

**The Aim of the Game:  
Insider stakeholders' perspectives on learning  
through play**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2014



## **ABSTRACT**

Most contemporary early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings in Western-heritage contexts are play-based. Play has become a central component of ECEC provision through the writings of Romantic philosophers of the 17th century and the spread of the child-centred approach in the latter half of the 20th century. Such an approach places what the child is interested in – notably represented by her/his play – in the centre of ECEC. What interests the child was seen to represent what s/he is currently learning. Any interference with this from the adult was seen to inhibit learning. The educator's role in this approach has been primarily as a facilitator, providing resources for rich and diverse play opportunities that the child chose at her/his will to learn from autonomously.

In recent curricular reforms across the globe, the educator is becoming repositioned. It is no longer sufficient that s/he facilitates learning through play only; s/he must engage with and extend play towards the learning of curriculum outcomes. In Australia, such reforms have taken the form of the National Quality Framework, which now stipulates that educators must “provide a balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning” rather than just child-initiated play (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). Research suggests educators struggle to find this balance. Further, the NQF assesses ECEC centres on whether they “respond to children's ideas and play and use intentional teaching to scaffold and extend each child's learning” (ACECQA, 2012, para. 10). This active, “intentional” role appears to be at odds with educators' traditional approaches, influencing how learning through play is implemented.

This thesis focused on this implementation by investigating the perspectives of those that enact learning through play – educators, family members, and children. Using a case study methodology, it conducted video-stimulated recall dialogues with 46 “insider” stakeholders in an ECEC centre in inner-Melbourne, Australia. Perspectives were expressed in relation to videos recorded of young children's

play in the home and the ECEC centre. Using a sociocultural theorisation of perspectives, findings were analysed in relation to the institutional practices and values that were expressed in the perspectives of children, mothers and educators.

Findings showed that children believed they were learning the main rule of the imaginary situation in play, demonstrating the practices of creating, publically declaring and maintaining this imaginary content. Mothers believed learning through play in the family context was predominantly intrapersonal, cognitive and social, suggesting the importance of successful participation in the practices of the family. Educators believed learning through play was predominantly cognitive, social and physical, which implied the value of balancing content- and child-centred approaches mostly through non-interventionist practices. While mothers' and educators' perspectives had cognitive and social learning through play in common, differences in perspectives included the importance of intrapersonal learning through play to mothers and the importance of the main rule of the imaginary situation of play to children. The thesis argued that educators must carry the burden of reconciling these differences, and engaging with the main rule of the imaginary situation is one simple way to do so. The main rule of play is a point of access that can help educators understand and enter into play, with scope to directing the play towards learning. It was argued that understanding the imaginary content of play will allow educators to better understand the importance of intrapersonal learning through play for mothers, aligning their perspectives also. Finally, the main rule of play is proposed as a tool for educators to direct learning towards curriculum outcomes, thus fulfilling their new role of responding to "children's ideas and play and [using] intentional teaching to scaffold and extend each child's learning". It is argued that this tool is simpler than other contemporary research findings related to the educators new, "intentional" role in learning through play.

## **PUBLICATIONS PRODUCED DURING CANDIDATURE**

### **Peer-reviewed journal articles**

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2. Bird, J., Colliver, Y. J., & Edwards, S. E. (2014). The camera is not a methodology: towards a framework for understanding young children's use of video cameras. *Early Child Development and Care*.  
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6. Colliver, Y. J (accepted, 2013). 'I care:' Maternal perspectives on learning through play. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Adelaide: AARE.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <b>CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION</b>      | <b>19</b>  |
| 1.1                                  | CONTEXT OF THE STUDY..... 19   |
| 1.2                                  | RESEARCH QUESTIONS..... 36   |
| 1.3                                  | SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY..... 37                                    |
| 1.3.1                                | <i>Children's perspectives are valuable.....</i> 38                  |
| 1.3.2                                | <i>Learning through play under the NQF.....</i> 39                   |
| 1.3.3                                | <i>Home-ECEC setting alignment.....</i> 41                           |
| 1.3.4                                | <i>Timely investigation of new NQF (2012).....</i> 42                |
| 1.4                                  | PERSONAL ORIENTATION TO THE RESEARCH..... 44                         |
| 1.5                                  | STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS..... 45                                      |
| <b>CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW</b> | <b>49</b>  |
| 2.1                                  | PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION ..... 49            |
| 2.1.1                                | <i>Philosophers' perspectives on learning through play.....</i> 51   |
| 2.1.2                                | <i>Psychologists' perspectives on learning through play.....</i> 52  |
| 2.1.3                                | <i>Academics' perspectives on learning through play.....</i> 55      |
| 2.1.4                                | <i>Policy-makers' perspectives on learning through play.....</i> 59  |
| 2.1.5                                | <i>Challenges to these perspectives.....</i> 60                      |
| 2.1.6                                | <i>Conclusion to play-based learning.....</i> 63                     |
| 2.2                                  | INSIDER STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING THROUGH PLAY ..... 63   |
| 2.2.2                                | <i>Children's perspectives on learning through play.....</i> 66      |
| 2.2.3                                | <i>Family members' perspectives on learning through play.....</i> 82 |
| 2.2.4                                | <i>Educators' perspectives on learning through play.....</i> 91      |
| 2.3                                  | CONCLUSION TO THE LITERATURE REVIEW..... 100                         |
| <b>CHAPTER 3 - THEORY</b>            | <b>103</b>   |
| 3.1                                  | THEORIES OF LEARNING ..... 103                                       |
| 3.1.1                                | <i>Acquisition models of learning.....</i> 104                       |
| 3.1.2                                | <i>Participation models of learning.....</i> 107                     |
| 3.1.3                                | <i>Cultural-historical theory.....</i> 109                           |
| 3.2                                  | A SOCIOCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING OF STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ..... 115  |
| 3.3                                  | THEORIES OF PLAY ..... 120   |
| 3.3.1                                | <i>Developmental understandings of play.....</i> 121                 |
| 3.3.2                                | <i>Sociocultural understandings of play.....</i> 131                 |
| 3.4                                  | A SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO LEARNING THROUGH PLAY..... 134           |
| 3.4.1                                | <i>Four ways imagination is connected to reality.....</i> 135        |
| 3.4.2                                | <i>Historical materialism.....</i> 139                               |
| 3.5                                  | CONCLUSION TO THE THEORY CHAPTER..... 142                            |
| <b>CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY</b>       | <b>144</b>   |
| 4.1                                  | THE SOCIOCULTURAL FRAMEWORK..... 144                                 |
| 4.1.1                                | <i>Sociocultural ontology.....</i> 145                               |
| 4.1.2                                | <i>Sociocultural epistemology.....</i> 146                           |
| 4.1.3                                | <i>Sociocultural axiology.....</i> 147                               |
| 4.1.4                                | <i>Sociocultural methodology.....</i> 148                            |
| 4.2                                  | RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN ..... 149                                     |
| 4.3                                  | RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN WITHIN A SOCIOCULTURAL FRAMEWORK..... 150     |
| 4.4                                  | CASE STUDY ..... 152   |
| 4.5                                  | VIDEO-STIMULATED RECALL DIALOGUES (VSRD) ..... 154                   |
| 4.6                                  | BENEFITS OF USING CAMERAS WITH CHILDREN ..... 158                    |
| 4.7                                  | METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN USING CAMERAS ..... 160           |
| 4.7.1                                | <i>Ethics of using cameras.....</i> 160                              |
| 4.7.2                                | <i>Least adult role.....</i> 161                                     |
| 4.7.3                                | <i>Inviting children to record their play.....</i> 162               |
| 4.7.4                                | <i>Informed consent.....</i> 163                                     |
| 4.7.5                                | <i>Reflexive research.....</i> 166                                   |

|                                   |  |     |
|-----------------------------------|--|-----|
| 4.8                               | IMPLEMENTATION .....   | 169 |
| 4.8.1                             | <i>Phase One: Familiarisation</i> .....  | 170 |
| 4.8.2                             | <i>Phase Two: Recording</i> .....  | 173 |
| 4.8.3                             | <i>Phase Three: VSRD</i> .....   | 175 |
| 4.8.4                             | <i>Phase Four: Focus group VSRD</i> .....  | 179 |
| 4.8.5                             | <i>Phase Five: Participant confirmation</i> .....                                    | 181 |
| 4.9                               | PARTICIPANTS .....   | 181 |
| 4.10                              | DATA ANALYSIS .....  | 183 |
| 4.10.1                            | <i>Sorting and shortening videos</i> .....   | 183 |
| 4.10.2                            | <i>Inductive coding</i> .....  | 183 |
| 4.10.3                            | <i>Deductive coding</i> .....  | 187 |
| 4.11                              | LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH.....   | 190 |
| <b>CHAPTER 5 - FINDINGS 193</b>   |  |     |
| 5.1                               | EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING THROUGH PLAY .....                               | 193 |
| 5.1.1                             | <i>Cognitive learning</i> .....  | 194 |
| 5.1.2                             | <i>Social learning</i> .....   | 202 |
| 5.1.3                             | <i>Physical learning</i> .....   | 209 |
| 5.1.4                             | <i>Conclusion to the educators' perspectives</i> .....                               | 211 |
| 5.2                               | MOTHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING THROUGH PLAY .....                                 | 211 |
| 5.2.1                             | <i>Intrapersonal development</i> .....   | 213 |
| 5.2.2                             | <i>Cognitive learning</i> .....  | 220 |
| 5.2.3                             | <i>Learning social skills</i> .....  | 226 |
| 5.2.4                             | <i>Conclusion to the mother's perspectives</i> .....                                 | 228 |
| 5.3                               | CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING THROUGH PLAY.....                                | 229 |
| 5.3.1                             | <i>Physical skills</i> .....   | 229 |
| 5.3.2                             | <i>Artistic development</i> .....  | 233 |
| 5.3.3                             | <i>Acting skills</i> .....   | 236 |
| 5.3.4                             | <i>How to play</i> .....   | 238 |
| 5.3.5                             | <i>Conclusion to the children's perspectives</i> .....                               | 241 |
| <b>CHAPTER 6 - DISCUSSION 243</b> |  |     |
| 6.1                               | CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES .....  | 243 |
| 6.1.1                             | <i>Children's learning</i> .....   | 244 |
| 6.1.2                             | <i>Vygotsky's theory on play</i> .....   | 253 |
| 6.1.3                             | <i>Sociocultural understandings of learning through play</i> .....                   | 254 |
| 6.1.4                             | <i>A lesson from the children's perspectives</i> .....                               | 267 |
| 6.2                               | MOTHER'S PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING THROUGH PLAY .....                                 | 269 |
| 6.2.1                             | <i>Mothers' perspectives on intrapersonal learning through play</i> .....            | 269 |
| 6.2.2                             | <i>Mothers' perspectives on cognitive learning through play</i> .....                | 271 |
| 6.2.3                             | <i>Mothers' perspectives on social learning through play</i> .....                   | 273 |
| 6.2.4                             | <i>Implications of mothers' perspectives</i> .....                                   | 274 |
| 6.3                               | EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING THROUGH PLAY .....                               | 276 |
| 6.3.1                             | <i>Educators' perspectives on cognitive learning through play</i> .....              | 276 |
| 6.3.2                             | <i>Educators' perspectives on social learning through play</i> .....                 | 278 |
| 6.3.3                             | <i>Educators' perspectives on physical learning through play</i> .....               | 280 |
| 6.3.4                             | <i>Implications of educators' perspectives</i> .....                                 | 281 |
| 6.4                               | RESEARCH QUESTION ONE.....   | 282 |
| 6.4.1                             | <i>Educators' perspectives</i> .....   | 283 |
| 6.4.2                             | <i>Mothers' perspectives</i> .....   | 284 |
| 6.4.3                             | <i>Children's perspectives</i> .....   | 285 |
| 6.5                               | SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN PERSPECTIVES .....                                   | 286 |
| 6.5.1                             | <i>Similarities</i> .....  | 287 |
| 6.5.2                             | <i>Differences</i> .....   | 289 |
| 6.6                               | RESEARCH QUESTION TWO.....   | 298 |
| 6.7                               | IMPLICATIONS.....  | 300 |
| 6.7.1                             | <i>Guiding play to learning</i> .....  | 302 |
| 6.7.2                             | <i>Guiding play towards learning curriculum outcomes</i> .....                       | 308 |
| 6.7.3                             | <i>How educators can foster learning outcomes through child-initiated play</i> ..... | 311 |



|  |   |            |
|--|---|------------|
| 6.7.4  | <i>Engaging with the NQF's repositioning of the educator's role in play</i> ..... | 315        |
| 6.7.5  | <i>The unique contribution of this thesis</i> .....                               | 318        |
| 6.8  | LIMITATIONS.....  | 324        |
| 6.9  | FUTURE RESEARCH.....  | 326        |
| <b>CHAPTER 7 - CONCLUSION</b>                        |   | <b>329</b> |
| 7.1  | AIMS AND RATIONALE OF THE THESIS.....   | 329        |
| 7.2  | HOW THE INVESTIGATION WAS CARRIED OUT.....  | 332        |
| 7.3  | PRINCIPAL CLAIMS OF THIS THESIS.....  | 334        |
| 7.3.2  | <i>Similarities and differences in perspectives</i> .....                         | 337        |
| 7.3.3  | <i>Implications of the results</i> .....  | 338        |
| 7.4  | SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION OF THESE CLAIMS.....                                | 341        |
| 7.4.1  | <i>Literature on children's perspectives</i> .....                                | 342        |
| 7.4.2  | <i>The repositioning of ECEC educator</i> .....                                   | 343        |
| 7.4.3  | <i>Alignment of the ECEC with the home setting</i> .....                          | 344        |
| 7.4.4  | <i>How the NQF is being implemented</i> .....                                     | 345        |
| 7.5  | LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH.....  | 346        |
| 7.6  | FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS ARISING FROM THE CLAIMS.....                           | 347        |
| 7.7  | FINAL REFLECTIONS: THE AIM OF THE GAME.....                                       | 349        |
| <b>CHAPTER 8 - GLOSSARY OF TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS</b> |   | <b>351</b> |
| <b>REFERENCE LIST</b>                                |   | <b>352</b> |
| <b>APPENDIX</b>                                      |   | <b>423</b> |
| 8.1  | TEACHER CONSENT FORM.....   | 423        |
| 8.2  | PARENT/ GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM.....  | 424        |
| 8.3  | CHILD INFORMATION LETTER.....   | 425        |
| 8.4  | THE "OK SHEET".....   | 429        |
| 8.5  | FAMILY MEMBER CONSENT FORM.....   | 431        |
| 8.6  | DEECD ETHICS.....   | 433        |
| 8.7  | PERMISSION TO USE HEDEGAARD'S (2009) MODEL.....                                   | 435        |
| 8.8  | ACU HREC APPROVAL.....  | 437        |

