further by the undefined roles and unclear implementation strategies disseminated by principal, school board, and Ministry.

Dissemination strategies. The consensus among all participants was that the dissemination of information regarding concept and implementation of play-based

learning in the classroom, and roles and responsibilities of the kindergarten teacher and early childhood educator was unclear in text and verbal communication.

All the educators agreed that the curriculum document captures the concept of play-based learning through the examples it provides. As Genevieve (KT) declared, "the link is those examples and them explaining situations that's linking play to the expectation". The examples are positioned within each specific expectation followed by how children might demonstrate their learning, and how educators can respond, challenge, and extend the learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). However, Genevieve (KT) and Amelia (ECE) mentioned the wording in the document is not specific enough with generic phrases such as "knows most letters of the alphabet" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 85), and "investigate some concepts of quantity" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 98) left to individual interpretation.

In terms of implementation strategies, Genevieve (KT) claimed that there needs be more specific guidelines so that "we're all reporting the same way, we're all working off the same program". Evalyn (KT) voiced a similar sentiment:

> There's not a lot of information on play-based learning being delivered to us so we're kind of guessing what play-based learning looks like and how to implement it and since the document doesn't provide the outline or the guide or a set formula on how to develop a play-based learning activity, something should be in there.

Challenging this idea is, if the document provides more specific guidelines would it "lend itself to a lot of teacher-directed activities" as Lucy (ECE) claimed it does, at the expense of child-initiated play? Lucy (ECE) further elaborated by stating, "it's very easy to go to that document, find a strand in math that you feel you need to cover and then set up an activity to do that".

In the absence of a "formula", some kindergarten teachers appear unsettled on how to best implement play in the context of a school classroom and end up copying scenarios illustrated in the document to cover curriculum expectations. Grace (KT) explained, "I was able to highlight situations that I figured, I can reenact this in my room, I can make sure this happens" with examples providing "a snapshot of what your room should probably look like". But, is this really the intended purpose of the examples – for educators to recreate scenarios as 'cookie-cutter' situations or do the concepts serve as a general guideline to tailor according to context and students? Lucy (ECE) remarked, "I don't think the example is meant to be used as what you do in your classroom. It's meant to highlight or help you understand the concept". Another ECE, Anya (ECE), stated, "what we do as teachers, we implement it [implementation strategies] according to our classroom and our needs of our students".

Thus, the concept of play-based learning was perceived by participants to be embedded in the curriculum document through the given examples. However, implementation strategies were reported as ambiguous and unclear with educators, uncomfortably, having to decipher how to implement it. This raises the question, do implementation strategies in the curriculum document need to be spelled out for educators, who should be adept at using the curriculum at their own discretion with the knowledge they have of their students, context, and concepts of play and learning? But then, this would leave educators to interpret and employ strategies according to their own philosophies and educational training, which as described earlier is connected to their role in the 'partnership'.

Accordingly, the roles and responsibilities of the educators were also initially discussed through my document analysis of the curriculum document and Pascal's report

in Chapter 3. My findings revealed the vague descriptions of educators' responsibilities in Pascal's document to perpetuate the discourse between both educators, which is further strengthened by the terminology in text in the curriculum document. The generality in description of educators' responsibilities and the dominant discourse favouring kindergarten teachers' authority promotes an unbalanced partnership and, consequently, a play-learning dichotomy linked to both educators' respective positions and backgrounds.

The participants also expressed undefined roles in the curriculum document with Lucy (ECE) having indicated, "the lack of clear description of the role of the ECE" given in the Ministry document. Genevieve (KT) commented,

I think the document is very broad too where people don't know what their job is. So, I don't know if the job descriptions aren't specific enough, what the expectations of people are or what they can…even in the assessment or document, teacher does report card, but how does the early childhood educator contribute to that and I think it's different everywhere and we need to have something standard across the province, if not just across the board. That people know what to expect of their job and what they need to do and how it's going to be used and how they're going to fit into that…and that goes all the way back to administration.

Evalyn (KT) noted that administration is not defining roles for educators, "people from above aren't telling the people their roles and everything, and their roles in the classroom and what this is supposed to look like". Evalyn (KT) pointed out that specific roles of the teacher and ECE should be laid out in the introduction of the curriculum document in order for play-based learning to occur. She elaborated further with a poignant statement, "You can't have a play-based classroom running effectively if everybody doesn't know the part they play". Hence, to alleviate ambiguity, discourse,

and program fragmentation dissemination efforts need to focus on being clear on the roles

and responsibilities of both educators with administrators and policy makers conveying

the same message through text and verbal communications.

Educators described how they perceived the concept of play-based learning and its

method of implementation were being conveyed by administration in workshops,

meetings, and daily interactions. The results disclosed that the Ministry embraces

learning through play with a significant amount of information on play-based learning

and the program being shared during Ministry board meetings.

According to Grace (KT), the school board "has a very good handle on

recognizing rhe value in learning and inquiry-based learning and I think what they

struggle with now is recognizing its importance moving it on through the years".

Genevieve (KT) described the board workshops as,"too general…need to be more

specific… too research based with not enough practicality". As a result, the message is

not getting through or it is not being understood clearly. As Evalyn (KT) so clearly

professed, "if they're giving it [how play-based learning should be implemented], I'm not

getting it".

Regarding the principals, common disclosure among the participants was that

principals do not have a good understanding of what play-based learning is and are,

therefore, not conveying anything to their FDELK staff. Principals only know what

educators are telling them and see the educators as the experts. Participants expressed the

importance of principals gaining a better understanding of the program, through

classroom involvement, in order to better support them in their roles and to advocate the

value of play to the rest of the school community.

It is interesting to note that through each demonstrated step of the administrative hierarchy, the message becomes progressively less clear. This reinforces the disclosure from Evalyn (KT) where she stated,

> There's nobody coming in to say yah you're doing this properly or yah that's what we're looking for or no you need to adjust this. There's no accountability for this program. That's a good way of describing it. There's no accountability. There's no consistency…no consistency across the board or even in the same school.