## LIST OF TABLES

|           |  |     |
|-----------|--|-----|
| Table 2.1 | Aspects Unique To Insider Stakeholder Group Perspectives.....                      | 66  |
| Table 4.1 | Studies Investigating Effective Methods Of Child Interviews, Justifying VSRD ..... | 155 |
| Table 4.2 | Research Project Design.....   | 170 |
| Table 4.3 | Direct And Indirect Questions Asked In VSRDs With Children .....                   | 178 |
| Table 4.4 | Summary Of Participant Numbers And Videos By Stakeholder Type .....                | 179 |
| Table 4.5 | Table Of Consenting Participants And Corresponding Rooms .....                     | 182 |
| Table 4.6 | Example Of Inductive Coding From Tarni's (55) Comment.....                         | 185 |
| Table 4.7 | Example Of Inductive Coding Of Intrapersonal Learning Through Play .....           | 186 |
| Table 4.8 | The Three Stages Of Data Analysis .....  | 189 |
| Table 5.1 | Educators' Perspectives On LtP According To Inductive And Deductive Coding... ..   | 195 |
| Table 5.2 | Mothers Perspectives On LtP According To Inductive And Deductive Coding .....      | 212 |
| Table 5.3 | Children's Perspectives On LtP According To Inductive And Deductive Coding. ..     | 229 |
| Table 5.4 | Children's Comments On LtP (III) Compared To The Main Rule Of The Play (II)... ..  | 241 |
| Table 6.1 | Children's Comments On LtP (III) Compared To The Main Rule Of The Play (II)... ..  | 249 |
| Table 6.2 | Comparison Of Types Of Activities in Perspectives On LtP .....                     | 295 |
| Table 6.3 | Contributions Addressing Tensions Related To Learning Through Play.....            | 323 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|             |   |     |
|-------------|---|-----|
| Figure 1.1  | Integrated Teaching And Learning Approaches .....                                 | 29  |
| Figure 2.1  | The Standard Model Of Learning .....  | 72  |
| Figure 2.2  | Theory Of Mind (ToM).....   | 73  |
| Figure 2.3  | Tom Used To Understand One’s Own Learning.....                                    | 74  |
| Figure 2.4  | Having A Perspective On One’s Own Learning Through Play .....                     | 76  |
| Figure 3.1  | Activity Upon An Object Is Mediated By A Tool .....                               | 110 |
| Figure 3.2  | Levels Of Analysis Of Perspectives.....   | 116 |
| Figure 4.1  | Example Okay Sheet.....   | 173 |
| Figure 5.1  | Play In The Sandpit .....   | 197 |
| Figure 5.2  | Ross Mixing Colours On Paper .....  | 197 |
| Figure 5.3  | Danielle, Tilly Billy And Marie's Lego Construction .....                         | 204 |
| Figure 5.4  | Negotiating How To Crash Like Wally While Feeling Safe .....                      | 204 |
| Figure 5.5  | "Primal" Dancing In Room D .....  | 207 |
| Figure 5.6  | Shaking Maracas .....   | 207 |
| Figure 5.7  | Drumming .....  | 207 |
| Figure 5.8  | Shaking Ankle Bells.....  | 207 |
| Figure 5.9  | Benji’s Basket “Train” .....  | 214 |
| Figure 5.10 | Davis Plays The Ukelele .....   | 214 |
| Figure 5.11 | Maggie Washing Plastic Bottles To Add To Her Art Resources.....                   | 218 |
| Figure 5.12 | Benji Playing With His Stick In The Yard .....                                    | 218 |
| Figure 5.13 | Jacob Playing With The Washing Machine .....                                      | 218 |
| Figure 5.14 | Davis Playing "Restaurants", Making Shopping Lists .....                          | 222 |
| Figure 5.15 | James Playing Out A Character.....  | 222 |
| Figure 5.16 | James Playing Out A Character.....  | 222 |
| Figure 5.17 | Maggie Blowing Bubbles.....   | 224 |
| Figure 5.18 | Ariel Playing Cooking In Her "Home Corner" Toy Set .....                          | 224 |
| Figure 5.19 | Maggie Playing Mother And Father Roles .....                                      | 228 |
| Figure 5.20 | Danielle's "Conflict" With Her Siblings .....                                     | 228 |
| Figure 5.21 | Kaiya (In Purple) “Blocks” Bindi's (In Pink) Escape With His Arms.....            | 232 |
| Figure 5.22 | Maggie's "Wand" .....   | 235 |
| Figure 6.1  | Belle Learning To Kill Captain Hook “Because He Is Evil” .....                    | 256 |
| Figure 6.2  | Building A High Tower Despite Wanting To Knock It Over.....                       | 262 |
| Figure 6.3  | Being Pinned Down By Several Boys Despite Wanting To Run Away .....               | 262 |
| Figure 6.4  | Model Of The Similarities And Differences Between Insider Perspectives on LtP ... | 292 |
| Figure 6.5  | Model Of Suggested Changes To Perspectives Via Its Main Rule .....                | 306 |
| Figure 6.6  | Integrated Teaching And Learning Approaches.....                                  | 316 |
| Figure 6.7  | Model Of Perspective Alignment Through Educator Engagement With Main Rule         | 320 |
| Figure 7.1  | Proposed Changes When Educators Actively Engage .....                             | 340 |





## DECLARATION

*This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.*

*No parts of this thesis have been submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.*

*No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.*

*All research procedures reported in this thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics Committees (see Appendix, p. 433).*

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*My special thanks go to Associate Professor Susan Edwards. Your astute supervision went beyond the bounds of your professional responsibilities and included mentoring, career advising and editing. Over the three years I have worked on this thesis, you have never missed a beat. This marks my second degree completed with your assistance, and I will make every effort to see our professional paths cross again. Your own work and work practices are a source of inspiration that I will continue to draw on in the years ahead as I research learning and young children.*

*I would also like to thank my co-supervisor, Dr Cathie Harrison, who gave me the critical feedback this thesis required and put in the hours to read every word on every page. This advice and perspective has enriched my understanding of the topics covered.*

*Thanks and praise go out to others who have supported me through proof-reading and editing advice that have been immeasurably helpful both for this thesis but also for myself as a writer. I was extremely fortunate to have a panel of academics examine the thesis in its entirety, and for this privilege thanks are due to Professor Kristina Love, Dr Jane Page, and Dr Kevin Davidson. Special mention goes to Dr Liz Dowling, Emily Long, Libby Maitland, Andrew Colliver, Phillip Reed, and Katherine Morrison for all your hours proofreading and providing invaluable feedback.*

*Finally, I would not have undertaken this thesis if it were not for the influence of my dear grandfather Alfred Spencer Colliver. Although most of your five children became social workers, your experience as an educationalist dedicated to the welfare of children had a strong influence on my early thinking about what is important for social change. Multiple conversations with you over my childhood were a big catalyst for my adult choice of career in education and early childhood, and for the aspirations I now hold to leave the world a slightly better place. Just a few months from the sixth anniversary of your passing I offer these three years of work to you, Spencer.*





## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**ABS** Australian Bureau of Statistics

**DAP** Developmentally appropriate practice

**DEEWR** Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations

**DCSF** Department for Child, Schools and Families

**DfES** Department of Educational Studies

**ECEC** Early childhood education and care

**LtP** Learning through play

**MESC** Ministry for Education, Science and Culture

**MOE** Ministry of Education

**MOES** Ministry of Education and Science

**NHMRC** National Health and Medical Research Council

**OECD** Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

**OUP** Oxford University Press

**UK** United Kingdom

**UN** United Nations

**USA** United States of America

**VCAA** Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority

**VSRD** Video-stimulated recall dialogues



## **Chapter 1 - INTRODUCTION**

This thesis considers stakeholder perspectives on learning through play in early childhood education and care (ECEC). This chapter introduces the investigation by first setting the context in which educators have been trained to only facilitate learning through play but in recent curricular reforms are expected to *engage with* and *extend* learning through play in a more intentional way. How this change in expectations about “the aim of the game” is experienced by insider stakeholder perspectives is the focus of the investigation in the form of two research questions. The significance of these questions for the field of ECEC is then explained, outlining the contribution this thesis intends to make to knowledge. After this, my personal impetus as a researcher to undertake the investigation is given so that my biases in the research are transparent. Finally, how the thesis responds to the context is summarised in with an overview of each chapter.

### **1.1 Context of the study**

This section will describe briefly one of the main problems with the notion of learning through play: that educators have been trained to only facilitate learning through play but in recent curricular reforms are increasingly expected to engage with and extend the learning of curriculum content through play. The other three main problems related to learning through play are explored in the Literature Review (see 2.1, on p. 49 of this thesis).

In the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC), play is central to the provision of curriculum (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, & Fler, 2009; Wood, 2013). Many western-heritage ECEC centres use a play-based curriculum (Pramling Samuelsson & Fler, 2008), both because play is seen as a natural behaviour of the

early years (Bateson, 2011; Cannella, 1997; Moyles, 2010), and because it is upheld within ECEC as a key way that children learn (Nutbrown, Clough, & Selbie, 2008; Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Stephen, 2006; VCAA, 2006). The play-based curriculum is the cornerstone of dominant western-heritage ECEC pedagogy and practice (Brooker, 2011; Wood, 2013).

The dominance of play-based curricula can be linked back to the value that early Romantic philosophers placed on it (Brooker, 2005; 2010a; Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2009; Kane, 2004; Wood, 2013). British philosopher John Locke (1632 – 1704) advocated for play and recreation as essential to a holistic education (Kirkpatrick, 2008, p. 47) and is attributed with starting modern educational theory (Brooker, 2010a, p. 40; Guldberg, 2009, p. 50). However, it was the Romantic French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) who is most famous for his view that child-initiated play was at the heart of sound educational practice (Burman, 2008; Fler, 1999; Gibbons, 2007; Guldberg, 2009; Kane, 2004; Wood, 2013). His guidance to educators was to:

let [the child] learn those that are within his [sic] reach by experiment, and discover the rest by induction; but I would far rather he knew nothing at all about them, than that you should tell him (Rousseau, 1762/2007, p. 108).

In this way, direct, educator-led instruction was admonished and replaced with the key tenet of the foundations of the play-based curriculum: that the child's interests should be placed at the centre of education (Chung & Walsh, 2000; Entwistle, 2012; Langford, 2010). This meant that early childhood education came to be framed in terms of following what the child was interested in, known as the *child-centred* approach. Other pedagogues such as Friedrich Fröbel (1782–1852) saw play as “the highest phase of child development – of human development” because it represented the child's interests (Fröbel, 1887/1900, p. 54).

As will be shown more extensively in the next chapter, the view that child-initiated activity should be at the heart of ECEC was adopted in the 1970s, when a

“non-directive approach” was endorsed widely in western-heritage<sup>1</sup> ECEC curricula (Laevers, 2005, p. 21; Pramling Samuelsson & Fler, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b, p. 147; Wood, 2013). These shifts occurred at a time when Swiss biologist Jean Piaget’s (1896–1980) theories of children’s cognitive development suggested that the child was innately driven towards learning what was most appropriate for her/his development at the time (Burman, 2008). It was widely believed that play was beneficial because it represented the current interests of the child and hence a representation of what s/he was ready to learn (Chung & Walsh, 2000; Entwistle, 2012). One of the most prolific instantiations of this view was salient in the ethos of the Developmentally Appropriate Practice guidelines (DAP; Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). In their original form (Bredekamp, 1987), these guidelines initially insisted:

The correct way to teach young children is not to lecture or verbally instruct them. Teachers<sup>2</sup> of young children are more like guides or *facilitators* (p. 52. italics added).

This meant that learning was expected to occur through play without “interference” from adults (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010, p. 502; Walsh, 2005). In the child-centred, developmentally-appropriate ethos, educators were expected to observe children at play and provide materials according to the child’s interests (Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Stephen , 2006). This view has dominated global ECEC practices for decades (Edwards, 2003; Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Ryan, 2005; Walsh, 2005), and is reflected in the practices (Ailwood, 2003, p. 296; Ryan & Goffin,

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<sup>1</sup> The term *western-heritage* will be used in this thesis to denote nation states which currently have a dominant European heritage, such as Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, South Africa, Australia, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Teacher or educator.

2008), early childhood teacher education (Edwards, 2009; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Stephen, 2012; Warash, Curtis, Hursh, & Tucci, 2008) and beliefs of educators (Fleer, Tonyan, Mantilla, & Rivalland, 2009). For decades, then, ECEC educators have seen themselves as “facilitators of children’s learning through play” (Ortlipp, Arthur, & Woodrow, 2011, p. 57; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b, p. 147).

Akin to the focus on facilitation was an emphasis on processes over product. Through the popularisation of Piaget’s (1962; 1972) theories of a universal process of cognitive development called *equilibration* (see Theory Chapter<sup>3</sup>, 3.3.2), it was thought that educators should focus on the “processes” of learning rather than its “products” (Cullen, 1999, p. 23; Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011, p. 51; Gibbons, 2007, p. 301; Krieg, 2011, p. 47; Wood, 2007, p. 123). This was important for the field because it meant that, unlike the objectives of school, ECEC educators were expected not to prescribe what children needed to learn, but rather to provide materials and resources to facilitate the learning that the child chose to engage in through their play and interests. In this way, ECEC education aspired not to deliver only what many deemed narrow notions of subject-content (such as science, mathematics and language), which were traditionally focused on in schools rather than ECEC (Fleer, 2010, p. 71). Instead, ECEC has been traditionally characterised by “a holistic view of the child that caters for mind, body, and emotions” and child-directed activities were seen as the key way to carry this out (Anning, 2009, p. 67). There has been a strong “consensus” that this view is appropriate for the ECEC educator (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b, p. 147), who:

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<sup>3</sup> In the interests of distinguishing references to page numbers of this thesis from page numbers of publications, I have used the word “see” before internal, in-thesis references, usually also with the page number relating to the specific page at hand. References to external publications are marked with the page number only.

sets up developmentally appropriate experiences and provides children with choices and the opportunity to take some authority over their learning (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 57).

This “consensus” has dominated the policies and curricula of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ryan, 2005, p. 99; Stephen, 2012, p. 227; Walsh, 2005), but has meant that educators have generally been trained only to facilitate learning through play (Fleer et al., 2009; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Ryan & Goffin, 2008; Wood, 2007).

However, recent ECEC curricular reforms have begun to stray from this consensus (Grieshaber, 2010). Over the last decade or more, there has been increased scrutiny of ECEC services in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Neuman, 2005; Penn, 2007; Urban, 2008). Much of this said scrutiny has been in relation to “quality”, particularly if it can be quantified (Biesta, 2007; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007; Hardy & Boyle, 2011). This scrutiny is justified economically, in relation to boosting labour participation through better educational outcomes (Bennet & Neuman, 2001; Fleer, 2010; Johansson & White, 2011; Osgood, 2009; Penn, 2007). Many aspects of educational provision in the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and Australia are subject to what has been termed an “audit culture”, where the provision of any aspect of ECEC must be justified in relation to its quantified value (Osgood, 2010, p. 119; Hardy & Boyle, 2011, p. 213). For example, a recent report justified the inclusion of play in ECEC provision because it was correlated with ECEC quality across 20 countries (OECD, 2004). Other studies have justified play’s inclusion based on long-term educational outcomes in the primary years (Marcon, 2002; Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, Rafferty, & Sheehy, 2006). Such recommendations have strengthened the place of play-based curricula internationally (Pramling Samuelsson & Fleer, 2008; VCAA, 2008; Wood, 2013).

In terms of learning, however, there is a “preoccupation with academic achievement” (Hatch & Grieshaber, 2002, p. 230). While play has maintained a

dominant place in many national curricular reforms across the globe (Pramling Samuelsson & Flear, 2008), it is frequently positioned in relation to the *learning* of outcomes (Rogers, 2013; VCAA, 2008). Examples include the UK (DCSF, 2008), Singapore (MOE, 2012), Iceland (MESC, 2011) and Sweden (MoES, 2010). ECEC is characterised by increased regulation in OECD countries in the last decade (Bennet, 2005, p. 7), and outcomes are frequently framed towards school readiness (Dahlberg et al., 2007). ECEC is progressively more focused on content knowledge such as literacy and numeracy traditionally taught in schools, often termed “‘pre-numeracy’ and ‘preliteracy’” (Flear, 2010, p. 71).

In Australia, school and ECEC curricula have undergone reforms in a climate of increasing high-stakes testing and nation-wide regulation. For example, in the primary school years, the audit culture is salient in Australia’s adoption of the national high-stakes testing instrument *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN; Thompson & Cook, 2013). This means that literacy and numeracy standards are benchmarked in all schools and national results are used to allocate funding (Hardy & Boyle, 2011).

In the ECEC sector, national curricular reforms have been undertaken in the form of the National Quality Framework (NQF; DoE, 2013), adopted by the Council of Australian Governments in December 2009 (Harrington, 2011) in response to “rhetoric” of human capital and quality (Tayler, 2012, p. 9). As part of the reforms, Australia released its first ever national learning framework for ECEC, the Early Years Learning Framework (*Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*; DEEWR, 2009). The aim of this document (henceforth, the EYLF) is articulated clearly in the first sentences of the introduction:

This is Australia’s first national Early Years Learning Framework for early childhood educators. The aim of this document is to extend and enrich children’s learning from birth to five years and through the transition to school (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5).



Further, the EYLF claims to “guide educators in their curriculum decision-making and assist in planning, implementing and evaluating quality in early childhood settings” (p. 8). It does so by establishing five Learning Outcomes which ECEC centres are expected to deliver. Each Australian state or territory then has its own framework, but these must use exactly the same Outcomes as the EYLF (DEECD, 2013, para. 5; ACECQA, 2012).

The NQF also includes a new integrated national approach to the regulation and quality assessment processes for all ECEC services. This includes a new quality rating system for services and a National Quality Standard (NQS) that involves assessing how well ECEC centres are complying with the relevant learning framework (Education and Care Services National Law Act, 2010). Not only are all Australian ECEC centres expected to follow the EYLF and their state learning framework, but they are also monitored and assessed in this regard (ACECQA, 2012).

These changes have dramatic consequences for the status of play in ECEC. For example, the reforms have “retained” and standardised play-based curricula at a national level (Leggett & Ford, 2013), yet the framing of the purpose of play appears to differ starkly from the Romantic philosophical framing under which play was originally justified throughout the history of ECEC (Stephen, 2006). Traditionally, dominant ECEC theory has held the notion that play lead to holistic learning, including emotional, physical, social and cognitive development (Anning, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Goffin, 1989; Kirkpatrick, 2008). Play has often been valued in its own right, for its intrinsic value (Bateson, 2011; Cannella, 1997; Moyles, 2010). Yet in the EYLF, almost all of the 68 times play is mentioned throughout the 39 pages of the document are in reference to *learning through play* (DEEWR, 2009; Fler, 2013; Ortlipp et al., 2011). The first pages of the document establish its commitment to, and “specific emphasis” on, the learning available in play (Cornish, 2012; DEEWR, 2009, p. 5; Fler, 2013; O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012, p. 269). This is important because the EYLF was implemented for

the purpose of “enriching and extending” children’s learning *in relation to its five Learning Outcomes* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5): learning is specifically limited to the five Outcomes (p. 8). This represents a marked departure from holistic and generic learning that has been traditionally thought of in relation to play (Keating, Fabian, Jordan, Mavers, & Roberts, 2000; Krieg, 2011). Instead, learning through play is necessarily learning of the five curricular Outcomes (or *Learning Outcomes*). The EYLF therefore presents a challenge to educators because they can no longer just facilitate learning through play but must “contribute” to it (Krieg, 2011, p. 46).

The importance of the five Outcomes to the way that play is conceptualised in the EYLF is evident in its references to other work also. For example, learning through play is one of the eight *Practices* the EYLF stipulates educators should use (p. 14), in which educators are expected to use “sustained shared conversations” (to foster learning through play) (p. 15). This is a reference to Siraj-Blatchford’s (2009a) “sustained shared thinking”, a significant finding of the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj-Blatchford, 2008). The EPPE study used quantitative scales to assess how 141 ECEC settings across England were “effective” in their provision of predetermined outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a, p. 77). The staff in the 12 most “effective” settings were then qualitatively analysed in terms of their pedagogical practices. For example, “early number” (pre-numeracy) and “language” (pre-literacy) outcomes correlated significantly with certain pedagogical practices (p. 78). It was found that respondents in “effective” settings specifically referred to the sharing of thinking with children, “where two or more individuals ‘work together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative” (pp. 78 – 79), and that the interactions between adults and children were sustained over an extended period of time, particularly in play (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013a; Irvine, 2013). Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues’ conception of sustained shared thinking linked with larger theoretical ideas about working within the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978) and

“guided participation” (Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1993), and imported a large theoretical base of understanding about children’s learning. It is questionable whether educators have been equipped with this large theoretical base, as the base requires “new types of integrated professional learning communities” (Tayler, 2012, p. 16).

Another key finding of the EPPE study that has had significant impact on the field is the notion that effective settings maintain “a balance between child- and adult-initiated play experiences” (Irvine, 2013, p. 4; Sylva et al., 2008). How this balance is to be achieved is a formidable challenge for the field (Grieshaber, 2010; Irvine, 2013; Krieg, 2011; Tayler, 2012), particularly since play will cease to be considered play if the adult directs it too much (Bennet, 2005; Leggett & Ford, 2013), at least by children (Cooney & Sha, 1999; Howard, 2002; King, 1979; see also 2.2.2.1, p. 67). The large theoretical base of knowledge regarding adult-child interactions is a significant challenge for educators also.

Both the findings of the EPPE study in general, and the specific finding of sustained shared thinking, have had an unparalleled impact on the field of ECEC: John Bennet (2005) argues that the EPPE study has greatly “repositioned” the early childhood educator from a facilitator to a guide of children’s learning (p. 17). Marilyn Flear (2010) posits that the sustained shared thinking finding is “the single most important contribution to early childhood education reported in the literature in recent years” (p. 6). This has had several implications for the field, which will be discussed later (see p. 31).

Further, the EYLF also stipulates that educators “take on many roles in play with children and use a range of strategies to support learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). Another role included in the *Practices* is “intentional teaching” (p. 10). This builds on Ann Epstein’s (2007) work which was taken up in the High Scope approach in the US (Leggett & Ford, 2013). The theory posits that educators need to be equipped with curricular content and act with specific outcomes in mind in the

playroom. In contrast to the traditional child-centred approach where educators “facilitate” children’s active learning (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 57; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b, p. 147), “intentional teaching” is “a new emphasis for the approach of Australian early childhood educators” (Leggett & Ford, 2013, p. 42; Fleer, 2013; Irvine, 2013). The EYLF clearly stipulates that:

Early childhood educators take on many roles in play with children and use a range of strategies to support learning. They engage in sustained shared conversations with children to extend their thinking. They provide a balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning... They also recognise spontaneous teachable moments as they occur, and use them to build on children’s learning (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15).

The importance of these notions is also salient in the state curriculum framework, the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (VEYLDF; DEECD & VCAA, 2011). Like the EYLF, the VEYLDF references “shared, sustained conversations” (in reference to Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a) and stipulates that educators must integrate “child-directed play and learning; guided play and learning; and adult-led learning” in the manner visualised in Figure 1.1. The VEYLDF gives similar directives as the EYLF in relation to learning through play:

Active engagement with, and attunement to children in their play extends and supports their learning. Shared, sustained conversations are also a powerful and important feature of active adult engagement. The integration of child-directed play and learning, guided play and learning, and adult-led learning is illustrated in [Figure 1.1] (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 12).

However, exactly how educators can enrich and extend learning in play is not addressed in the document, nor in pre-service teacher education (Fleer et al., 2009; Garvis, Pendergast, Twigg, Flückiger, & Kanasa, 2012; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Ryan & Goffin, 2008; Warash et al., 2008; Wood, 2007). For example, educators are not provided instruction on how to negotiate the complicated and nuanced notions of when to guide play or learning and when to let children have

“long periods of uninterrupted play” (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 25). This is further complicated by the fact that too much adult intervention in the play is likely to prevent it from being considered play (Cooney & Sha, 1999; King, 1979), meaning children will lose interest or find it “boring” (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011, p. 18; Zubrowski, 2009).



Figure 1.1 Integrated teaching and learning approaches (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 12)

In fact, preliminary research into the impact of the reforms shows Victorian educators find the VEYLDF “difficult to comprehend” (Garvis et al., 2012, p. 25). Many resources have been targeted to aid the implementation of these reforms (Garvis et al., 2012). For example, the federal government has provided states and territories \$61.27 million over the last four years to aid implementation (Harrington, 2011). However, implementation will not be effective in achieving the five Outcomes unless educators understand the frameworks and are able to adequately judge when to enter play and when to let children learn independently.

This finding is significant in light of the tighter regulation of ECEC practices and of the heightened educator “accountability” (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 62). As mentioned above, the NQF included along with the EYLF other components such as the National Quality Standard (NQS) and National Laws (e.g., *Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010*). For example, the NQS ratings provide an accountability measure for ECEC centres by assessing them against seven areas.

Once assessed, a centre's rating is made publically available online for families considering ECEC services for their children (DEECD, 2012; Tayler, 2012). Of the seven areas, *One* and *Five* have particular relevance to learning through play. *Area One, Educational Program and Practice*, requires ECEC staff to meet children's individual learning and development needs (ACECQA, 2012, para. 1). Specifically, centres are assessed on whether "educators respond to children's ideas and play and use intentional teaching to scaffold and extend each child's learning" (Element 1.2.2, para. 10). As a result of this ratings process, educators' ability to be seen to actively enrich and extend children's learning in their play is highly significant: it determines whether a centre will satisfy the NQS and the centre's publically available rating. This in turn is likely to impact whether an ECEC centre will be attractive to families or not (Tayler, 2012). What families think about learning through play is also likely to impact their choices relating to their child's enrolment (Press & Woodrow, 2005; Stuart, 2013). For example, if an educator did not believe in or utilise learning through play, this may incur a fine of \$20,000 that would drastically impact the ratings of her/his centre, and would possibly even impact on how economically successful the centre was. Similarly, educators seemingly incapable of extending children's learning through play would also have negative consequences for their centre. Thus educators' perspectives on, and capacity to guide, learning through play may impact the economic success or failure of their ECEC centre.

Additionally, another way in which learning through play is formalised in the NQF reforms is the creation of offence provisions in Federal law, whereby an ECEC centre that fails to follow the approved learning framework faces a penalty of up to \$20,000 (Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010). In other words, the NQF stipulates that educators must enact learning through play intentionally or face a penalty. Such regulation of learning through play makes the issue of how to extend and enrich children's learning in their play highly critical to the field.

The new emphases of the EYLF and VEYLDF on sustained shared thinking and intentional teaching, while not necessarily detracting from traditional “holistic approaches” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14), disrupt the conventional notion that learning through play occurs via “non-directive” educators facilitating the children’s agentic learning (Bennet, 2005; Laevers, 2005, p. 21; Pramling Samuelsson & Fler, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b, p. 147; Wood, 2013). The new emphases evident in the EYLF demand that educators “take on many roles” in relation to children’s learning through play (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). Nicole Leggett and Margot Ford (2013) argue that this demand is unbalanced, with a bias toward the educator’s role in this learning, to the detriment of the child’s role in “intentional learning” (p. 43). How educators will know how to make this shift from being facilitative to more active and “intentional” in children’s play is a considerable problem for the field. This is particularly true because educators’ training and practices are developmentally based (Edwards, 2003; 2009; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Ryan & Goffin, 2008; Stephen, 2012; Walsh, 2005; Warash et al., 2008), resulting in a lack of knowledge regarding how to intervene in play to extend children’s learning (Cooney, 2004; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Moyles & Adams, 2001; Rogers & Evans, 2008). In fact, preliminary evidence shows educators are not adequately fostering learning of content (Appleton, 2006; Cullen, 1993; 2009; Raban & Ure, 2000; Rogers, 2010; Sylva et al., 2008; Traianou, 2006).

The complexity of the knowledge required of educators to make responsive judgements and actions is only increased by a strong children’s rights agenda, where it is considered imperative that children’s rights to choose their play activities are respected (Bennet, 2005, p. 17; UN, 1989; Wood, 2014). Exactly when and how to “take on the many roles” of “modelling and demonstrating, open questioning, speculating, explaining, engaging in shared thinking and problem

solving to extend children’s thinking and learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15) is a complex problem that is yet to be elaborated in the framework document (Krieg, 2011). The EYLF “leaves teachers<sup>4</sup> uncertain about ‘how the processes and content’ embedded in the outcomes” are to be delivered (Krieg, 2011, p. 46). As Grieshaber (2010) and others (Leggett & Ford, 2013; Tayler, 2012) have argued, the EYLF departs significantly from previous curriculum documents in its articulation of how educators must engage with play and extend it, a significant challenge for educators.

Analyses of the EYLF have shown that “long-held beliefs about child development and lasting theories which have held a place in early childhood education for many years” are persistent in interpretations of the EYLF (Salamon, 2011, p. 4). Tayler (2012) has argued the need for strong leadership and professional training if these beliefs are to be shifted towards the aspirations of the EYLF. At this juncture in the introduction of the EYLF in Australia, it is critical to review the beliefs and perspectives of educators in relation to learning through play specifically. An investigation of this sort is likely to uncover other influential perspectives and how educators might balance child- and adult-initiated activity in episodes of learning through play.

Critically, some work has progressed the field’s understandings of how to do so. For example, Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness and Trew (2011) suggest taking “a degree of playfulness in the learning structure” in order to foster a “playful structure” that supports curriculum content learning. Suzy Edwards and Amy

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that many writers use the term “teacher” in ECEC. However, in keeping with Australia’s national framework (DEEWR, 2009, see below), I have used the term “educator” in the interests of foregrounding the professional status of ECEC staff (Ortlipp, Arthur, & Woodrow, 2011) when I am not directly quoting one of these writers.



Cutter-Mackenzie's (2013a; 2013b; 2013c; Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014) and Fleer's work (2010; 2011) on purposefully-framed and conceptual play has done much to move the field closer to understanding how play might be used to foster learning. For example, Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2013a) describe how play can be anything from open-ended (in which play materials suggestive of the learning of outcomes are just provided by the educator) to purposefully-framed (where educators introduce materials in relation to outcomes, modelling and allowing for play and sustaining conversations and shared thinking related to these outcomes) (pp. 61 - 62).

Fleer (2010) suggests working within the imaginary world of play to make sure that the children's right to choose activity is not disregarded (p. 147; see Cooney & Sha, 1999; Howard, 2002; and King, 1979, for discussions of the complexities of engaging children in learning activities that children do not consider play). Fleer (2011) also suggests actively working with the children's imaginary world as a way of developing learning that is necessary for "pre-literacy and pre-numeracy" (p. 231). For example, playing with concepts of import to science, mathematics and language, such as measuring, calculating and expressing the distribution of insect habitat in the playground, may be one way to engage children in play that foregrounds the learning of literacy and numeracy outcomes (Fleer, 2010, p. 236). Yet this requires educators to "connect conceptually and contextually" with the children but also "analyse their play for possibilities of active concept formation" (p. 147) - not a simple task. Fleer proposes that there is a strong need for children to know what the educator wants them to learn (in this case, curriculum outcomes), so that both the educator and children share that understanding. This common understanding she (2010) calls "contextual intersubjectivity" (p. 16). She illustrates the problem with the educator taking a facilitating role in play, only

providing resources for play that is thought to lead to particular learning rather than setting the curriculum context for the materials to be played with:

if the teacher<sup>5</sup> had pedagogically framed the introduction of the materials with a particular purpose rather than letting the children work it out for themselves, the children would have been more ... likely to allow the teacher to work with them on their project and they would have been more conceptually focussed on the concepts that were being promoted through the play material (pp. 15 – 16).

Fleer proposes that educators make a “double move” when they understand what concepts children are playing with (“conceptual intersubjectivity”) and how they relate to the curriculum content (“contextual intersubjectivity”). In this way, contextual intersubjectivity is one important tool Fleer provides for educators who are expected to engage with children’s learning of curriculum outcomes more proactively than mere facilitation. Yet this is arguably a complex and demanding task that requires an intimate knowledge of the children’s play world and the concepts being used in it (p. 148).

Much more work is needed to understand how contextual intersubjectivity can be achieved simply by educators in a simple manner. Doing so may be precarious when children are likely to be more interested in their own play than the curriculum outcomes educators might try to explain to children. Thus, educators need to know how to act as “conduits” between the children’s imaginary worlds, where concepts are being played with (Fleer, 2010), and the learning of content, as specified in the learning frameworks. Acting as a conduit between these two perspectives is likely to be complex, so educators need tools which can make this

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<sup>5</sup> or educator.

translation simpler and more effective.

This section has described the context of this particular problem in relation to the dominance of the perspectives of Romantic philosophers and outcome-focused policy-makers. It is likely that the perspectives of policy-makers are quite distant from the perspectives and everyday concerns of young children. In fact, in a recent survey of policy-makers' perspectives in 46 countries across the globe (from New Zealand to Turkey to Colombia), policy-makers appeared to attribute little or no value to children's perspectives (Powell, Graham, Taylor, Newell, & Fitzgerald, 2011). The question of how to make policy-maker perspectives, as reflected in curriculum frameworks, relevant for children is one that may best be answered by asking the children themselves. Because children are the stakeholders who experience learning through play policies "on the ground", and have the final say in whether these policies are effective in the way they are intended, children's perspectives are vital to the questions facing ECEC particularly in the light of recent international changes to the way we implement learning through play. Specifically, children's perspectives on learning through play are likely to help the ECEC field understand how play might better be engaged to foster learning without interrupting children's meaning-making or choices. Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate young children's perspectives on learning through play as well as educators'.

Further, much research now shows that the intentions of educators and families need to be aligned if play is to lead to learning (Melhuish, 2010; Schaller, Rocha, & Barshinger, 2007; Sylva et al., 2008; Wise & Sanson, 2003). There is strong, longitudinal evidence that having greater continuity between the home and ECEC setting leads to improved outcomes for children. Therefore, understanding how learning through play is understood in the home as well as ECEC setting represents a key way in which curricular outcomes might be better achieved through play. Thus it is critical in this thesis to include an investigation of family members' perspectives on learning through play.

Having a better understanding of “insider” stakeholder perspectives – of young children, family members and educators – on learning through play will provide unique insight into how policy and curriculum frameworks are being implemented (Stephen & Brown, 2004, p. 324). This insight is expected not only to help understand how practice has been affected by the curricular reforms (e.g., the NQF), but also how to handle the problem presented above (e.g., how educators, trained to only facilitate learning through play, can more actively extend and enrich learning of curriculum outcomes). As has been shown, the educators’ capacity to do so has significant commercial and financial impacts considering the heightened accountability built into the NQF.

## **1.2 Research questions**

The above section has shown how play became the cornerstone of dominant ECEC pedagogy across the globe because it denoted the interest of the child, which was seen to represent her/his innate learning processes. It has shown how recent international curricular reforms, seen in Australia as the NQF, have reframed learning through play in terms of five Outcomes. This is evidenced in the EYLF in that almost all of the 68 times the EYLF mentions play, it does so in relation to learning. Yet how learning through play is being realised “on the ground” is something that the “insider” perspectives, such as those of children, family members and educators, can reveal (Stephen & Brown, 2004, p. 324). In the interests of not predetermining these perspectives in relation to the learning of curriculum outcomes, I focus on learning through play as it is perceived by the stakeholders themselves.

Secondly, as this thesis proposes to investigate insider stakeholder perspectives in order to see how learning through play is realised practically, then it is pertinent to understand how their perspectives might interact with and influence one

another at this practical level. This focus has been operationalised in terms of the similarities and differences between their perspectives in the second question.

As such this thesis poses the following two research questions to frame the investigation:

1. What are the perspectives of insider stakeholders, including children, mothers, and educators, on learning through play?
2. What are the similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play?

Mothers were focused on as family members in the above questions because only mothers volunteered their time for the study (see the Literature Review, 2.3.1).

### **1.3 Significance of the study**

The above research questions are vital for the ECEC field for multiple reasons. This section discusses four of the main ones. First, the perspectives of young children are valuable in their own right, and merit investigation purely for insight into children's internal worlds. Second, as implied in the first section of this chapter, an investigation of insider stakeholder perspectives is likely to provide a unique angle on the new outcome-focus on play as seen in the recent curriculum reforms, as well as on the longstanding problems with content learning through play that will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter (2.1). Third, this thesis is significant as an investigation of two contexts: the home and the ECEC centre. As such, it will provide useful understanding about how the two might be better aligned, which is a focus of the NQF and a factor that longitudinal research has isolated as an important factor correlated with improved educational

outcomes for children. Finally, this thesis is timely as it investigates insider perspectives as Australia's first national curriculum has been recently implemented, because it investigates perspectives at a historic global era of increased scrutiny and reforms internationally, and because it coincides with the finalising of the legislative arrangements for the NQF.