This leaves front-line practitioners implementing play-based learning according to their own interpretations of policy and their own knowledge of play-based learning, which derives from their education, theories, beliefs, values, attitudes, and culture. With so many factors influencing the state of play in school classrooms it is imperative that dissemination efforts be clear and well understood every step of the way to ensure accurate policy comprehension, implementation, and effectiveness.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings based on the analysis of data collected and strove to answer the following research questions:

1. What are early childhood educators' and kindergarten teachers' perceptions and practices of play-based learning?
2. What is the divide between policy and practice?
    i. How is the concept of play-based learning and method of implementation being conveyed in Ontario's new policy initiative via the FDELK Program

document, Pascal's document, workshops, meetings, and by
administration?

ii.   How do the practitioners' interpretations of play-based learning from these sources compare to their own perceptions and practices?

The findings revealed a compartmentalization of play and learning based on:
(1) the disparity in early childhood educators' and kindergarten teachers' perceptions, practices, and interpretations of play-based learning and contributing compound effects, including (2) the ambiguity and discourse prevalent in policy dissemination strategies augmenting the policy/practice divide.

More specifically, the results affirmed that all participants perceived play in accordance with children's interests and regarded play as very important to children's learning. Observations of practices revealed a consistency in how play was situated in the classroom in terms of program structure, classroom design, and type of activities. Free play (child-directed play) was assigned a given block of time in the morning and afternoon that was shorter than the prescribed time stipulated. There was a significant number of whole group instruction throughout the day primarily focused on literacy and teacher-directed instruction with flexibility to accommodate students. The set up of the classrooms offered various play opportunities in different spaces of the classrooms. However, given that a majority of toys were close ended, the range of interests that children were able to explore was limited to the materials available or the inquiries provoked by the educators.

In regards to the direction of play, a significant discrepancy was evident in the play/curriculum relationship. Early childhood educators explained that children's play

and interests informed their practice while kindergarten teachers indicated the curriculum drove their instruction and the play opportunities provided for students. Further, ECE participants asserted there was no distinction between play and learning as "play is learning" whereas, the kindergarten teachers comments revealed a distinction with curriculum governing their practice. Their different approaches, which magnify the compartmentalization of play and learning, were linked to their image of the child and perceptions of educators' roles.

The compound effects found to contribute to the dichotomy of play and learning pertained to class size, resources, space, co-planning time, and a hierarchal teaching structure, laden with power and relationship dynamics.

In reference to dissemination strategies, the majority of participants reported that the Ministry curriculum document captured the concept of play-based learning, but were unspecific and ambiguous in laying out implementation strategies and describing educators' roles and responsibilities. In addition to analyzing Pascal's document, my analysis revealed similar results with the exception of the description of play-based learning. In examining the term in text, the document conveyed the important role of play in learning, but it lacked in supplying a definition, explanation, or narration of "free play" and "structured play-based learning". Also, in the curriculum document, dominant-laden terminology was found associated to the kindergarten teacher, which may compound the discourse in power and relationship dynamics.

Participants described the board as having a good understanding of play-based learning and its importance, but the information relayed was not specific enough and "too research based with not enough practicality". As for the principals, common

disclosure among the participants was that principals did not have a good understanding of play, conveyed little to no information, and provided minimal support.

The information relayed to participants became predominantly less clear to them in the downward progression of the administrative hierarchy. Given that most educators could not decipher a clear message from administrators, a policy/practice divide has established. This, in turn, created difficulty in comparing their interpretation of play-based learning from these sources to their own perceptions and practices.

The next chapter will discuss these findings in association with the literature and my lived reality and dissonance as an early childhood educator in the field. Further, a plan of action is presented that strives to unify educators in their practice and challenge the way we think about play and learning.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them. (Albert Einstein, n.d.)

The previous chapter presented the thematic findings that emerged from educators expressed perceptions, interpretations, and practices of play-based learning in Ontario's new play policy initiative. This chapter discusses these findings in relation to the literature on play with particular attention given to its complexity, perceived value, and practice in educational settings. Connections are drawn to my personal experiences working in the program including struggles I worked through and my resolve in taking a stance. This is followed by implications for research and practice that serve to challenge our thinking on play and learning and broaden our knowledge to new directions in play policy. Lastly, a plan of action is proposed to build a common understanding and practice of play-based learning and promote more continuity in the program.

Play: Rhetoric and Reality

The research evidence has indicated that there are many benefits of play to children's development with play-based experiences encouraging the development and extension of children's skills in the areas of cognitive, language, creative, physical, personal, social, emotional (Brown & Patte, 2013; Nell, Drew, & Bush, 2013), moral, and spiritual development (NCCA, 2007). But, despite play's contribution to children's learning and development the nature of play has evoked much controversy regarding competing discourses of simplicity/complexity, significance/insignificance, and play/work. The rhetoric of play enveloped in ambiguity has left educators implementing their own reality of play with perceptions framed by knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, theories, values, principles (Bennet et al., 1997), culture, education, and experiences.

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The findings from this research have helped identify particular areas of educators' perceptions and practices that further complexify the ambiguity of play and augment the compartmentalization of play and learning. The areas are as follows: localizing play (the role of play in the classroom), the image of the child, the educator's role, compound effects, and dissemination strategies. Even though these areas are listed separately they are not mutually exclusive, but rather interconnected and enmeshed in ambiguity and discourse. For this reason the discussion that follows interweaves the roles they play in the compartmentalization of play and learning.

How educators situate play in the classroom and enable it to inform their practice exposes how much value they attribute to play in student learning. The arrangement, preparation of the environment, and planning of routines indicates the nature and quality of play that is available to children. The wider the range of play possibilities the educator offers the students, the richer their play experiences (Malaguzzi, 1998). As Malaguzzi (1998) asserts, "We must widen the range of topics and goals, the types of situations we offer and their degree of structure, the kinds and combinations of resources and materials, and the possible interactions with things, peers, and adults" (p. 79). Thus, educators must think carefully about the message the environment is communicating to children and others visiting the classrooms (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002). The space speaks about the educational philosophy and beliefs of the educator, as well as, their attitudes towards play, learning, and the image of the child.

In my observations of the participants' classrooms, I could see the various play opportunities offered in different spaces of the classroom and the representation of children's play and work through documentation. The "affective climate" (Shipley, 2008. p.69), signified by child-child and educator-child interactions, was warm, friendly, and

inclusive. All these elements impressed upon me the value educators place on play and

its importance to children's learning, as well as, the respect they had for the children and

their work. Their responses reinforced my view as they described play as the "main

component of the program" and "the way children learn".

However, where this begins to differ is how educators directed play within their

teaching and learning. All educators expressed children's interests as a fundamental

aspect of play, but kindergarten teachers used the curriculum to govern their practice and

instruct play while the early childhood educators sought the children's interests and play

as their compass.

The contrasting practices and expressed views demonstrated the different

perceptions educators have of play-based learning. Early childhood educators expressed

the learning capability inherent in play alone with subsequent connections made to the

curriculum, whereas kindergarten teachers expressed the learning potential of play when

driven by the learning objectives in the curriculum. Hence, the former exhibits trust in

the connection between play and learning while in the latter, faith in this connection

manifests when led by the curriculum, not in just play alone.

The diversity in perspectives became evident by educators' comments. Lucy

(ECE) asserted, "Play has its own end. So, if you're following the children's curiosity the

play helps me know what they want to be doing and what they're learning about". In

contrast, Evalyn (KT) professed, "If you want them to play you say go play. If you want

them to learn you say go play with a purpose", with the purpose tied to a learning

expectation. Thus, a dichotomy of play and learning unfolded as educators either

characterized play as a learning process or play as a means to achieve a learning outcome.

This process/outcome debate (Paptheodorou, 2009) echoed throughout educators'

responses, further revealing their perceptions of the purpose of play and, essentially, aims of education.

Play described as a learning process gives merit to the act of play itself and the meaning it holds for its players. It operates with the whole child in mind with all aspects of a child's development seen as interconnected rather than in isolation (Nell et al., 2013). Play and learning are regarded as "inseparable dimensions" (Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006, p. 47).

On the other hand, play used as a tool to reach a specified learning outcome, places little trust in play alone to contribute to learning. Instead, it is regarded as something that must be wielded by the teacher to gain assurance that learning has occurred (Moran & Brown, 2013). Play and learning are seen as distinct with the teacher injecting a learning goal into the children's play. This practice presents a fragmented view of learning as different learning components are segregated and inserted into the students' play, predominantly literacy and numeracy based. It also ignores students who can learn more than the outlined outcomes (Wien & Dudley-Marling, 1998).

Curriculum documents define in detail specific skills and knowledge that students are expected to develop within a subject area (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013b). Teachers carry out the instructions detailed in the documents in an efficient "lock-step" fashion (Wien & Dudlye, 1998, p. 411) with content completed within a timed sequence. In allowing the curriculum to traject the course of play, the kindergarten teacher participants in this study convey a distrust in play alone to contribute to learning, a distrust in children as strong, competent individuals capable of directing their own learning, and a distrust in themselves to be more than "mere technicians" (Wien & Dudley-Marley, 1998, p. 410) in children's learning. In taking on the role as a technician,

teachers follow a prescribed agenda fashioned by someone else. In 'the chain of command', this pattern of power and control repeats itself in a curriculum-driven program with teachers exerting power and control over the students. The notion of teacher control connects with Bernstein's (2003a) theory of visible pedagogy, where a teacher determines the subject criteria, selection of what will be covered, the organization of the materials presented, and the pace of teaching the material and, subsequently, the students' understanding of the material.

The role of the educator as a 'technician' is due in part to the "heritage school system" (Yelland et al., 2008, p. 5) that still prevails. This system holds on to a tradition of teaching and learning that is formal, structured (Brown & Patte, 2013) and focused on rote learning, memorization, and tests as determinants of knowledge acquisition (Yelland et al., 2008) and retention. In a standard-driven setting a "one-size fits all model" is the antithesis of a play-based approach (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 53).

How educators perceive their role in the FDELK program is largely shaped by their culture, education, experiences, and beliefs. Educators' beliefs regarding the child's role and the image of the child largely influence their practices, interactions with children, and the level of democracy in the student-teacher relationship. The comments from the kindergarten teachers echo an image of children who are in need of instruction rather then being capable of directing their own learning, particularly, with the disclosed importance placed on meeting specific curriculum goals set out by the teacher. My observations reinforce this deficiency model of children who are passive and dependent by the high frequency and duration of teacher-directed instruction observed.

Thus, students continue to be enveloped in a consumerist approach to teaching and learning when current society is "moving toward an emerging creative class that

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values conceptual knowledge and original thinking" (Golinkoff et al., 2006, p. 6). The "best practices of 21st century education" (Chard, 2011, para 1) involving developed skills from children driving their own learning through play, inquiry, research, and project collaboration (Bell, 2010) is not being fully realized as students sit quietly listening to teachers. The student's role in passive participation is not conducive to meaningful learning. Dewey believed that students should be actively engaged in the classroom in order for learning to occur and new ideas to form. He argued that if "the child is thrown into a passive, receptive, or absorbing attitude…the result is friction and waste" (Dewey, 2009, p. 39).