### **1.3.1 Children's perspectives are valuable**

In turning to the first reason, it is important to note that the rationale presented in the first section of this chapter (see 1.1, p. 19) justifies the investigation of insider stakeholder perspectives both because they are lacking and because they will provide unique insight into how learning through play is realised "on the ground". Research in ECEC has lacked the perspectives of those for whom the ECEC field is designed: children themselves (Brooker, 2011; Howard, 2002; Mayall, 1996; 2008; Smith, Duncan, & Marshall, 2005). In the case of this thesis, young children were invited to video-record their activities to include their perspectives and give them a voice (Bird, Colliver, & Edwards, 2014; Palaiologou, 2014). This form of child participation contributes to the literature regarding ways of making children's perspectives accessible to other stakeholders (Boström, 2006; Wragg, 2013).

This thesis is not only a contribution to a burgeoning body of research that many argue is vital for the field (Clark, 2005; Mashford-Scott, Church, & Tayler, 2012, p. 241), but is also a counter to the common perception that children are not capable of contributing to the improvement of ECEC provision (Clark, 2005; Cook & Hess, 2007; Valentine, 1999). For example, one recent study of 257 researchers' opinions across the globe (in 46 countries), found that children's perspectives were not included in research mostly because of the assumption that children are not competent reporters of their own experience (Powell et al., 2011, p. 15). The assumption appeared to be strongest amongst policy makers, whose perspective appeared to be that children's perspectives had no value (p. 19). This thesis

provides strong evidence that this pervasive view is unfounded (Johansson & White, 2011; Thomson, 2008).

The thesis also provides perspectives on learning through play which challenge dominant conceptions. Children's perspectives are likely to diverge even further than educators from the dominant conception of learning through play, because children are one step further removed from policy makers (Brooker, 2010b; Press & Woodrow, 2005; Sommer, Pramling-Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010; Wood, Broadhead, & Howard, 2010).

However, there is a large body of literature that sees the importance of children's - in particular, young children's - perspectives as a valid interpretation of childhood and associated constructs such as ECEC (Turmel, 2008; see 2.2.3 for details). For this reason, it is important to acknowledge that this thesis provides an account - however abbreviated and a product of my own biases as an adult - of childhood from the perspectives of young children. It is thus significant as a contribution to our understanding of children's perspectives.

### **1.3.2 Learning through play under the NQF**

The second reason this thesis is significant is that it strives to contribute to the dilemma presented in the first section of this chapter: the EYLF's repositioning of the educator's role in learning through play to be more agentic. For example, the EYLF states that, "in response to children's ideas and interests, educators assess, anticipate and extend children's learning" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). Although these ideas are fundamentally child-centred (because they reference children's interests), there is a departure from a "facilitator" role because educators must assist the children's learning by "contributing" to it (Krieg, 2011, p. 46; Grieshaber, 2010). There is a stronger emphasis on the intentional teaching aspects of learning (Leggett & Ford, 2013; Tayler, 2012), and on sustained shared thinking (Bennet, 2005; Fleer, 2010).

As the next chapter will indicate in more detail, research shows that educators generally facilitate play experiences for children by only providing materials, rather than taking a more active role in directing the play experiences towards specified content (Fleer, 2010; Gibbons, 2007; Krieg, 2011). For example, educators expect children to actively and naturally choose play experiences that are developmentally appropriate for them (Ryan, 2005; Walsh, 2005), rather than “intervening” in the play to foster learning (Walsh, McGuinness, Sproule, & Trew, 2010, p. 55). Such a standpoint on learning through play is consistent with the DAP perspective, as will be shown in the Literature Review (specifically, 2.1.2, p. 52). However, there has been much debate over whether this approach to learning through play facilitates the learning of specified content (Appleton, 2006; Brooker, 2002; Cullen, 1993; 1999; 2009; Cunningham, 2007; Lillard, Lerner, Hopkins, Dore, Smith, & Palmquist, 2013; Raban & Ure, 2000; Rogers, 2010; Smith, 1988; Sylva et al., 2008; Traianou, 2006; Trawick-Smith, 1989; see Colliver, 2012, for an overview). Research also suggests educators frequently struggle to understand (Garvis et al., 2012) and to effectively enact curriculum in relation to learning through play (Anning, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Rogers, 2010). It would appear that the NQF reforms tap into public concern that play might not lead to useful learning. In this way, this investigation of insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play addresses two critical issues for the field:

a) the issue of whether learning through play appears to be occurring “on the ground” rather than just in policy. This is achieved by asking those that implement learning through play (educators, families and children); and

(b) the issue of whether play fosters the learning of specific content such as



the five Outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

By addressing these two issues that are critical for various stakeholders, this thesis is a significant contribution to the field. In particular, the thesis intends to follow on from the useful work of scholars such as Fleer (2010; 2011) in relation to the challenge for educators to enter play and to “extend and enrich” the learning available (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5) without converting the play into purely adult-led activities that may not hold the interest of children in the same way that play does.

### **1.3.3 Home-ECEC setting alignment**

While recent research has focussed on critiquing the dominance of the notion of learning through play (Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Cecchin, 2013; Rogers, 2013; Wood, 2014), not as much attention has been paid to the perspectives of those who experience, enact and support learning through play as a basis for curriculum provision (Soto & Swadener, 2002; Stephen & Brown, 2004; Thomson, 2008): children, families, and educators. An investigation of these perspectives and their similarities and differences is significant because it will provide understanding as to how the family and ECEC settings interact in relation to children’s learning. This understanding is very important for children’s learning because continuity between these two settings – alignment of their intentions – has been shown by multiple large-scale studies to positively affect children’s educational outcomes (Melhuish, 2010; Schaller et al., 2007; Sylva et al., 2008; Wise & Sanson, 2003). Specifically, they showed that educators’ and families’ intentions need to be aligned if play is to lead to learning. This investigation of mothers’ and educators’

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<sup>6</sup> I could not address the Outcomes in the research questions, as doing so may have led to bias by imposing expectations about how participants answered.

perspectives is significant because it uncovers ways in which the two settings can be aligned.

Another reason this is significant is Area Six in which the NQS rates ECEC settings directly relates to “collaborative partnerships with families and communities” (ACECQA, 2012, para. 12). The NQS evaluates whether centres are above or below standard, and this evaluation is made public on the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) website. If educators are supposed to follow *Element 6.2.1*, “The expertise of families is recognised and they share in decision making about their child’s learning and wellbeing”, then an investigation such as the current one is useful in order to give insight into how educators can better collaborate with families using families’ expertise to make decisions.

### **1.3.4 Timely investigation of new NQF (2012)**

This thesis comes at a particular socio-historical moment in which Australia’s first national curriculum to regulate children’s learning (DEEWR, 2009), international trends in ECEC include tighter auditing of quality measurements (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Hardy & Boyle, 2011), and the administration of the NQF are all impacting directly on the field.

The EYLF represents the “first time that learning outcomes for children in the prior-to-school sector have been specified nationally” (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 57). It has been widely praised as an achievement in nationally regulating learning (e.g., Arthur, Barnes, & Ortlipp, 2011; Ellis, 2009; Giugni, 2011; Grajczonek, 2012; Ortlipp et al, 2011; Sumsion, Barnes, Cheeseman, Harrison, Kennedy, & Stonehouse, 2009; Sumsion & Wong, 2011; Young, 2009). Its release was framed as a means to boost learning in care environments, a way “to bridge the gap between care and learning” (Rudd & Macklin, 2007, p. 12). This thesis is significant as it looks at one major aspect of learning in ECEC: the learning that occurs through

play.

Second, the regulation of learning as it relates to outcomes is increasingly occurring at national levels across the globe (Ball, 2003; Hatch & Grieshaber, 2002; Rogers, 2013; VCAA, 2008). As children's learning is the key justification for these reforms (Fleer, 2010, p. 5), this thesis has significance in terms of the larger international trends towards regulation of play through policy (Rogers, 2013). As the teaching of subject content is increasingly included in policy (Bennet, 2005; Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Fleer, 2010), an investigation at the time when the EYLF comes into effect is significant also.

Third, an investigation of learning through play is timely as all components of the quality reform are only recently in operation, with the EYLF being implemented in 2009, the VEYLDF distributed to all ECEC services in 2010, and the NQF coming into effect only in 2012 (ACECQA, 2012; Harrington, 2011). The findings for this thesis were generated in 2012 and so come at a time when reforms intended to balance the tensions between play and learning (Rudd & Macklin, 2007) have all come into operation.

An investigation of how learning through play is experienced by insider stakeholders is thus timely as Australia regulates learning at a national level for the first time, as similar curricular reforms occur internationally, and as all components of the NQF are operational.

In summary, this thesis aspires to contribute children's perspectives in and of themselves, insight about how educators differ in their perspectives from family members and children so that the learning of content can be fostered more effectively through play, understanding of how to align practices in the home and ECEC settings better, and a depiction of the effects of the NQS "on the ground" for learning through play. The next section provides some context as to why I have endeavoured to contribute these perspectives.

## 1.4 Personal orientation to the research

The impetus for this research began with an idea which first occurred to me when I was a child, but took shape later. From my primary school years, I was fascinated when I saw how quickly and naturally infants learned language. When I was in high school, all students were required to complete two weeks of work experience and I chose to work as a kindergarten teacher's assistant. I found it most intriguing to watch children absorbed in play because they appeared to be learning naturally, in a way that adults did not.

These two observations gathered momentum over the years into what has become a life-long goal to investigate learning. I have been particularly interested in learning that occurs incidentally and naturally. I completed a degree in Psychology and Linguistics, hoping to join the two into post-graduate psycholinguistic research, investigating how children learn their first language naturally and with such apparent ease. When an opportunity emerged to research learning through play, this appealed to me as another chance to investigate natural, incidental learning. Thus, I undertook this investigation recognising that my own Romantic view on this learning has affected how I was to answer the above questions. In one sense, I came to the research believing there was no "aim of the game" for children; it seemed that they played and learned through play only because it was natural for them, and something that adults could not be improve on. However, my own perspective has changed as I learned the different perspectives of the insider stakeholders in this thesis. I now believe, along with many other sociocultural theorists (Fleer, 2010; Hedegaard, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978), that adults have the capacity to enter play as equals with children with specific learning outcomes in mind.

## 1.5 Structure of the thesis

This first chapter, the *Introduction*, has detailed the thesis topic. It has also briefly contextualised and justified the need for an investigation of insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play because they are central to the effectiveness of learning through play, particularly as it is conceptualised in recent curricular reforms such as the NQF.

Chapter Two, the *Literature Review*, explains what is already known about stakeholder perspectives on learning through play. This chapter begins by canvassing the literature on learning through play, showing it is characterised by the perspectives of philosophers, psychologists, academics and politicians, perspectives that frequently collide and conflict. It then addresses children's perspectives, showing that research suggests children highly value child-initiated play and peer-participation, but that little can be said about their perspectives on learning or learning through play. The Literature Review then looks at mother's perspectives. This literature suggests that mothers generally agree with the provision for learning through play but are more focused on their children learning literacy and numeracy academic skills, such that purposefully-framed play and structured activities are valued more than open-ended play. To complicate matters, mothers also consistently want their children to learn social skills, an aspect of learning for which open-ended play is often considered an appropriate avenue. To finish, this chapter considers educators. Educator perspectives on learning through play chiefly reflect the tensions between their own values of child-centred, free play facilitation and the parental and curricular demands for specific outcomes such as literacy and numeracy content. The tension implies that educators either cannot or choose not to enter children's play to guide it towards curricular content outcomes. The chapter concludes by showing that the interaction between the three insider stakeholders needs to be thoroughly investigated if the field is to respond to the apparent tensions between facilitating play and actively guiding it.

The third chapter, the *Theory*, establishes the lens through which the investigation was conducted, and defines the key theoretical constructs used in the thesis. Four constructs are considered from a sociocultural perspective. First, theories of learning are described, identifying a sociocultural theorisation as necessary to understand the different perspectives of the insider stakeholders. Second, a sociocultural framework for analysing perspectives – the unit of analysis in the investigation – is described. Third, play theory is considered, showing that a sociocultural understanding related to the imaginary situation of play is the only productive understanding for the purposes of the thesis. Finally, this provides the foundation for describing learning through play as it has been theorised by sociocultural thinkers such as Vygotsky and Piotr Galperin.

The fourth chapter, the Methodology Chapter, describes the way the research was carried out. First, a sociocultural ontology, epistemology and axiology are considered. The sensitivity necessary to conduct research with children is outlined to justify the methods used in the investigation. The importance of a reflexive stance is discussed from the ontological position on the research topic through to the details of the methods used. This chapter then describes the implementation of the investigation, concluding with a consideration of its limitations.

The fifth chapter, the *Findings*, details the results of the investigation in three parts: the children's, family members' and educators' perspectives on learning through play. Presentation of the findings is supported with reference to the data, including transcriptions and video-captured images. The finding for the first research question was that children saw learning through play as the main rule of the imaginary situation, the mothers described it as participation in family practices and educators saw it as balancing child- and content-centred approaches. The finding for the second research question was that both educators and mothers believed children were achieving cognitive and social learning through play, whereas only children and mothers framed learning through play in relation to children's participation in institutional practices. The children's and

educators' perspectives differed the most. Interestingly, each stakeholder group was focused on the practices of their own institution: the playground, the family and the ECEC centre.

The sixth chapter, the *Discussion*, explores these findings in relation to the literature established in *Chapter Three* and the theory of *Chapter Four*. Specifically it does so to answer the first and the second research question. It shows that children's perspectives on learning through play, which were about participating in practices of the playground, were similar to mother's perspectives on child practices. Educators, in contrast, were focussed on their own practices in relation to the curriculum. Further, mothers saw intrapersonal learning through play as the most significant type. The implication of these findings is that educators can align the three insider stakeholder perspectives more by focussing on the practices of the playground. Specifically, focusing on the main rule of the imaginary situation provides educators an effective tool with which to enter the imaginary situation and also to include curriculum content. Findings suggest educators may be able to "extend and enrich" children's learning through play by adapting the main rule of the imaginary situation to the Outcomes of the learning framework. Further, connecting with the main rule may provide the unique insight into the children's play content that is necessary to help them understand the intrapersonal learning that mothers privileged. Doing so may generate greater continuity between the home and ECEC settings, an Outcome of the relevant learning frameworks.

The seventh and final chapter, the *Conclusion*, considers contributions the thesis makes to the ECEC field. Specifically, it suggests that the main rule is a simple tool that educators may use to think about actively engaging with and extending children's learning, as they are expected to in recent curricular reforms such as the NQF. Educators can use "the aim of the game" to enter children's imaginary worlds as co-players and capitalise on teachable moments to reach the Outcomes of the learning frameworks.





## **CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW**

The previous chapter introduced the Romantic notion that play represents the child's interest and therefore what is most stimulating for her/his learning. In this child-centred approach to learning through play, the educator is expected not to interfere in the children's play but only to facilitate it. This was shown to be problematic in light of the repositioning of the educator in relation to learning through play in the NQF and other contemporary, international curriculum reforms. This chapter extends on these ideas, showing other debates related to learning through play, debates that have been dominated by the perspectives of philosophers, psychologists and policy-makers. Because of this, the chapter justifies a review of the research literature on young children's, family members' and educators' perspectives. Thus the next three subsections of the chapter review these perspectives (2.2.2 - 2.2.4, pp. 66 - 103).

### **2.1 Play-based learning in early childhood education**

Play has a long history in education. Immanuel Kant's (1803) famous claim that "man can only become man by education" encapsulates his view that education was the only way to be emancipated from tutelage (Jordan et al., 2008, p. 6; Rancière, 2010). From Kant's perspective, the learner was to use her/his own reason without direction from another. This sentiment remains at the heart of play-based curricula in ECEC today, where play is seen as a way for children to become their own teachers (Stephen, 2006). In this way the child is emancipated from direct guidance from adults (Rancière, 2010), and play and direct adult guidance become polarised (Hedges, 2010; Krieg, 2011).

The importance of play in ECEC is now recognised by scholars worldwide (Christie, 1991; Kessler & Hauser, 2000; Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993; Wood, 2007; 2008; 2013; 2014). In part, this is because scholars in the field of education have tried to

determine play's practical value for children (Wood, 2007), which in recent discourses justifies the money spent on its provision (Ailwood, 2003; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Fler, 2010; Stuart, 2013). The assessment of the value of play has included both its extrinsic as well as intrinsic worth (Moyles, 2010).

The existence of play in every society studied by anthropologists suggests that it has some intrinsic value (i.e., enjoyment) (Lancy, 2007, p. 274). In the United States of America (USA), the second most common activity for children out of school is playing with friends (Miller, O'Connor, & Sirignano, 1995, p. 1253). Yet it is considered to be most common before they reach school age, between the ages of three and five (Singer & Singer, 1992; Vygotsky, 1976).

However, research into play behaviour has historically assumed that it occurs because it has a serious purpose, even for animals that play (Bateson, 2011). This view has prevailed in the majority of research into play, which focuses on its extrinsic value, such as social, physical, and conceptual learning (Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Lillard et al., 2013; Smith, 1988). In this thesis, I will use the more general description, "learning through play", to represent the position on the use of play-based learning in ECEC that focuses on the *extrinsic* value of play: for children's learning and development.

Such preoccupation with the extrinsic value of play has dominated the literature (Colliver, 2011; 2012), and has focused on ascertaining *if* play leads to learning (Lillard et al., 2013). As the next subsection shows, the perspectives of philosophers, psychologists and policy-makers have dominated these debates. The policy-maker perspective has particularly focused on *what* children learn through play, particularly in relation to measurable outcomes (Stephen & Brown, 2004; Walsh et al., 2010; Wood, 2008). Therefore, the focus has shifted from *if* to *what* learning occurs through play. This shift is reflected in the dominance of philosophers', psychologists', academics' and policy-makers' perspectives on learning through play.

### 2.1.1 Philosophers' perspectives on learning through play

Learning through play has historically represented a key aspect of ECEC because philosophers have seen it as the most natural and therefore effective means to educate children. These ideas culminated in the child-centred approach to ECEC, bringing the idea of learning through play to the fore of educational intent.

Learning through play probably dates back as far as Plato (424 - 347 BC) who advocated the imperative, "Let your child's education take the form of play" (Entwistle, 2012, p. 11; Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Seeley, 2009). As mentioned in the Introduction, Rousseau and Fröbel, who was for many the forefather of child-centred education (Chung & Walsh, 2000; Howard, 2010a; Wood, 2013), were also fascinated by play (Fröbel, 1887/1900; Rousseau, 1762/2007). These Romantic philosophers saw learning as a natural function of play and exploration, and thus the educator's role as one of care and facilitation (Brooker, 2005; Jordan et al., 2008). For example, Fröbel saw the teacher as a threat to the child's learning:

education in instruction and training, originally and in its first principles, should necessarily be *passive*, following (only guarding and protective), not *prescriptive, categorical*, interfering ... a more arbitrary (active), prescriptive and categorical interfering education ... must necessity annihilate, hinder and destroy" (Fröbel, cited in Entwistle, 2012, p. 143).

Yet it was not until the 20th century that play was more widely legitimated with the spread and popularisation of the child-centred approach (Kane, 2004; Wood, 2008). A key tenet of the child-centred approach was prioritising what the child is interested in (Entwistle, 2012; Langford, 2010) - which is represented in her/his play (Chung & Walsh, 2000; Wood, 2013). The educator was therefore expected to interfere as little as possible. Over the course of the century, the humanistic, child-centred ethos was enshrined in curriculum documents across the western world (Cunningham, 2007; Tzuo, 2007; Wood, 2010). The child-centred perspective has emphasised the need for educators to follow the child's interest in order to

maximise learning through play. This has meant that the application of a play-based curriculum has come to imply a child-centred approach (Wood, 2013), particularly in the UK (Adams et al., 2004; Brooker, 2011; Rogers & Evans, 2008; Stephen & Brown, 2004), the USA (Burman, 2008), South Korea (Kwon, 2004) and Australia (Fleer, 2011; Krieg, 2011).

### **2.1.2 Psychologists' perspectives on learning through play**

The insistence that the educator take a facilitating role in children's learning through play did not occur as a result of philosophical endorsement alone (Henricks, 2001). The popularisation of Piaget's theories meant there was a strong endorsement of children's self-directed learning in education (Lee & Johnson, 2007). In fact, developmental psychologists (see Theory Chapter) saw as much value in having educators facilitate play as did Romantics such as Rousseau and Fröbel (Brooker, 2011; Henricks, 2001).

Over the last 40 years play has been the subject of countless psychological investigations seeking to empirically substantiate its value (Christie, 1991; Lillard et al., 2013; Smith, 1988), a value that continues to be staunchly defended (e.g., Bergen, 2013; Walker & Gopnik, 2013; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). Despite the differences of their epistemological stance on empiricism compared with their Romantic predecessors (Henricks, 2001), developmental psychologists adopted the Piagetian (and constructivist) notion that the child learned about the world through self-guided discovery (Burman, 1994; Goffin & Wilson, 2000; Walsh, 1991). Within this paradigm, the educator would merely *provide* play to aid the child's discoveries (Burman, 2008; Ryan & Goffin, 2008). The psychological perspective on ECEC continued to emphasise the child's autonomous psychological processes involved in learning through play rather than the content to be taught by the educator (Gibbons, 2007; Krieg, 2011).

Play was - and continues to be - advocated and defended as "essential" to learning

and development through the citation of scientific studies (Nutbrown et al., 2008, p. 154; Smith, 1988, p. 212; Wood, 2013, p. 1). Studies have highlighted the developmental advantages of play for children in all domains (Barnett, 1990; Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Lee & Thompson, 2007; Saracho, 1991; Wood, 2009; Walker & Gopnik, 2013). Extensive research has also highlighted learning within specific developmental domains including physical (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Wyver, Bundy, Naughton, Tranter, Sandseter, & Ragen, 2010; Wyver, Tranter, Naughton, Little, Sandseter, & Bundy, 2010), social (Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993; Rogers & Evans, 2008; Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008), and intellectual or cognitive development (Bateson, 2011; Bodrova, 2008; Dolhinow, 1987; Henricks, 2009; Leslie, 1987; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000; Marcon, 2002; Panksepp, 1998; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Sherrod & Singer, 1989; Taylor, et al., 2004). In line with child-centred approaches (Entwistle, 2012), there was also an emphasis on the benefits for emotional development (Howes, 1997; Spodek & Saracho, 1999), and on play as an indicator of emotional wellbeing (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010; Siegel, 1999). When play spontaneously occurred, it was seen as a sign of normal development, which merged well with the principles of psychoanalytic theory (Bruner, 1960; Person, Fonagy, & Figueira, 1995; Walker, 2009). Such ideas were most famously advocated by Freud's youngest child, Anna Freud (1895 - 1982) (Wood, 2013). In fact, so pronounced was the pro-play discourse that scholars have commented on its status as an "orthodoxy" in the field as early as the 1980s (Smith, 1988, p. 213). Sutton-Smith (1997) refers to the dominance of the extrinsic value accorded to play, as

extrinsic academic, social, moral, physical, and cognitive play functions, with a progress-oriented thrust, have been the major focus of most child play scientists ... These extrinsic theories are the best demonstrations of the way in which the field of child play is dominated by the rhetoric of progress (p. 50 - 51).

This quote reflects the 20th century empirical verification of play which has

focused on understanding learning through play as developmental domains. The focus on developmental domains suggested educators should provide play materials because her/his interests were the best indication of what was being learned, and educators could monitor learning in such domains (Ceglowski, 1997, p. 111). Of particular importance more recently has been the developmentally appropriate practice guidelines (DAP). DAP is a USA policy document first published in 1987 with revised editions published in 1997 and 2009 (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) and has become highly influential in western ECEC thinking (Burman, 2008; Butler, Gotts, & Quisenberry, 1978; Lee & Johnson, 2007; Walkerdine, 1984). The dominant psychological perspective adopted the DAP philosophy, which is to provide rich ECEC environments which allow children to freely choose their activities on the basis that this fosters learning at the most “developmentally appropriate” level and is thought to be the most prominent modern instantiation of the child-centred approach to curriculum (Ryan, 2005; Walsh, 2005).

DAP represents the child-centred ethos in many ways, such as by emphasising holistic learning (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014; Edwards, 2003; Ryan, 2005) including physical, social, emotional and cognitive learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), which is predominantly achieved through the child’s active learning processes. An excerpt from the latest version of DAP (2009) evidenced the active learning of these domains through play:

Children of all ages love to play, and it gives them opportunities to develop physical competence and enjoyment of the outdoors, understand and make sense of their world, interact with others, express and control emotions, develop their symbolic and problem-solving abilities, and practice emerging skills. ... Observed in young animals, play apparently serves important physical, mental, emotional, and social functions for humans and others species... (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 14)

The DAP perspective holds that scientific studies have proven the value of

learning through play (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), sufficient justification for making play “a universal pedagogic practice” (Brooker, 2011, p. 142). Even with critiques and developments of developmental theory (e.g., Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005), DAP remains the dominant discourse of Western educator training (Edwards, 2009; Fleer et al., 2009; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Stephen, 2012; Warash et al., 2008), upheld in policy documents (Rogers & Evans, 2008; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005; Walsh et al., 2010; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008), and enacted in ECEC centres (Ryan & Goffin, 2008). Until recently, this psychological perspective dominated, meaning educators were mainly responsible for observing and setting up play experiences to foster learning (Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Burman, 2008; Walsh, 2005).

### **2.1.3 Academics’ perspectives on learning through play**

The dominance of the child-centred approach to teaching has not been without its critiques. The “play ethos”, so prominent in the play literature (Lillard et al., 2013, p. 8), was challenged by certain scholars who emphasised the importance of the content of “essentials”, such as literacy and numeracy (Cullen, 1999, p. 23). These scholars have focused on the importance of, for example, young children being able to recognise letters of the alphabet or count to 20. They challenged the reliance on play to teach children, considering play-based curricula “ill-conceived educational practice” (Trawick-Smith, 1989, p. 161). The field’s child-centred approaches argued for the young child’s need to play, yet there was a conservative backlash (Cunningham, 2007; Entwistle, 2012; Smith, 1988; Trawick-Smith, 1989) aligned with “an implicit expectation that [children in ECEC should be] also preparing for formal education” (Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 58). Elizabeth Wood (2008) recognised the conflict between the child-centred approach of play-based learning and the demands of the curriculum for subject content in her statement that free play and the child-centred values were “ideologically seductive to early childhood practitioners, [yet] conceptually weak in practice” (p.

8). This was in the context of large-scale studies which suggested play-based learning was not sufficient to teach subject content (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002; Sylva et al., 2008). As Hedges (2010) explained:

the adage of learning through play has never sat comfortably alongside the notion of teaching through play, and is unlikely ever to do so. The non-compulsory, non-prescriptive, unstructured and play-based nature of Western-European early childhood education exposes it to many viewpoints and debates (p. 25).

Importantly, the dominant child-centred discourse assumed that educators could foster learning solely through play (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2009; Stephen, 2010; Trawick-Smith, 1989), whereas Piaget himself (1962) suggested only “assimilation” would occur in play, and not its complement, “accommodation” (p. 150; see *Theory Chapter, Section Two*). Even if play would lead to the development of other skills (Lillard et al., 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2008), many scholars stressed the importance of literacy and numeracy, two vital components of early curriculum *content* (Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008), and the failure of play-based curricula to deliver them (Hutt, Tyler, Hutt, & Christopherson, 1989; Ryan & Goffin, 2008; Wood, 2010).

The above focus on learning *content* conflicts with child-centred, play-based pedagogy, an approach which emphasises whole learning and encapsulates broader concepts such as wellbeing, social skills and emotional development (Fleer, 2011). A further problem for play-based learning is this tension between child-centred and subject content-centred approaches (Cullen, 1999; Krieg, 2011), because they implied a similar dichotomy between child-centred and educator-directed approaches (Leggett & Ford, 2013, p. 43). Whereas the psychological perspective had predominantly endorsed the notion of the child directing her/his own learning, a recent meta-analysis of play studies over the last 40 years showed that there was no empirical evidence supporting the proposition that play-based approaches lead to the learning of measurable subject content such as literacy or



numeracy (Lillard et al., 2013). This was the first time previous psychological studies had been so rigorously investigated.

This conflict between content- and child-centred approaches was also represented by research in playrooms as a conflict between process and product. Susan Krieg (2011) illustrated:

For example, when children are intensely involved in play that re-enacts (or acts) violence, they could be described as focused, highly engaged and actively making meaning (indicators of effective learning processes). However, it is difficult to imagine that any early childhood educator would argue that the 'product' (which, in the case, could be that the children see violence as the solution to a difficult situation) is unimportant (p. 47).

This example shows the tensions between direct instruction of content (product- or content-centred) and child-centred approaches. Other studies challenged the widespread belief that "free play is a sufficient condition for learning" (Stephen, 2010, p. 20), suggesting that the goals of content- and child-centred approaches to education were at odds with one another. Whereas content-centred approaches focus on objectively measurable content derived from the subject disciplines such as literacy and mathematics (Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Stephen & Brown, 2004), child-centred approaches emphasise more holistic outcomes such as self-expression, learning dispositions and emotional learning (Olsen & Sumsion, 2000; Rusher et al., 1992). As one scholar summarised, it is widely recognised that "...play-based programs, and the theories that guide them, were never designed to exclusively deliver academically-oriented outcomes" (Fleer, 2011, p. 244). Thus it was argued that child-centred approaches may fail to deliver subject content outcomes such as literacy, numeracy and science, a significant challenge to the dominance of learning through play.

Some academics took this challenge up and argued for greater adult guidance of play as a solution (Walsh et al., 2010). For example, "sustained shared thinking"

(Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a) has attracted much attention as a modern way for educators to guide the child's play to foster learning whilst maintaining a commitment to what the child is interested in. Another example of where adult guidance of play is often used is in special education (Leong & Bodrova, 2012, p. 31; Walsh et al., 2010), where it is seen to boost literacy (Edmiston, 2007), inclusion (Ganz & Flores, 2010; Warming, 2011), interaction (Elmore & Vail, 2011), and play complexity and variety (Barton & Wolery, 2010). For children with developmental disorders, play is seen to boost social and cognitive learning (Boutot, Guenther, & Crozier, 2005; Lifter, Sulzer-Azaroff, Anderson, & Cowder, 1993; Terpstra, Higgins, & Pierce, 2002).

Yet a more active adult role in play-based learning conflicted with the psychologists' perspective that this would impair the quality of the learning. For example, a principal feature of the 1987 edition of DAP was its insistence that play is spontaneous and should not be "interfered" with by adults (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010, p. 502; Walsh, 2005). Inspired by Piaget's ideas of individual learning and constructivism, many educationalists sympathetic to DAP believed "certain concepts should not be presented to children until they reach the appropriate level of cognitive development necessary to understand them" (Spodek & Saracho, 1999, p. 8; Ranz-Smith, 2007). This approach aligned with the belief that "the play world belongs to the child" and that teachers must not impinge on play's inherent freedom (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012, p. 267). A similar sentiment of the time appears to be reflected in the spirit of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), which is known for its framing of play as a representation of children's free choice (Wood, 2014) in accordance with their developmental level:

States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities *appropriate to the age of the child* and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts (Article 31, p. 9, italics added).

After much controversy over “the teacher’s role [being] relegated to ‘following the child’s lead’” (Bodrova, 2008, p. 358; Walsh et al., 2010), the DAP guidelines were amended (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997) to account for educators “failing to challenge children adequately” in learning through play (Dickinson, 2002, p. 28). There appeared to be a return “toward the middle of the ‘direct versus child-initiated instruction’ continuum” (Warash et al., 2008, p. 443), reflected in the latest version of DAP (Copple & Bredenkamp, 2009).

#### **2.1.4 Policy-makers’ perspectives on learning through play**

Some contemporary research appears to agree with a greater emphasis on educators guiding play to learning (e.g., Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013c). Examples include the EPPE study (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004; Sylva et al, 2008; see 1.1) and the Researching Pedagogy in English Pre-Schools (REPEY; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002), which showed how educators needed to take a more active role in play for it to lead to learning of measurable content (Bennet, 2005; Fleer, 2010; Irvine, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a). Today there appears to be an association between ECEC quality and a balance between child- and educator-led activities (Leggett & Ford, 2013, p. 43; Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008).

In conjunction with this research, there appears to be increasingly business-like models being applied to the field (Biesta, 2007). With stronger pushes to deliver curricular content outcomes and other measures of “quality” and “effectiveness” (Biesta, 2007; Dahlberg et al., 2007; VCAA, 2008), policy-makers represent such pushes in their development of curricula (Hedges & Cullen, 2012; Stephen & Brown, 2004). As mentioned in the Introduction (see 1.1), this trend is reflected in Australia with the introduction of national standards and outcomes in the NQF and EYLF (Leggett & Ford, 2013; Ortlipp et al., 2011; Rudd & Macklin, 2007; Tayler, 2012). Critically, these policies, like contemporary research, have emphasised the active role of the educator in extending children’s learning. In

Australia, this represents a challenge to educators to negotiate the “delicate” relationship between the child’s active learning processes and the educator’s responsibility to respond to opportunities for learning content (Leggett & Ford, 2013, p. 44; Grieshaber, 2010; Krieg, 2011).

Learning through play is now a core component of many leading national curricula across the world (Pramling Samuelsson & Fler, 2008) and a key way in which curricular outcomes are expected to be delivered in the national curricula in Canada (Ruffolo, 2009, p. 293), the UK (Adams, Alexander, Drummond, & Moyles, 2004; Brooker, 2011, p. 139; DCSF, 2008), Iceland (Einarsdottir, 2011, p. 389; MESC, 2011), Korea (Kwon, 2004, p. 297), Singapore (MOE, 2012) and Australia (Fler et al., 2009, p. 293; DEEWR, 2009a). Thus the policy-maker perspective largely endorses the notion of learning through play in daily curricular activities.

### **2.1.5 Challenges to these perspectives**

The first significant challenge to the notion of learning through play has come from those who have argued that the value of play is typically viewed only in terms of such as learning and progress, to the exclusion of its other values (Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Rogers, 2013; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Wood, 2007; 2010). Some scholars have highlighted how the provision of play is increasingly “functional” (Wood & Hall, 2011, p. 268), viewed only in terms of measurable outcomes (Elkind, 1981; Keating et al., 2000). The freedom and playful characteristics of play are replaced by “highly prescribed, externally evaluated, purposeful play regime[s]” (Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 37).

Akin to such ideas is the contention that children are becoming overrun with busy schedules (Elkind, 1981; Hirsh-Pasek, Hyson, & Rescorla, 1990; Nutbrown et al., 2008; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) recently expressed concern that time for child-directed activities such as

play is shortened by the increasing imposition of overly structured and programmed schedules (Section 4722). It issued a *General Comment* that the child's right to play was under threat due to an over-emphasis on "academic targets and formal learning at the expense of participation in play" (UNCRC, 2013, para. 3133 - 4711).