In addition to these attitudinal constraints are the compound effects identified by the participants such as class size, resources, space, co-planning time, and hierarchal teaching structure, which influence the play reality in classrooms. Some of these factors such as class size, resources, and space parallel the structural constraints posited by Dockett (2011) and Bennett et al. (1999). As discussed in Chapter 2, Dockett (2011) pointed out that resources and space were structural constraints that teachers reported affected the provision of play in an educational context. In addition, several functional constraints were also identified, such as curriculum expectations, group dynamics, minimal administrative support, and parental expectations (Dockett, 2011). Similarly, in the study by Bennett et al. (1999), teachers expressed structural constraints such as class size, resources, space, structure of formal schooling (timetable, curriculum) and functional constraints such as lack of adult support and pressure from expectations of external bodies (parents, inspectors), as mediating factors influencing the provision of play.

Thus, if play and learning are indivisible entities and regarded as "inseparable dimensions" (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006, p. 47) in practice, the lack of provision of play will directly affect students' learning. Educators need to be made aware of the evidence supporting the connection between play and learning and, also, need to appreciate that one cannot coexist without the other in educating young children.

This awareness and appreciation is strengthened or developed through the dissemination of information. The results from this study indicate that the relayed information educators received were obscure and unspecific, particularly regarding implementation strategies, educators' roles and responsibilities, and definition of free play and structured play-based learning. Further, the lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities combined with the dominant-laden terminology privileging kindergarten teachers has perpetuated the discourse amongst both educators and given kindergarten teachers higher ground to perch on. Given unclear dissemination, inequality in roles, and the prevalence of discourse in policy and text, play and learning is compromised and fragmented as educators exercise their own interpretation of play-based learning.

My Lived Reality: Reflections

As an early childhood educator playing and working in the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten program I have had the opportunity to observe and speak with many early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers. I have heard their stories, watched their lived realities, and walked along with them in their struggles. Much of the struggles of the ECEs mirrored my own and I not only empathized, but also felt compelled to take a stance in an ethos enveloped in ambiguity and discourse. My stance comes in advocating the importance of play in children's learning and the necessity for both educators to be on the same page to what play-based learning is and how it can be

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implemented. I have done this through my discussions with educators and through the process of writing this thesis. This section makes visible my viewpoints, biases, and reflections as I continue to course in my journey on understanding play and play policy in a school context.

Play, for me, is a social construct as it involves the player in a relationship with other individual(s), materials, and/or the environment. It is active in nature as the player exercises a holistic pursuit in making meaning, and challenging and constructing knowledge in his or her context. It is a process unconfined by outcomes and immeasurable in terms of possibilities. Play is not meant to be pinned down by predetermined measures, but rather allowed to flourish to see where new discoveries and new knowledge reside. Perhaps this is why it has been difficult to situate play in a context driven and regulated by outcomes. The 'outcomes' of play are not always visible or measurable (Wood, 2013). I have witnessed practitioners struggle with this notion as early childhood educators initiate free play and free choice while kindergarten teachers initiate 'purposeful' play shaped by curriculum objectives. The "educational play discourse" (Wood, 2013, p. 13) between both educators is amplified by the ambiguity of play and the ambiguity of roles.

Described above is my version of play, which supports my practice, planning and interaction with students. Hence, the reason for play's ambiguity – everyone has their own version of what play is and how it should play out in a classroom. There is no single, universal definition for play (Else, 2014; Lilleymr, 2009; Moyles, 1989; Wood, 2013). It has many proven functions for both children and adults (Lillemyr, 2009) and accepting it as a process further eludes a satisfactory definition (Moyles, 1989). I'm not sure if there can ever really be a single definition of play as it is confounded by many

variables related to its participants, such as individual backgrounds (education, training, experiences), thinking (knowledge, attitudes, believes, values, philosophies, theories), and culture. But, at the same time, if we do not have a shared definition of play, how can we implement it properly in a program that is being delivered by two educators?

There will always be conflicting interests, perceptions, and practices, but an operational definition is necessary to bridge these conflicts and provide students with a harmonious space of which to participate in play. Only then, do I believe, we will see the vast benefits of play and the capability of students that, at times, may be going unnoticed or is being veiled by predetermined learning outcomes.

The ambiguity of educators' roles is linked to the ambiguity in definition, the "educational play discourse" (Wood, 2013, p. 13), and ambiguity in dissemination. Recall that Wood's (2013) term of 'educational play discourse' refers to the conflict of play's purpose – free play or 'play with a purpose'. I have looked on and have been a participant of this discourse. Consensus through my research and in my lived experiences has revealed that kindergarten teachers see play as an important mechanism to teaching and learning a specified outcome planned by the teacher, whereas early childhood educators see it as important in its own right with learning and playing occurring together, while directed by the child. This calls into question the educator's image of the child, their perceived purpose of play in a school context, and their perceived role in a context with an educational and policy version of play-based learning (Wood, 2013).

I have found that early childhood educators trust in the capability of children to be "protagonists" (Edward, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, p. 80) in their own learning. They believe that children have the right to direct their own learning with an educator facilitating them in, as Lucy (ECE) stated, "how to be curious and how to wonder and

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how to investigate". Thus, focus is given more to guiding children *how* to learn than *what* to learn.

The focus on *'what* to learn' is more commonplace among kindergarten teachers who perceive their role to be to execute the learning expectations. Hence, they provide the information to students who, in outcomes-based learning, are seen as deficient and in need of achieving specified outcomes (Wien & Dudley-Marling, 1998). After all, to some, this is the purpose of school and accordingly should be the purpose of play in a school context.

Parents come to expect their children to learn their ABCs and numbers 1 to 100. Policy-makers develop learning outcomes to have something to measure students against one another such as class tests and examinations; to measure schools against one another such as Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) provincial tests (EQA0, 2015), and, consequently, countries against one another such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) international tests (OECD, 2015). Competition in the global economy has created top-down pressures, which spiral all the way down to front-line practitioners. Teachers in the age of 'accountability' have a duty to assess and report student achievement according to pre-established outcomes. How else are they to measure students learning if not by common standards? But is learning really just a measure against common standards? Does this not prioritize the *what* of learning when the emphasis should also be on the *how* of learning? Are teachers just "mere technicians" (Wien & Dudley-Marley, 1998, p. 410) with content that needs to be completed in a specified timed sequence?