Some argue that these pressures arise from curriculum documents such as the "Desirable Learning Outcomes" (Keating et al., 2000, p. 439) or "Standard Assessment Tasks" and "a target-driven culture in primary schools" (Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 52). Dahlberg and colleagues (2007) have argued how the trend to regulate "quality" in ECEC "has been dominated by a small group of experts, to the exclusion of a wide range of other stakeholders with an interest in early childhood early childhood institutions" (p. 5). For this reason, it is important to investigate the perspectives of insider stakeholders as those with the most invested in learning through play.

Others insist it is the power of a culture of "ambitious" parents (Bateson, 2011, p. 46; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000), and trends towards "formal instruction" which have led to overly busy childhoods (Einarsdottir, 2011, p. 389; Flear, 2011). It is in this context that an investigation of family members' perspectives is justified.

Further, some express concern that this trend is detrimental to long term learning outcomes (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008; Marcon, 2002). The curricular outcomes expected through learning through play are considered an "over-scheduling" (LEGO learning institute, 2002, p. 5; UNCRC, 2013) or "over-booking" of childhood (Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 272), losing the balance between work and play (Flear, 2011; Nutbrown et al., 2008; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000). The trend has occurred in contexts where there are already concerns about the sedentary, academic focus of childhood activities (Wyver, Bundy, Naughton, Tranter, Sandseter, & Ragen, 2010). It is expected that an investigation of children's perspectives will reveal if indeed overscheduling is a concern and if it

affects learning through play.

Third, as will be shown in the final subsection of this chapter (see 2.2.4, p. 91), several studies (e.g., Garvis et al., 2012; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Rogers & Evans, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b) have found that educators are unsure “about their own role in children’s play when they should intervene and become involved in children’s play and when they should let the children play alone” in order to maximise learning (Walsh et al., 2010, p. 55). This has led to a large degree of uncertainty about how educators should engage in children’s play experiences to foster learning (Anning, 2010; Krieg, 2011; Kwon, 2002; Leaupepe, 2010; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Specifically in relation to the learning of the EYLF’s curriculum Outcomes, for example, it has been argued that “clearly the relationship between the child as agent and the teacher as pedagogical driver is a very delicate one” (Leggett & Ford, 2013, p. 44). This may explain why educators find the VEYLDF “difficult to comprehend” (Garvis et al. 2012, p. 25).

On the other hand, many approaches that are seen at the forefront of contemporary thinking about child-centred ECEC, such as the Reggio Emilia (Malaguzzi, 2011) and Project-Based (Helm & Katz, 2011) approaches, see play as a foundation for following the child’s interest, and are widely acclaimed for their approach to learning through play. As these approaches clash with the repositioning of the educator’s role in recent curricular reforms, it is important to investigate how the perspectives of those that implement learning through play influence and differ from one another.

It is hence the various challenges to learning through play, particularly as it is instantiated in recent curricular reforms, that justify an examination of how it is experienced by insider stakeholders.

### **2.1.6 Conclusion to play-based learning**

The above account highlights some of the main debates which have featured in the literature regarding learning through play, including the perspectives of stakeholders such as philosophers, psychologists, and policy-makers. These debates may be characterised as a tension between content- and child-centred approaches (Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Krieg, 2011). Although there is some research into the perspectives of those stakeholders who directly experience learning through play – children, families and educators – the research has been insufficient (O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Soto & Swadener, 2002; Stephen & Brown, 2004). In particular, what educators think about learning through play is especially important because they must enact the curriculum and are monitored through various accountability measures. The similarities and differences between their perspectives and those of the children whose learning they seek to support, and the families with whom they engage, are also important because aligning their motives has been shown to boost educational achievement and overall wellbeing (Melhuish, 2010; Schaller et al., 2007; Sylva et al., 2008; Wise & Sanson, 2003). Finally, as those with the most at stake in ECEC, children’s perspectives and how they differ from adult stakeholders are vital to an investigation of learning through play.

## **2.2 Insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play**

As a summation of a series of research projects, Christine Stephen and Sally Brown (2004) argued that the effective provision of ECEC is compromised by a failure to understand and align “insider” and “outsider” stakeholder perspectives.

By ‘outsiders’ we mean, for the most part, those whose main responsibilities rest in areas such as the formulation of a general national or regional

curriculum framework for the pre-school years, the inspection of pre-school provision, and the external-to-institution aspects of the training of pre-school staff (p. 324).

This thesis investigates the perspectives of “insider” stakeholders on learning through play, namely children, families and educators. The reasons for doing so are discussed below in relation to each insider stakeholder.

First, it has been argued that play must be considered from the perspectives of the players – what they think about it, why they do it, what it means, and what they imagine through it (Wood et al., 2010). These considerations sit in opposition to, and have value despite, the perspectives of adult stakeholders; they “cannot and should not be subordinated wholly to educational policy agendas that privilege narrow constructs of effectiveness and defined outcomes” (p. 2). Children’s experiences and interpretations of learning through play in ECEC settings are extremely valuable (Howard, 2002; Smith et al., 2005; Stephen & Brown, 2004; Thomson, 2008). They are the stakeholders for whom educational policy is designed (Harcourt, 2011; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005; 2011), so they are the most “inside” of all the stakeholders. They are also removed from the adult concerns regarding play and thus can offer a unique perspective (Porter, 2009; Reifel, 1988). As was shown above (see 2.1), the literature on play has been dominated by the perspectives of policy-makers, academics, and philosophers (Colliver, 2012; Powell et al., 2011; Soto & Swadener, 2002). Thus, the paucity of research on children’s perspectives means that research understanding their thinking about learning through play is a valuable contribution to the literature (Alderson, 2008; Clark, 2005; Darbyshire, Schiller, & MacDougall, 2005; Harcourt & Conroy, 2005; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003; Robson, 2011; Rogers & Evans, 2008; Thomson, 2008).

Second, family members involved with a child’s ECEC are also insider stakeholders, not just in terms of their choices as “consumers” (Press & Woodrow, 2005) [i.e., in selecting ECEC centres and thus having an idiosyncratic economic



influence on the field (Stuart, 2013)] but also as relatives who have a significant and unique interest in the quality and outcomes of the child's education and care (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). Family member interests and experiences provide a distinct perspective on play and learning through play, with scope to make a unique contribution to debates which, to date, have only considered their perspectives superficially (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012).

Third, educators' perspectives have been seen as the necessary conduit between "insider" and "outsider perspectives" (Stephen & Brown, 2004, p. 338). Educators' perspectives are vital as they make decisions about the provision of play in the interests of learning (Hedges, 2010). Their experiences of the actual implementation of learning through play offer some of the most convincing problematisations of the relationship between theoretical ideas about play and the realisation of policy goals (Anning, 2010). As implementers of play-based curricula, educators have unique insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum, and so have much to offer when seeking to improve curricula (Kemmis, 2010). It is plausible that without research illuminating educators' perspectives, and their struggles to put the ideals of both content- and child-centred approaches into practice, the tension between the two may never have come to light (Rogers, 2010, p. 153).

Finally, the "triangle of care" (child, parent, and educator) has been pinpointed as the configuration central to improving society, meriting governmental and political attention (Brooker, 2010b, p. 181; Stuart, 2013). Studies of early childhood frequently cite the economic incentives for increased attention and resourcing of this "trinity" (Stuart, 2013, p. 55; Fleer, 2010; Neuman, 2005), particularly because the members of that trinity are unique as "insiders" with hitherto under-represented experiences and perspectives (Stephen & Brown, 2004).

Evidently, insider stakeholders offer unique and important perspectives on the

shifting notion of how best to implement and engage learning through play. These are summarised in Table 2.1.

|   | Children | Family members | Educators |
|---|----------|----------------|-----------|
| <b>Aspects unique to the insider stakeholders' perspectives</b>     |          |                |           |
| Offers unique experiences   | Y        | Y              | Y         |
| Deals directly with the ECEC setting                                | Y        | Y              | Y         |
| Offers practical experience with play and learning                  | Y        | Y              | Y         |
| Offers a perspective which has been traditionally devalued, is rare | Y        | Y              | Y         |
| Make choices which affect how ECEC is carried out                   | Y        | Y              | Y         |
| Plays in the ECEC setting   | Y        | N              | Y         |
| Offers the perspective of a stakeholder accountable to policy       | Y        | N              | N         |
| Offers a non-adult perspective, uninfluenced by adult concerns      | Y        | N              | N         |
| Is the reason ECEC policy, curricula, theory, and settings exist    | Y        | N              | N         |

Table 2.1 Aspects unique to insider stakeholder group perspectives

## 2.2.2 Children's perspectives on learning through play

Very few studies have investigated young children's perspectives on any topic (Evans & Fuller, 1999; Freeman & Mathieson, 2009; Johansson & White, 2011; Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011; Nutbrown & Hannon, 2003; Sandberg, 2002), particularly related to play (Howard, 2002) or learning (Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 39; Smith et al., 2005). A thorough review of the academic literature (published between 1979 and 2014) reveals no studies in English that have specifically examined children's perspectives on learning through play.

The next subsection shows that literature related to children's perspectives depicts play as the most important activity to children, and interaction with peers as the most important aspect of play. The following subsection describes how the research literature on what children think about their learning presents conflicting findings. The final subsection notes that children's perspectives can be viewed from sociology of childhood and children's rights perspectives, which were important theoretical underpinnings to acknowledge in undertaking research with children.

#### **2.2.2.1 Children's perspectives on play**

The research literature is consistent in some simple findings. One of the pioneering studies in the area (King, 1979) described how children defined play, suggesting that their perspective on play was quite definite and clear. There appeared to be a precise division between play and work for children. King's final conclusion was that activities that could be chosen or directed by children were often deemed play. This simple idea is consistent with studies of Danish and American (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011), British (Clark & Moss, 2001; Stephen & Brown, 2004), Chinese (Cooney & Sha, 1999; Wing, 1995) and Swedish children's perspectives on play (Sandberg, 2002). Quantitative research has suggested that the mere presence of an adult is likely to prevent a child from perceiving an activity as play, so it would appear that child-choice is a defining characteristic of play in children's perspectives (Howard, 2002; 2010b; McInnes, Howard, Crowley, & Miles, 2013). This is significant for the "delicate" balance that was identified in the Introduction in relation to how much adults can guide play in order to (in the words of the EYLF directives) "extend and enrich" learning (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). This research literature suggests that the element of choice is critical for children in considering if an activity is work or play (Cooney & Sha, 1999; King, 1979). For example, when educators "imposed direction on activities, children indicated that they recognized that those activities were obligatory [and] considered those

activities to be work, in spite of teachers' attempts to make them play-like" (Cooney & Sha, 199, p. 242; Einarsdottir, 2005; Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011).

Another finding is that play is the preferred activity of European-heritage children in play-based ECEC centres (Brooker, 2002; Clark & Moss, 2001; Cooney & Sha, 1999; Degotardi, Sweller, & Pearson, 2013; Dupree, Elaine, Bertram, & Pascal, 2001; Einarsdottir, 2005; 2011; King, 1979; Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011; Ledger, Smith, & Rich, 1998; Pramling Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Stephen & Brown, 2004; Stephen, McPake, Plowman, & Berch-Heyman, 2008; Wing, 1995). This finding is highly significant for the balance between "facilitating" and "contributing to" learning through play because it suggests that children are most engaged and motivated in play. In conjunction with the finding mentioned above, that children cease to see activities as play once an educator "attempts to make them play-like" by giving "direction", it is possible to see how "delicate" the balance is between child-centred and -initiated and educator-directed activities (Leggett & Ford, 2013, p. 44). It is thus vital to investigate the similarities and differences between children's and educators' perspectives to determine better where this balance sits.

Research has also found that play with peers is preferred to solitary play (Cooney & Sha, 1999; Einarsdottir, 2008; King, 1979; Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011; Rogers & Evans, 2008; Stephen & Brown, 2003; Wing, 1995). When asked to comment on factors contributing to quality in ECEC centres, children mentioned peer engagement (Langsted, 1994) and relationships (Einarsdottir, 2005) as the primary factor. For example, one child commented, "There's lots of children to play with" (Langsted, 1994, p. 37). Bond (1995), Clark (2005), Einarsdottir (2005; 2008), Kragh-Müller and Isbell (2011), Rogers and Evans (2008), and Stephen and Brown (2004) also found that children mentioned play with peers as the most fun aspect of their centre, and found educator-led, "structured" activities (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011, p. 18), or educator-led "group activities" (Stephen & Brown, 2004, p. 332) dreary or boring. These findings suggest that positive peer relations are the

primary interest of children (Einarsdottir, 2008; Hamilton, 2013), and that negative ones are the primary concern (Campbell, 2005; Cousins, 1999; Farrell, Tayler, Tennent, & Gahan, 2002; Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011; Ledger et al., 1998; Löfdahl, 2006; 2010; Ryan, 2005; Wood, 2008).

In relation to the children's concerns over negative peer interactions, they often express a true need for the ECEC staff to mediate (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011; Clark & Moss, 2001; DaycareTrust, 1998). When to give this help and when to encourage independence is yet to be resolved in the literature on children's perspectives (Forman, 2010). Some findings show that peer play is much more significant for children than adult-child play (Degotardi et al., 2013). In fact, many young children see educators as "workers" rather than playmates (King, 1979, p. 85). In the words of children themselves, in relation to educators: "'She doesn't play with me...Teachers need to work'" (Keating et al., 2000, p. 447), "'She doesn't play'" (King, 1979, p. 85), "'Teachers should not play, because they interfere too much and talk too much'" (Sandberg, 2002, p. 20).

These findings touch on the topic of adult participation in play, something I showed earlier has been debated from philosophical, psychological and human rights perspectives. There seems to be little evidence that children think adults interrupt their play, and some preliminary evidence that children appreciate adult participation (Bond, 1995; Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2009; DaycareTrust, 1998), and intervention appears to be a potential solution to some of the vast array of power differentials that can arise in play (Campbell, 2005; Colliver, 2012; Löfdahl, 2010; Ryan, 2005). This aspect requires further investigation, particularly in light of research showing the importance of "secret" play places away from adult surveillance (Clark & Moss, 2001; Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011; Moore, 2014), and the negative impact of educators' regulation of children (Ranz-Smith, 2007; Sumsion, 2005). As mentioned above (see 2.2.2.1, specifically p. 68), it is also complicated by the findings implying that children will be less engaged with learning through play as soon as adults guide it so much that children no longer

deem it play.

One other prevalent finding of children's perspectives on play is that they think adults value it less than work. There appear to be eight main reasons for this perception:

1. The educators and families believe it themselves (Anning, 2010; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Keating et al., 2000)
2. Play activities in the playroom are often deprioritised relative to work activities (King, 1979; Rogers & Evans, 2008)
3. Teachers participate only in work activities (Keating et al., 2000; Wing, 1995)
4. Play is given as a reward for work completed (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Rogers & Evans, 2008; Wing, 1995)
5. Play is retracted as punishment if work is not completed (Pan, 1994; Wing, 1995)
6. Many types of play are sanctioned (e.g., violent, "raucous", sexualised play) (Holland, 2003; Keating et al., 2000; Ranz-Smith, 2007)
7. Only work warrants teacher approval (Wing, 1995)
8. Children see work as the purpose of school (Dupree et al., 2001; Keating et al., 2000; Ledger et al., 1998)

These findings are important as an initial suggestion about how children's and educators' perspectives might interact. These eight reasons are also important because the children's view that adults value work over play is consistent with the parents' and educators' perspective (discussed in the next two sections). The clash between the children's and adults' preferences for play versus work are an echo of the tensions between the child- and adult-initiated activities discussed earlier: children most enjoy play, finding work "boring" (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011, p. 18), but believe adults do not value it. This is significant in light of the finding that

play is the preferred activity of children despite this, suggesting that children will not value work more than play regardless of how much adults do (as seen in Points One to Eight above). Therefore, it is even more critical that educators know how to participate in play without overriding it, which would risk children deeming it “work” (Cooney & Sha, 1999; King, 1979).

Thus, the existing research on children’s perspectives shows that play is their most significant and enjoyable activity and peer engagement their foremost concern. Due to this concern, children feel it is sometimes appropriate for adults to intervene. Other times, however, such as during secret play, it is perhaps not. Finally, in the child’s perspective, educators and parents ascribe more value to work than play. Because of the importance of play to children, it is therefore vital to understand how educators can maintain the integrity of play but enter it respectfully so as to introduce curriculum content and minimise negative peer interactions.

Because there appears to be no research on children’s perspectives on learning through play, I turn now to research on their perspectives on learning.

#### **2.2.2.2 Children’s perspectives on learning**

As will be explored in the *Theory Chapter*, learning is typically considered to be a process of changing one’s behaviour as a result of one or a series of experiences (de Houwer, Barnes-Holmes, & Moors, 2013; OUP, 2001). To give one’s perspective on learning, then, requires one to reflect on the difference between behaviour *before* and *after* these experiences (see Figure 2.1). The research suggests that this is a complex process for the young child which utilises *metacognition* (Flavell, 1979; Whitebread, 2010), which is an awareness of thinking and its uses (Kuhn, 2000a). It is agreed among psychologists in the field that metacognition is evidenced by Theory of Mind (ToM; Kuhn, 2000b, p. 301). ToM can be tested using tests of false belief. With the research on children’s perspectives on learning

so sparse (Rogers & Evans, 2008; Smith et al., 2005), it is useful to explore and examine research on these related topics.