In the course of my work, I have witnessed some kindergarten teachers fixation on the curriculum overtake the classroom - the set up of their classrooms, the type of

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activities students are given in the "guise of play-based learning" (Rogers, 2011, p. 15),

and the number of teacher-directed/structured activities. Also, I have witnessed teachers

hold play in the balance when play time is taken away or is threatened to be taken away

from a child or class because they demonstrated some type of 'misbehavour' or

unfavourable conduct. If play is the way children learn and valued as such, why is it

misused as a punishment/reward system?

I have heard too often the trivialization of play in comments such as, "they can

play, but they also need to learn", "play has to have a purpose", "boys and girls, play is a

privilege. It's not something you have to do". I have felt too often the discourse between

kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators when I witness some kindergarten

teachers monopolize the delivery of the program, when early childhood educators are

given secondary status in the room or are not given any acknowledgement. In addition,

there is a lack of respect with comments such as "you're not the teacher", "I'm not going

to let an ECE run my classroom" or with tasks being delegated to them by their teaching

partner. I would like to think that early childhood educators are more than this. I would

like to think that we are partners with kindergarten teachers working together to embrace

our diversity and viewpoints and channeling them to unfold change, growth, and creative

solutions.

I believe all educators are more than technicians, more than conformists regulated

by curriculum. We are co-constructers of knowledge and building relationships as

exemplified in the Reggio philosophy. We must become role models of divergent

thinking, as that is what part of the vision of this program is - to create "millennium

learners" (Yelland et al., 2008, p.1). Lucy (ECE), one of my participants, articulated

similar sentiments:

Our job in kindergarten is to create thinkers and people who question and people who wonder and people who want to learn more and people who aren't afraid to say – what happens if I do this? It's our job to get them curious, to get their brain thinking and learning.

Thus, if we want students to be innovative, critical thinkers, and problem solvers than why are we holding on to old methods of teaching and learning? Why are we not rethinking our roles and reframing our practices? Perhaps it is because dissemination efforts have been vague in description and explanations. This leaves us to our own perceptions and interpretations of play-based learning stemming from our own lived realities, creating a fragmented delivery of the play-based program. How will we ever be efficient in delivering the vision of this program if we are not held together in a common framework of what play is, how it should be implemented, and what our roles are?

Implications for Research and Practice

I have placed research and practice both in this section, as I believe one informs and shapes the other and to explain them separately would portray a dichotomy that discounts this belief.

This study explored early childhood educators' and kindergarten teachers' perceptions and practices of play-based learning in Ontario Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten classrooms, particularly their interpretations of the policy, documents, and administrative dissemination strategies. In examining this phenomenon the study aimed to determine similarities and differences among educators' perceptions and practices and draw comparisons to policy interpretation and dissemination. The results revealed the compartmentalization of play and learning to be the core issue confounded by localizing play, image of the child, role of the educator, compound effects, and dissemination

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strategies. Implications for future research and practice suggest that we need to rethink

play, learning, and roles in order to alleviate ambiguity and discourse that hinder

delivering a shared understanding of play in practice. Also, consideration must be given

to reexamining and re-evaluating policy dissemination strategies that are sustaining the

ambiguity and discourse and preventing the Ontario Early Years vision from being

realized.

The research on play has demonstrated what Rogers (2010) refers to as a

"pedagogization of play" (p.163). That is, play used as a tool to learn and reproduce

standards (Rogers, 2010). But, play's purpose should be to develop 'effective systems of

learning' rather than specific learning outcomes (Burgardht, 2005). We have touted the

importance of 21st century thinkers, but continue to teach students in conventional modes

of instruction that encourage dependency and conformity. There needs to be a shift in the

way we teach and learn alongside children in order to develop thinkers and not just

followers.

This begins in rethinking our understanding of play and pedagogy and altering the

way we use the curriculum from a prescriptive map to more of a descriptive guide (Wien

& Dudley-Marling, 1998). Rethinking play and learning involves seeing both as

intertwined and occurring simultaneously. In recalling Piaget's theory of cognitive

development discussed in Chapter 2, Piaget asserted that play occurs only during

assimilation. Children repeat their behaviours during play until the new information can

fit or be modified into their existing schema. When the new information cannot fit into

their prior knowledge children strive to achieve balance through accommodation,

whereby they adjust their thinking with new knowledge and learning. Thus, Piaget's

model regards play as contributing to learning, but it conveys both constructs as separate dimensions with play occurring during assimilation and learning during accommodation.