Figure 2.1 The standard model of learning (de Houwer et al., 2013)

For a person to have a perspective on their learning through an experience, it is assumed that they need to reflect on their thinking before and after that experience. This awareness of thinking and its uses is termed metacognition (Flavell, 1979). Thinking about learning is therefore a “metacognitive experience” (Flavell, 1979, p. 908; Whitebread, 2010), and can include being able to make judgements about how easily or well something is learned (Larkin, 2010, p. 11).

Metacognition is considered a significant developmental hallmark of early childhood (Flavell, 1979). Bartsch and Wellman (1995) showed that children between the ages of 18 months to six years speak increasingly about mental states using terms such as “believe” and “think”, with a marked increase in their correct usage around the age of three (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995, p. 44). By the age of four, children can discuss their learning whereas before four they may not be able to distinguish between what they know now and what they knew before the learning experience (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001; Whitebread, 2010). Other studies confirm that metacognition is evident in the activities of three- to five-year-old preschool children (Whitebread, Bingham, Grau, Pino Pasternak, & Sangster, 2007).



A particular type of metacognition is Theory of Mind (ToM; Premack & Woodruff, 1978), a person's ability to identify other states of mind or thinking (Larkin, 2010). To illustrate, a boy of three years and three months (with ToM) distinguishes between his own and others' thinking about birds in the following comments:

Abe: Some people don't like hawks. They think they ... are slimy.

Mother: What do you think?

Abe: I think they are good animals (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995, p. 39).

Figure 2.2 represents the standard use of theory of mind, which understanding another's mental state. Larkin (2010) states that research from numerous tests concurs that ToM develops around the age of three to four.

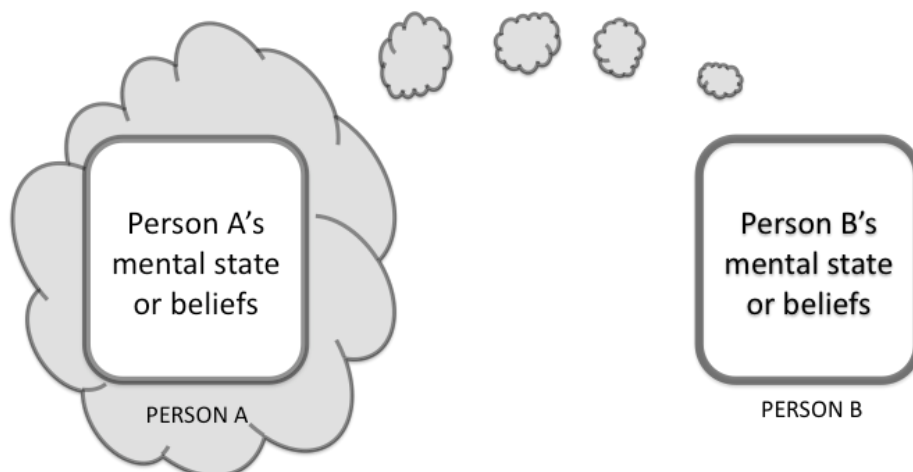


Figure 2.2 Theory of Mind (ToM)

The developmental acquisition of ToM can be effectively tested by the false belief task (Wimmer & Perner, 1983; although see Rubio-Fernandez, 2013, for a summary of the shortcomings of the test). The most common example of this task involves presenting a child with a lolly container, asking the child what he/she believes is inside (to which almost all children reply, "lollies"), and then showing them that there are only rocks inside. The child is then asked to predict what a friend would think was inside if the friend saw the container for the first time

(Gopnik & Astington, 1988). Most children under four years old will predict rocks (Rubio-Fernandez & Geurts, 2013), suggesting they are not able to understand that their mental state has changed since learning that the container does not contain lollies. They appear to assume that their friend must have the same mental state as them, even though their friend has not had the same learning experience. Research has consistently shown that children over four evidence understanding of the false belief (e.g., of their friend) (Larkin, 2010; Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). Identifying false belief appears to be important for identifying one's own beliefs or mental states before a learning experience so as to be cognizant of the learning that occurred (see Figure 2.3).

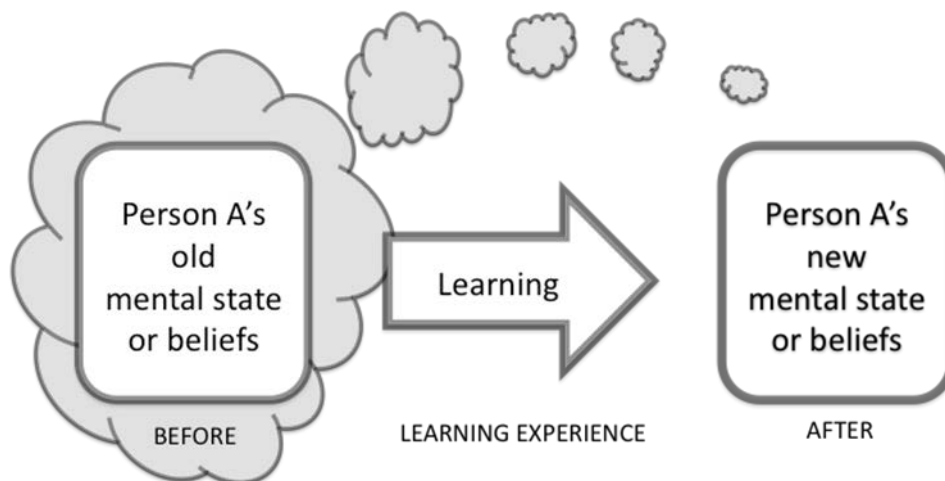


Figure 2.3 ToM used to understand one's own learning

Given the developmental progression of ToM during the early childhood period, an understanding of ToM is significant for an investigation of young children's perspectives on learning through play. ToM was particularly relevant to my own an investigation of learning through play because I assumed that play used fantasy and the imaginary whereas thinking about learning I assumed to be an account of reality only. Therefore, I assumed that having a perspective on learning

through play required being able to understand the imaginary from the reference point of reality (see Figure 2.4). For example, it was assumed that role playing pirates with peers would lead to learning that would only be applicable outside of that imaginary world, such as social skills like negotiation and communication skills (used in reality). Yet before the age of four (presumably without ToM) children would not be able to talk about learning through play because they would not be able to discuss learning outside of the imaginary situation of play. This is in part due to Piaget's influence, who has had a significant impact on the ECEC field (Burman, 2008; Kamii, 1974; Kamii & Ewing, 1996; Stephen, 2006; Walkerdine, 1984). Piaget believed that young children confuse reality and the imaginary (Sharon & Wolley, 2004). Thus, I assumed that only children over four were able to reflect on their own learning through play because I believed that children confuse the real world and the imaginary world of play.

In relation to qualitative studies which might verify or contradict if the above assumptions were indeed the case, to date studies have only investigated children's perspectives on learning, not on learning through play. Unfortunately, these studies are inconclusive as to whether children can evidence a ToM when they discuss their learning. For example, Morgan (2007) reported on a study of the perceptions of learning of 90 three- to seven-year-olds. In this study, children were shown videos of their activities so that they could watch them and later be asked about their learning. Inconsistent with what ToM research suggests, Morgan (2007) found, "When viewing episodes identified by the teacher, the majority of children seemed to recall the activity [viewed, but] were frequently not able to recall what they were learning or thinking about" (p. 220). This finding seemed to suggest the children did not evidence a ToM. This finding seems to conflict with the large number of studies which found ToM develops between three and four years (Larkin, 2010; Rubio-Fernandez & Geurts, 2013; Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001).

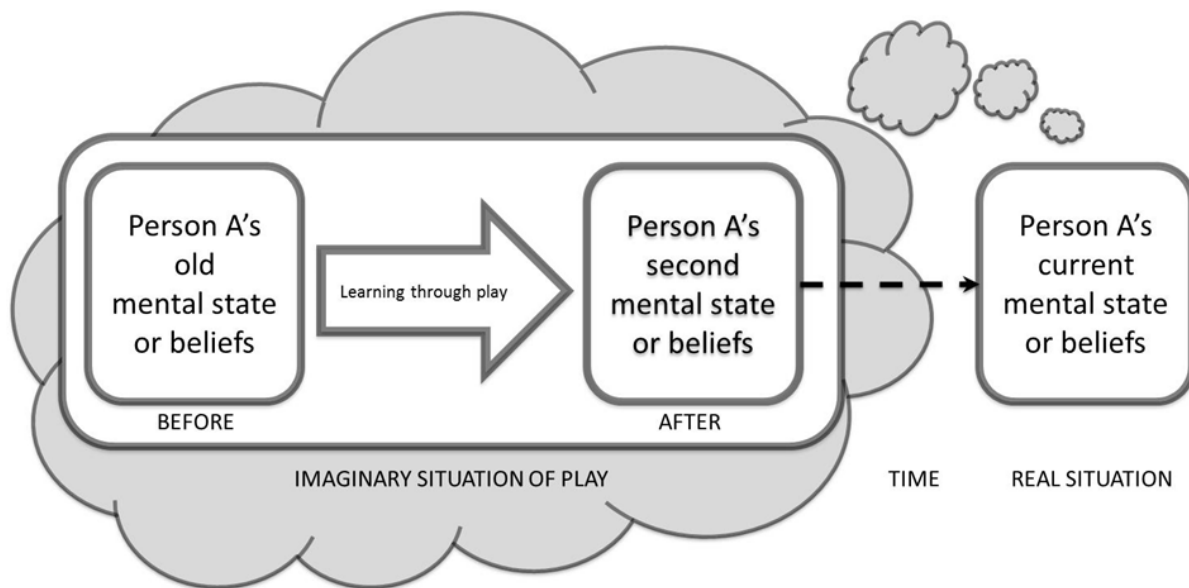


Figure 2.4 Having a perspective on one's own learning through play

Four years later, in a study of children's perspectives on their activities, Robson (2011) did find "evidence of metacognitive knowledge" for three- and four-year-old children (p. 188). Similarly, Richards (2011), when investigating children's accounts of play, found that children aged between four and eleven years were able to step out of the play situation when they were thinking about what it meant for them after (metacognition). For one girl of seven years, "out of 'play', [her] standpoint changes ... she is now in a different social relation: her 'in play' persona (Barthes, 1975, cited in text) is abandoned for one judged appropriate to 'being interviewed', somewhat serious, commonsensical and dispassionate" (Richards, 2011, p. 316). This ability to change from the "in play" (before) and "dispassionate" (after) "standpoint" seemed to evidence ToM (see Figure 2.4).

It is not clear from the conflicting findings of previous studies of younger children whether children aged four and five are able to discuss their learning in terms of mental states before and after a play episode or not. For instance, Richards' (2011)

and Robson's (2010; 2011) studies suggest children under four can talk about learning in terms of a pre-experience mental state, whereas Morgan (2007) and others (e.g. Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008) suggest they cannot.

Such research is highly significant for the field in light of research relating to learning content through play such as Fleer's (2010; 2011). This is because Fleer's work proposes the idea of "contextual intersubjectivity": that educators explain their goals to achieve curriculum outcomes to children (Fleer, 2010, p. 16). In this way, Fleer argues, children and educators can work together towards curriculum content and outcome learning. However, if children under four years cannot understand their own learning, this makes Fleer's (2010) notion ineffective for these children. Thus the current investigation of children's perspectives is highly significant.

### **2.2.2.3 Children's perspectives in the sociology of childhood**

The above research literature may be seen in terms of its assumptions about what young children can - and more specifically, cannot - do. For example, much of the above research assumes that children under four are not able to understand learning because they do not discuss their before-and-after mental states. However, it is equally possible that children under four understand and describe learning differently. Changing one's lens in understanding the children's perspective may result in shifting from a deficit model of the child (Boström, 2006; Wragg, 2013) to a more expansive or strength-based model. One way of achieving this might be to view learning in a new way, not based on before-and-after mental states.

One contemporary lens on children's perspectives comes from the sociology of childhood, seeks sought to study childhood as a social structure (Turmel, 2008). Research within this orientation initially arose as a rejection of developmental psychology (Boström, 2006, p. 228; Hedegaard, 2009, p. 64), which dominated

research throughout the 20th century (Burman, 2008) and was the default lens through which children were viewed sociologically (Turmel, 2008). Early sociologists rejected the atomisation of the individual and developmental psychology's failure to account for social influences (Rose, 1991) and so turned to socialisation theory (Wyness, 2006). However, a culmination of the sentiment from the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) framed the research of children in terms of children having equally valued rights to those of adults, yet distinct from them. For example, the Convention set out children's right to play and leisure (Article 31). In the same vein, James and Prout, in what is now commonly regarded as a pivotal text in the sociology of childhood (1997), challenged the notion of the child as a passive recipient of socialisation, arguing that children should be seen as "beings", rather than future adults, or "becomings" (White, 2002). They argued for childhood to be studied in and of itself (rather than in relation to adulthood), thus legitimating ethnographic approaches to studies of children's perspectives and urging researchers "towards work 'with' rather than 'on' children" (James, 2001, cited in Richards, 2011, p. 315). This distinction was important for this thesis as investigation of children's perspectives in and of themselves, as explained in the Introduction (see 1.3.1, p. 38) and the Methodology Chapter (see 4.2, p. 149).

Corsaro's early work (1992; 1993) highlighted the self-regulatory and autonomous aspects of an "interpretive reproduction" of the adult world, highlighting the agency and creativity of children's social lives. Aries' (1996) work showed how the separation of children from mature practices of the community was a relatively recent and western practice, suggesting that the deficit model of the child was a product only of our modern assumptions. Researchers from a new sociological childhood paradigm, often referred to as the "sociology of childhood" (Aries, 1996; Corsaro, 2011; James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 2002) thus agreed on three basic tenets of childhood:

1. Childhood is a specific social structure ("sociology" being the study

of such structures)

2. Children and adults are exposed to the same social influences, but these have different effects on children and adults
3. Children are not passive for institutional or adult purposes, but represent active and participating co-constructors of their childhood and society in general (Bostrom, 2006, p. 232; Corsaro, 2011, p. 4; Gray & Macblain, 2012, p. 127; Qvortrup, 2002; pp. 45 – 46; Sommer et al., 2010, p. 31)

This third tenet is concerned with “agency, competence and citizenship” (Wyness, 2006 p. 1), all of which are implied in the foregrounding of children’s perspectives in investigations such as this thesis. Many researchers continue to insist on the importance of, and need for, children’s perspectives (e.g., Brooker, 2011; Clark, 2005; Corsaro, 2011; Freeman & Mathieson, 2009; Haw, 2008; Hedegaard, 2008b; Howard, 2002; Johansson & White, 2011; Porter, 2008; Sandberg, 2002; Smith et al., 2005; Thomson, 2008; Valentine, 1999; Wood, 2014; Wragg, 2013). As recently as 26 years ago, there was a negligible amount of sociological studies into childhood (Corsaro, 2011; Gray & Macblan, 2012; Qvortrup, 2002), yet the growing interest in children’s perspectives continues today and work in the sociology of childhood has shed light on children’s perspectives (Sommer et al., 2010), not least due to interest in the Convention (UN, 1989) and its implications (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008, p. 629). For example, much research has shown that children’s play is characterised by peer cultures, wherein rules and cultural norms are created and regulated by children alone (Corsaro, 1993; 1992; 2012; Factor, 2009; Opie & Opie, 1977). Much of this research depicts how peer culture sits in opposition to the culture regulated by adults (Jirata, 2012; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2007; Skånfors, Löfdahl, & Hägglund, 2009; Wood, 2014; Wyness, 2006), and is created and controlled by complex social interactions characterised by tacit power hierarchies and challenges, speaking to the children’s agency and mastery of social skills (Campbell, 2005; Löfdahl, 2006; 2010; Mawson, 2011). Specifically,

children's cultures appear to be created and maintained by children's utterances, as well as the ability of those utterances to change the "nature and direction" of the play (Mawson, 2011, p. 13; Corsaro, 2012). Thus, the social context of when, where and how a child's perspective is expressed is also highly relevant (Bruner, 1987; Vygotsky, 1986).

Some contemporary research distinguishes between "child perspectives" and "children's perspectives"; a distinction that arises from the tenet that adults can only ever represent - never fully understand - children's perspectives (Paley, 1986; Sommer et al., 2010, p. 47; Wragg, 2013). Whereas "children's perspectives" refers to the actual experiences and perceptions of children, "child perspectives" refers to the adult's interpretation of children's experiences and perceptions. As an example, when an infant raises the corners of her mouth, adults call this a smile, inferring the infant is happy. This supposes a correspondence between external behaviour and the child's internal experiential world (Sommer et al., 2010), as in many of the experimental psychological studies of children's behaviour (Burman, 2008). Such assumptions rely on the notion of a "normal" child, discounting individual differences (p. 22). Such studies strive for "child perspectives" (Sommer et al., 2010, p. 21). However, contemporary views on research with children state that researchers can never know or understand children's experiences: "Adult researchers may gain insight into children's worlds, but their knowledge must inevitably be of a different order than the experiential knowledge that children act on in their daily practice" (Sommer et al., 2010, p. 47).