The adapted model (Figure 5.1) proposes that play and learning are integrated (Bergen, 2009; Golinkoff et al., 2006; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Wood, 2010a) with play occurring during assimilation, as well as, accommodation. Thus, when a child is playing and assimilating information into their existing schema or knowledge they are eventually challenged by new information that tips their knowledge and thinking in a state of disequilibrium. To achieve a state of balance the child continues to play with the object or idea and cycles back and forth between new information arising from the play experience and new knowledge learned/ knowledge modified (accommodation) through playful exploration and experimentation. Once a satisfactory conclusion is reached the child applies the new knowledge learned or modified knowledge to a new play experience involving a similar object or idea.
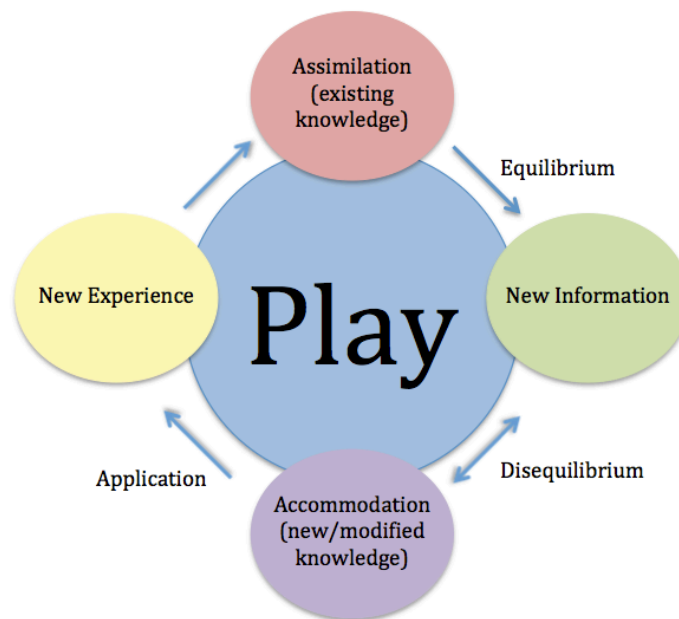
Figure 5.1 Play-learning connection. Adapted from "Jean Piaget" by Saul McLeod, 2009. Retrieved from http://www.simplypsychology.org/piaget.html.

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In altering our use of the curriculum from a prescriptive map to a descriptive guide requires our practice to move away from just measuring student learning according to narrow learning outcomes. Other modes of assessment need to be examined that use the curriculum as a guide and provide a more holistic picture of students' capacities, such as portfolios, learning stories, and anecdotal notes all based on educators' observations and interactions with students. These forms of documentation are currently being used in the program (Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2012), but many educators are not aware of how to proceed and fall back to old methods that they are comfortable with and that are easier to implement, such as worksheets and checklists. Efforts need to be made to advise educators on how to implement these into practice, which not only alter the way learning is perceived but also the way educators interact with their students.

Our interactions with students are contingent on how we view students. Each student in our classrooms should be seen as connected and linked to relationships, feelings, desires, and experiences that they bring to school with them. They carry with them pieces of their life that cannot be separated from them (Malaguzzi, 1994). This connected image of the child attributes value and respect to the lived experiences and different contributions each student brings to the classroom. Viewing students in this way builds a strong image of the child that is rich and competent rather than weak and incomplete. In addition, children should be viewed as having the right to a good school – good building, good teachers, and good activities (Malaguzzi, 1994). These rights should be articulated in depth in the research literature with explanations detailing the requirements and characteristics of a good environment, educators, and activities. Our practices should reflect these rights, particularly the right for children to play as stipulated in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), with

adults enriching the opportunities of children to play in their own way (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2010).

Reflecting on the role of the educator, it has become apparent that the role of the educator should be redefined from a provider of knowledge to a designer of learning. This comes with a good understanding of play and a belief that play and learning are intertwined. It includes educators taking ownership in becoming "play literate" (Else, 2014, p. 59) as they broaden their knowledge and improve their skills to best support their students during play. Becoming more play literate involves staying informed, through research and dialogue, on best play practices in order to increase understanding and promote advocacy. Also, it includes practitioners taking a reflective approach in their perceptions and practices of play, challenging their theories and roles. It requires educators to be confident in their abilities and venture outside their comfort zone and participate in more creative approaches to play-based learning. In doing so, may inspire educators in divergent thinking that will reflect in their practice and send students along the same path.

Being play literate requires a degree of professional and personal accountability. In questioning ourselves and when we are asked to account for our actions, reflection helps one to be prepared (Moyles, 2010). As such, reflective practice should also be common practice for educators as it serves to improve educators' skills and, consequently, their practice. Reflective practice is being mindful about your own practice and that of your colleagues (Lindon, 2012). It implies thought, consideration and evaluation of actions, and forethought about the future (Else, 2014). Being reflective in practice humbles one to view himself or herself as a learner rather than just a provider of

information. It provides an opportunity for an educator to become a researcher and a partner in the co-construction of knowledge.

My journal entries were a form of reflective practice that helped me gain a better understanding of myself in relation to my students and the part I played and still continue to play in their education, and the part my students played and still continue to play in educating me. The process challenged my thinking, provoked questions, and allowed me to gain further insight into my own perceptions and practices of play and what I most importantly value and what I should be striving towards. It opened my eyes to things I take for granted and made me more aware of the actions and dialogue of colleagues that impact the children and each other. For me, reflection is about continually seeking to improve yourself in order to be better than you were yesterday. As an essential approach to develop practice and become more effective practitioners, it is important for research to examine reflective practice and inform educators of the relevant tools necessary for reflection. In doing so moves 'thinking forward' and relishes in the pursuit of knowledge rather than in its attainment.

Through reflection, a strong image of the teacher develops that reciprocates the strong image of the child. This concept of reciprocity respects and values the complementary roles both parties bring to the relationship with an alternative image of student-teacher relationships. Rather than the usual relationship where teachers dominate the learning process or the child has complete freedom, a reciprocal relationship involves both teacher and student listening, contributing, and responsive to one another and open to change and negotiation (Fraser & Gestiwicki, 2002). It is essential that research explore this level of exchange in order to mirror participatory democracy in current society and the roles responsible citizens play.

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Lastly, it is imperative that research and practice entail dissemination strategies that are clear about how to implement play, and the specific roles and responsibilities of educators and administrators. From front-line practitioners to policy-makers everyone must have a clear understanding of not only what is expected of them, but also what it is they are advocating. The information that is issued must be clear, specific, and free of dominant discourse. In addition, Ontario policy makers must devise an operational definition of play that eliminates any ambiguity and reinforces the concepts through training. This operational definition will by no means be an exhaustive definition of play because, as previously mentioned, a single definition of play is not possible with all variables considered. But, for the purpose of sustaining policy effectiveness, best efforts need to be made to craft a definition that reflects the vision of the program, best practices, and respects the construct of play.

Plan of Action

Albert Einstein's quote presented at the beginning of this chapter compels us to break away from the confined patterns of thinking that helped create the issues and challenges in the first place. In the Foucauldian sense, we must engage in "thinking otherwise" (Ball, 1995) where we go outside our usual forms of thinking and explore solutions that have the potential to resolve old problems. The following is a recommended plan of action that attempts to unify educators in their understanding and practices of play-based learning and promote more continuity in the program.

Skill Upgrading and Integrative Education

In my analysis, it is critical that a change is required in how roles and professionalism are perceived regarding early childhood educators. The change must create an even level playing field in the classroom in order to prevent a hierarchal

teaching structure from manifesting and to create the best teaching environment for students.

Originally, Pascal's recommendation was to have an early childhood educator and kindergarten teacher as the teaching team because of their diverse knowledge and skills. However, this diversity has attached to it educational and salary differences that rouse the discourse that currently exists. The two suggestions I posit to create more congruent, compatable practice is first, to have both educators in the room with the educational requirements of B.Ed./.E.C.E degree. This will help alleviate the hierarchal teaching structure and create more equality in education salary, and professional prestige. This ensures that both educators have comparable knowledge in play, early childhood development, and elementary curriculum. But, most importantly it brings the two teachers together in a common framework of knowledge and skills with direction towards the same vision. This may be done in a staged approach with educators upgrading skills over time (Gananathan, 2011). This method will help ease the transition, particularly, for ECEs who will likely require more years to obtain a degree. A compensatory funding plan should be put in place to relieve financial constraints.

The alternative option is interprofessional education (IPE) or multiprofessional education. This is a concept that has been used in the past in the health care field. According to The World Health Organization (WHO, 1988), multiprofessional education is:

> The process by which a group of students or workers from the health related occupations with different backgrounds learn together during periods of their education, with interaction as the important goal, to collaborate in providing

promotive, preventive, curative, rehabilitative, and other health-related services

(p. 6).

This approach is key to achieving system change as it instills competencies in collaborative practice such as shared problem solving and decision-making. It also helps develop a mutual understanding and respect for the contributions of other disciplines (CIHC, 2007).

Joint Planning Time

Designated joint planning time needs to be incorporated into the program to allow educators the time to plan harmonious and effective play experiences for students. This will involve a modification in board infrastructure to accommodate replacement of early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers while they are away from the classroom. This effort will dip into the boards' financial funds, but it is a pivotal piece of the program that is missing that will improve outcomes for children, program effectiveness, and relieve tensions in team teaching.

Policy Text

To help alleviate the ambiguity of play and create a common understanding of which educators can work from, an operational definition of play should be cited in the curriculum document with clear implementation strategies. The roles and responsibilities of teachers and early childhood educators in policy text need to be detailed in a clear, specific, and distinct manner so that there exists no ambiguity, which can be confounded with discourse. As well, the text that is clearly stated in the curriculum document should be reworded to erase any implication of dominant/passive roles and instead reinforce the equal partnership between both educators.

Play course

Also, a play course at the university level, in the teacher education program, is necessary now that play-based learning is such an important part of primary curriculum. It is critical that educators, right from the start gain an appreciation of the importance of play, and a theoretical and practical understanding of incorporating it into daily pedagogy.

Collaborative Training

The dissemination strategies used thus far in the policy initative have been in the form of informative conferences, documents, brochures, and media resources. But, when bringing together two individuals in a working relationship, cooperative and interactive strategies that include teaching people *how* to work together are also required.

Similar to IPE, the following recommendations involve developing collaborative competencies through shared knowledge and training. They include joint training and hands-on workshops; team building workshops; play-based learning study groups; lesson studies; family of school networks for collaboration and support; school tours to see what other classrooms are doing; and play modules accessible to educators that show what play-based learning looks like, sounds like, and feels like.

Principal Engagement

In a leadership role, elementary school principals must make more of an effort to become involved and knowledgeable in the FDELK program, ECE roles and responsibilities, and play-based learning. Initiatives are required to invite principals to workshops and training with their EL – K teams to share and build in knowledge and understanding of play-based learning and implementation. In keeping informed and through a shared practice, principals can better support and advocate the roles of their EL – K teams to the rest of the school community.

Conclusion

As kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators, we need to be cognizant of our individual frames of reference and the influences they have on our perceptions and practices of play-based learning. We need to re-evaluate our aims in education and rethink learning, play, the image of the child, and our roles. This will guide us in determining what our purpose is, what our objectives are, and if we are enhancing the freedoms and play experiences of the individuals in our classroom.

We have many lessons to learn from the philosophy and practices of Reggio Emilia and *Te Whāriki* that warrant us to broaden our knowledge and advance our thinking to the diversity of play perspectives. Play is a complex construct contingent on context and its players. For this reason, it is imperative that we strive to be play literate and reflective in our practice in order that we may embrace play's diversity and potential, be united in our understanding and practice of play, and best support our students and colleagues. In doing so, we create a culture of play, learning, and education that exalts play and respects it players.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Play-Based Learning

1. How would you define play?

2. How <u>important</u> is play as a mechanism for learning?

3. In your opinion, what is the best teaching strategy to use for play-based learning?
   (eg. child-initiated, negotiated, teacher-directed)

4. What are your criteria for play-based learning?

Practice

5. Describe <u>your role</u> in the play-based learning environment?

6. On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being child-directed and 10 being teacher-directed, how would you rate your instructional style with the play-based learning curriculum?

7. Do you and your teaching partner share the same teaching style?

8. What are some <u>benefits</u> you have experienced implementing play-based learning in your program?

9. What are some <u>challenges</u> you have experienced implementing play-based learning in your program?

Policy

10. What is your level of satisfaction with the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program curriculum document – very unsatisfied, unsatisfied, satisfied, very satisfied?

11. What aspects are you <u>most </u>satisfied with in the curriculum document?

12. What aspects are you <u>least </u>satisfied with in the curriculum document?

13. In your opinion, does the curriculum document capture the concept of play-based learning?
    (If the interviewee answers yes – ask him/her to explain how the document captures the concept. If the interviewee answers no – ask them to explain how it doesn't, what is missing, and what are their suggestions?)

14. In your opinion, what are some of the other purposes of play beyond learning and curricular aspects?

15. In your opinion does the curriculum document clearly specify implementation strategies pertaining to play-based learning? Explain.

16. What, if any, areas are in <u>need of improvement</u> in the curriculum document?

17. Describe your experiences in workshops and/or meetings related to play-based learning in the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten program.

18. What is administration communicating regarding play-based learning and its method of implementation in school classrooms?

19. Do you agree or disagree with the information administration is relaying? Explain.

Support

20. What sources of support would you recommend to assist in implementing play-based learning in the Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten program?

21. Are there any additional comments that you would like to make, questions that you think I did not ask, or issues that I did not address in this interview?

Educators' Perceptions and Practices of Play-Based Learning in Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Classrooms

Background

1. Your name (*Last*) _____ (*First*) _____

2. Your gender [*circle the number*]

   1 Female   2 Male   3 Other

3. E-mail (*alternative to BBS*) _____

Education/Occupation

4. What is the <u>highest</u> level of education you have completed? [*circle the number*]

   1 College Diploma (2 years)

   2 College Advanced Diploma (3 years)

   3 College Degree (4 years)

   4 Collaborative and Joint Degree (eg. Concurrent Education)

   5 Bachelor Degree

   6 Master Degree

   7 Doctorate Degree

   8 Other (specify)

5.   In what field of study did you achieve your highest level of education? (*Please specify*)

_____

6.   Have you had training in any of the following areas? [*Check* (√) *the appropriate category*]

	Yes	No
Kindergarten curriculum		
Child development		
Play-based learning		

7.   What is your <u>current</u> job title? [*circle the number*]

       1   Early childhood educator

       2   Kindergarten teacher

8.   How long have you been in your <u>current</u> job? (e.g., months, years)

_____

9.   How many students do you teach? _____

RQ 1 – What are kindergarten teachers' and early childhood educators' understandings, beliefs, and practices of play-based learning?

1. How would you define play?

Amelia	Genevieve	Anya	Sami	Evalyn	Lucy	Grace
-interacting with materials -ch. interests -self-initiated -manipulating materials -figuring out -talking -creating	-ch. interests -self-guided -playing with materials -manipulating/ using materials -broad	-ch. interests -holistic development	-ch, engaging in conversation -using their imagination -using materials	-ch. like to do -ch. interests -engaging in activities -using their imagination	-ch. naturally do -ch. interests -no adult agenda -has own purpose	-explore freely -pleasure -interest

■ children's interests
■ child - initiated
■ materials

5. How do you use play in teaching?

Amelia	Genevieve	Anya	Sami	Evalyn	Lucy	Grace
-go down to their level -show it's ok to make mistakes -show to keep on trying	-using materials -observing -engaging with st. -know your curriculum, program expectations, kids -bring learning into play -individualizing	-be playmate -provoke with questions – elaborate play -engaging	-being involved -listening -observing -documenting ch. interests	-activities set up are interesting and user friendly -teacher engagement	(ideally) -materials -open-ended -lead to inquiry -lead to st. involvement -rotation of materials -observing -listening -play is my cue -doesn't like word teaching	(changed) -don't interrupt play -don't interfere too much -scaffold -extend learning -classroom set up -observe

■ materials
■ teacher engagement
■ observing, listening, documenting

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7. What are your criteria for play-based learning?

Amelia	Genevieve	Anya	Sami	Evalyn	Lucy	Grace
-different centres -space - grouped together -free-flow -question (box) – extend learning	-availability/ access materials -space -environment - money -ch. interests -expand play	-holistic development -cross-curricular	-space -materials -ch. interaction -open-ended questions (teacher) -teacher engagement (expand learning)	-materials -meeting expectations -teacher guidance	-time -env. created by ch. -responsive teachers -flexibility	-well organized -structure -free flow -quality materials -open ended materials -kids explore

materials

teacher engagement

environment

Appendix D: Site Descriptive Matrix

Teaching Strategies	
1. Ameilia & Genevieve	- <mark style="background:green">encourage</mark> - <mark style="background:gray">asks questions (to invite conversations)</mark> - <mark style="background:magenta">gives assistance</mark>, direction, provides information - acknowledges students' statements and actions (eg. so you'll come help us after snack – Obs. 1 p.2) - uses visuals, demonstrates - <mark style="background:yellow">extension of children's curiosity/interests</mark> – student interest in heart – teacher brings book about the body - <mark style="background:cyan">makes connections – ties previous day activities to present day</mark>
2. Anya, Sami, & Evalyn	- role model - <mark style="background:green">praise</mark> - <mark style="background:gray">asks questions (Evalyn)</mark> - <mark style="background:cyan">makes connections to previous day</mark> - both ECEs – limited extension to children's learning - uses visuals (chart, paper, snail) - <mark style="background:magenta">gives assistance</mark>, provides information - sad news board – lose 10 min play time for misbehavior - ECE – provides quick guidance but doesn't ensure understanding
3. Lucy & Grace	- guidance - <mark style="background:gray">asks questions</mark> - <mark style="background:green">praise and encouragement</mark> - acknowledges students' statements - <mark style="background:cyan">makes connections to previous day or activities</mark> - <mark style="background:magenta">gives assistance</mark> - <mark style="background:yellow">extension of children's interest, curiosity</mark> (paper airplanes)

- praise and encouragement
- asks questions

- gives assistance
- makes connections

- extension of children's interests

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