This thesis is located within an understanding of *children's* perspectives by focussing on children's "perceptions, knowledge and experiences" rather than what I saw from my own perspective (p. 21). Exactly how my own perspective on learning has been changed by the children's perceptions, knowledge and experiences is explored in the Findings (see 5.3, p. 229) and Discussion (see 6.1.4, p. 267). However, as it is a mere representation (and inherently a reduction of) these perceptions and experiences, I must by acknowledge that the research will



invariably be an objectification of children's experience and thus always a "child perspective" (p. 22). It is an ideal towards which I continue to aspire.

In this light, one contemporary and holistic way to approach children's perspectives is to investigate "the practice in children's everyday institutions" (Hedegaard, 2009, p. 64). This focus on everyday practices links with the children's rights and sociology of childhood orientation because it shows the children's agency and capacities in their practices, rather than seeing them as products of socialisation or as immature people becoming adults (Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 12), as in the view that children cannot understand learning. The Theory (see 3.2, specifically p. 117) and Methodology chapters (see 4.10.3, p. 187) explain how investigating practices inverts the deficit model of children.

In summary, it is important to contextualise the literature on children's perspectives in relation to recent thinking, such as that of the sociology of childhood and children's rights. This is because this thesis investigates children's perspectives rather than child perspectives (see previous page), an important distinction if the thesis is to reveal children's perspectives on learning through play that are different from adult perspectives such as my own perspective as a researcher.

#### **2.2.2.4 Conclusion to children's perspectives on learning through play**

The existing research on children's perspectives on play suggests only some basic ideas about learning through play. There is substantial evidence that play is the most important and preferred activity of children. There is also evidence to suggest that the social aspects of play are a central focus for children as the most enjoyable as well as the most concerning aspects for them. It is unclear how much adult involvement children want in their play. Finally, from the children's perspective, adults are seen to value work more than play. These findings all

suggest that play is the most engaging activity for children and thus the best activity to exploit for learning. This validates the inclusion of learning through play in recent curriculum frameworks such as the EYLF. However, because children cease to define play as such if adults intervene too much, it is vital that educators' attempts to guide play to learning are delicately balanced and respect children's choices. The ECEC field requires research such as this thesis, which seeks to contribute to educators' understandings of how to enter and guide play to learning outcomes.

In relation to learning, the psychological research suggests that children develop ToM between the ages of three and five. However, the qualitative research literature on children's perspectives on learning challenge these findings. This is significant if educators expect to use Flear's (2010) notion of "contextual intersubjectivity" because children under four would not be able to understand what they are learning or what they have learned. Therefore, this investigation of children aged two to five may assist in clarifying this uncertainty. In addition, it will give a qualitative account of children's perspectives on learning through play, which will be a contribution to literature detailing children's perspectives, something of value even without the above justifications.

### **2.2.3 Family members' perspectives on learning through play**

I chose to investigate family (as opposed to "parental" or "maternal") perspectives on learning through play because of three arguments that exist in the literature on family perspectives. The first is that the traditional configuration wherein child-rearing is left only to mothers has become outdated. Fathers are as "competent in interacting with their children" as mothers (Comfort, 1987, p. 1; Lancy, 2007; Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). Not only do fathers enjoy playing with their children as much as mothers (Haight, Parke, & Black, 1997), they also engage with their children for just as long as mothers (Russell & Saebel, 1997; Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). It is arguable that they have as important a perspective on play and

learning, even if research shows they value pretend play less than mothers (Gleason, 2005; Richman & Rescorla, 1995).

The second reason for including all family members was an aspiration of this thesis to remedy the lack of literature on family members other than mothers. For example, Comfort's (1987) study underlines "the need to investigate further the unique contributions of fathers" to their children's play (p. 3). It is now widely argued that "it has been the mother-infant dyad which has come under scrutiny in relation to ... play, to the exclusion of fathers, other family members and socio-cultural, economic and wider structural factors" (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010, p. 504). Thus, one goal of this thesis was to counter-balance the dominance of research on mothers.

The third reason for wanting to investigate family perspectives was the argument given by scholars involved in cross-cultural and post structural research who claim that the importance of the mother-child dyad "is a very particular cultural construction that reflects euro-centric and class biases" (Burman, 1994, p. 115; Cameron, Hancock, Pinto, Gamannossi, & Tapanya, 2011). Contemporary literature has sought to highlight the variety of parental structures and beliefs across and within cultures (Lancy, 2007; Roopnarine, 2011; Tudge et al., 1999), and so it is important to include other family members (Rogoff, 2003). Cross-cultural research has shown that playing with children is considered "the role of siblings, grandparents or other children in the neighbourhood" in some cultures (Sanagavaarapu & Wong, 2004, p. 304). Rogoff (2003) has written at length about the importance of extended family members, neighbours and other community members in child rearing practices in different (often colonised or non-Western) cultures across the world. Thus, the notion that mothers may hold the most significant perspectives on play in the family would not fit with Melbourne's multicultural demographics (ABS, 2012), nor the egalitarian aspirations of modern research.

As such, the research was framed with special mention of family members such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents in the invitation to participate, with the intention to include the perspectives of various family members.

This research wishes to acknowledge cultural backgrounds in which the nuclear family of two parents and children may not be the norm. In some families, other family members such as grandparents or aunts and uncles may have a significant amount of contact with the children, and this may influence the children as much as their contact with their parents (Information letter to family members, 2012).

### **2.2.3.1 Mothers the only family members who participated**

However, all of the family members who consented and participated in the Video Stimulated Recall Dialogues (VSRDs; see Methodology Chapter, ) were mothers; no family members other than mothers volunteered to participate. The ECEC centre where the research was conducted, “Tall Eucalypts”, was located in a largely middle to upper class (ABS, 2012), Anglo-Australian area (ABS, 2013). The mothers of children attending the centre maintained primary care responsibilities for their children. One may infer that for this reason they were more able to participate (Stockall & Dennis, 2013, p. 299). The findings of this thesis may therefore be skewed towards some of the “euro-centric and class biases” mentioned above (Burman, 1994, p. 115). Consequently, the remainder of this thesis will refer to mothers’ perspectives in sections that were initially intended to consider family members’ perspectives.

### **2.2.3.2 Literature on mothers’ perspectives**

The literature on parental and maternal perspectives on learning through play has attracted the interest of businesses (e.g., Fisher-Price, Inc. (Fisher et al., 2008) and Lego (2002)), educationalists (e.g., O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012), psychologists (e.g., Fogle & Medez, 2006), special needs scholars (e.g., Goodley & Runswick-

Cole, 2010) and anthropologists (e.g., Lancy, 2007), to name a few. Yet only a relatively small body of research has investigated parental views on play, particularly in Australia (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). A smaller body has charted their views on learning through play, and an even smaller body mothers' perspectives.

This subsection shows that the research that *does* exist related to mothers' perspectives on learning through play in the early years is focused on preparation for entry to school. However, this manifests in complicated and apparently contradictory research findings. Specifically, the literature suggests that mothers are divided in their endorsement of the rhetoric of learning through play. Some mothers appear to reject its ideals, preferring educators to implement structured activities that focus on teaching subject content such as literacy and mathematics. Others appear to endorse the ideals of child-centred approaches, which value learning through play. However, some studies show many mothers waver in their trust in play when it comes to teaching subject content (e.g., literacy and numeracy), whether or not they value learning through play. Finally, many studies show mothers consistently want social learning through play for their children, regardless of their perspective on learning academics through play.

Some of the first studies of maternal perspectives on play suggested their divergence from educators' (Rotherlein & Brett, 1987) and psychologists' perspectives (Goodnow, 1988). Yet more recent studies suggest that, in fact, mothers have a similar perspective to educators, at least in relation to learning through play (Cooney, 2004; Cooney & Sha, 1999; Fisher et al., 2008). Educators agree that play should rarely be interfered with (Stephen, Stevenson, & Adey, 2013), presumably because it has a significant potential for learning (Christmas, 2005; Haight, Parke, & Black, 1997; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). Some studies of maternal perspectives have suggested that mothers saw this potential in relatively the same domains as the relevant national curriculum (Christmas, 2005; Farver, Kim, & Lee, 1995). LEGO® conducted a five-country study which showed that

mothers attributed learning to play in all five countries (LEGO Learning Institute, 2002), adding to the evidence that mothers believe learning readily occurs through play. This suggests that there might be some consistency between policy-maker and maternal perspectives.

However, there appears to be a strong conflict between mothers' endorsement of child-centred ideals about learning through play and their desire for their child to learn academics. A recent Australian study of mothers' perspectives suggested that play did not always mean learning in their eyes (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). As the authors succinctly summarised, "play is valued [by parents] as long as it is also explicitly focuse[s] on worthwhile school-based learning, especially literacy and numeracy" (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012, p. 270). This shows that the child-centred approach is supported by parents so long as it is balanced with content-centred ideals of educators guiding play towards scholastic outcomes. Another study of mothers' perspectives on learning through play revealed that mothers agree with the notion that play is a powerful tool for learning but simultaneously doubt this will amount to content-centred outcomes such as literacy and numeracy, especially if it implies the risk that *their* child may not learn the content necessary for entry into school (Fung & Cheng, 2012):

The inability to grasp concrete evidence of the children's play-based learning outcomes made parents concerned about their children's academic readiness and how they would handle the upcoming transition from kindergarten to primary school ...This seemed to override their desire for their children to enjoy playful learning experiences, even though they were confident that play-based teaching could enable their children to learn in an enjoyable way (p. 23 - 24).

Other studies confirm that this concern appears directly related to concern about school readiness (Christmas, 2005; Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Pierola, 1995; Kable, 2001; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Oppen, 1994; West, Hausken, & Collins, 1993). This has been linked to "competitive attitudes among parents"

(Ranz-Smith, 2007, pp. 271 - 272), particularly for academic content outcomes (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 1990). Critically, studies have shown that “the central objective for all mothers [is] preparing their children to succeed in school”, and this compromises their commitment in learning through play (Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Pierola, 1995, p. 451; Fung & Cheng, 2012). These findings suggest mothers’ perspectives align with the recent curricular reforms of the educators’ role to be more active in guiding play to scholastic learning outcomes.

There appears to be an overall tendency for mothers to value structured over free play (Haight, Parke, & Black, 1997; McLean et al., 2014, forthcoming), although structure has been shown to vary depending on the type of play (e.g., physical or pretend play) (Russell & Saebel, 1997). Research by Fisher and colleagues (2008) indicated that mothers value structured play even more than “expert” professionals, including educators (Fisher et al., 2008, p. 313). Critically, two national surveys with a sample size of over 8,000 parents showed parents rated literacy (i.e., recognising alphabet letters) and numeracy (i.e., counting to 20 or more) six to eight times higher than educators (West et al., 1993, p. 2). Research by Rescorla, Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Cone (1990) suggested that the parental push for academics always seems to exceed that of educators, particularly in child-centred settings. The research literature also shows that mothers expect a “teaching” role of educators more than of themselves (Christmas, 2005, p. 145; Monteflor, et al., 2006; Opper, 1994), which perhaps compounds their “competitive” maternal attitudes (Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 271), particularly in the context of high-stakes testing in Australia (Thompson, 2013). In these ways, the NQF reforms appear to be consistent with mothers’ perspectives and demands.

These findings are also very significant for the similarities and differences between mother and educator perspectives that are canvassed in this thesis. One mother’s comment illustrates the link between learning through play and the expectations that mothers have for educators: “I think a lot of people feel like they’d rather their kids being in a structured environment rather than just... play,

or someone supervising; a baby-sitter really. That's what it comes down to" (Parent 8 in O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012, p. 271). This quote captures the expectation that educators should be more active than just facilitating the learning young children engage in independently and autonomously, reminiscent of the EYLF directives discussed in the Introduction (1.1).

Thus the literature suggests that mothers frame the play in ECEC settings in relation to what they want the setting to provide for their child over and above free play and "babysitting" services that mothers can provide themselves. It would appear that mothers' concern for their child's future school "success" (Cohen, 1981, p. 282; Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Pierola, 1995, p. 451; Lane, Stanton-Chapman, Jamison, & Phillips, 2007, p. 94) reduces their commitment to child-centred approaches to learning through play (Fung & Cheng, 2012, p. 29), and this explains their desire for school preparation and structure in ECEC settings (O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012).

There is thus an apparent contradiction of maternal beliefs: (a) that play leads to learning; but (b) that structured, non-play activities for literacy and numeracy learning are preferred. One study explained this contradiction regarding the role of play in learning with reference to the education levels of mothers (Fogle & Mendez, 2006). Quantitative data from mothers who completed schooling at primary, secondary or tertiary levels, has since statistically verified Fogle and Mendez's contention, showing that "the parents who graduated from universities exhibit attitudes which express the positive effects of play on children" (Pirpir, Er, & Koçak, 2009, p. 937). Although beyond the scope of this review, there is extensive literature on the relationship between mothers' cultural and social backgrounds and their beliefs and perspectives on child rearing (Goodnow, 1988; Miller, 1988; Ninio, 1979), how those perspectives in turn affect their parenting behaviours (Rescorla, Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Cone, 1990), and then how these affect their child's play behaviours (Amato & Rivera, 1999). There also appears to be wide cultural differences in maternal perspectives related to learning through



play (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Brooker, 2002; 2010b; Cameron, Hancock, Pinto, Gamannossi, & Tapanya, 2011; Cooney & Sha, 1999; Farver, Kim, & Lee, 1995; Fogle & Mendez, 2006; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2004; Windisch, Jenvey, & Drysdale, 2003). Specifically, communities that value learning through play also value school learning (Roopnarine, 2011). However, others (e.g., more traditional hunting and foraging communities) seem to value learning through play less, perhaps because learning from play is seen to have little value for community practices (e.g., hunting or foraging). As one extensive review of cross-cultural literature suggests, “at the moment, among the different cultural groups in Western technological societies, mothers from European and European-heritage cultures have the most positive views about the role of play in childhood development” (Roopnarine, 2011, p. 24). These findings are significant for the current study because they imply the importance of cultural background to maternal perspectives.

A second major trend in the literature about the kind of learning that mothers believe occurs in play in ECEC settings is social skills, which may also be understood in terms of school readiness (Lane et al., 2007). Several studies have shown “socialization” or “social development” to be a key expectation in mothers’ decisions to enrol children in ECEC (Needham & Jackson, 2012, p. 168; Cooney, 2004; Haight, Parke, & Black, 1997; Lane et al., 2007; McLean et al., 2014, forthcoming; Plowman, 2003; Rescorla et al., 1990) as well as one main way in which children learn (Cooney, 2004; Haight, Parke, & Black, 1997). This may also be understood in relation to the increased opportunities for social interaction and the resultant learning of life skills, such as manners and compliance with educator commands (Christmas, 2005; Rescorla, Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Cone, 1990, p. 173). One reason is there are opportunities to mix with a variety of peers, which may not be as readily available in the home setting, especially where there are age gaps between siblings and smaller families (Hayes, Weston, Qu, & Gray, 2010). There is also some evidence that mothers believe children develop their language skills in

peer play in ECEC settings (McLean et al., 2014, forthcoming), suggesting again that mothers see advantages of peer play in ECEC settings for learning and school readiness.

### **2.2.3.3 Conclusion to maternal perspectives on learning through play**

The literature on maternal perspectives on learning through play is mixed in its findings. Outside of western technologically-advanced societies, learning through play generally seems not to be valued. Within western technologically-advanced societies, there appears to be a consensus that all mothers want social skills for their children and so endorse learning through play for this reason. Yet when it comes to other areas of school readiness, particularly literacy and numeracy, mothers demonstrate overall “complex and contradictory notions of [play’s] value” (O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012, p. 266).

It would seem that mothers of western heritage agree with the ideas and philosophy of child-centred, play-based learning. However, because they prioritise the academic success of their children, they value free play less than structured activities. Interestingly, this reflects the tensions seen in the literature and policy, between philosophical notions that the child should learn through play (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993; Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006) and a push for more “intentionality” in play (Leggett & Ford, 2013, p. 42). That is, some mothers appear to endorse the facilitating, child-centred approach to learning through play but demand a more active role when it comes to the academic success of their children (Fung & Cheng, 2012, p. 29). What is also significant is mothers appear to expect this from educators but not themselves. This thesis, in examining learning through play in the home and the ECEC centre, will help to untie the differences in perspectives between educators and mothers with a scope to aligning them better. Doing so has shown to boost children’s educational outcomes, and “collaborative partnerships with families” is also a quality Area of the NQS (ACECQA, 2012, para. 12).

## 2.2.4 Educators' perspectives on learning through play

This section shows that research on educator perspectives on learning through play sits within the context of concerns about whether play-based learning can meet the parental and curricular demands placed on educators. Adding to these concerns is an apparent tension between the ideals of content-centred and child-centred approaches to learning, which may be irreconcilable. Some scholars have blamed educators for a failure to deliver academics and performance on standardised tests, pinpointing inadequacies in pre-service teacher education (particularly from a DAP perspective) as a key cause of this. This may contribute to the mistrust mothers appear to have of play-based learning and its delivery of subject content outcomes.

A review of the research literature indicates some interesting ideas about educator perspectives on learning through play. Firstly, presumably because of the dominance of child-centred approaches in teacher education (Cullen, 1999; Fleer et al., 2009; Kable, 2001; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008), the literature suggests that most educators endorse child-centred notions of learning through play (Christmas, 2005; Cooney, 2004; Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Keating et al., 2000; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Izumi-Taylor, et al., 2004; Wood & Bennett, 1998). For example, play is also seen as a key way to enhance the "engagement and motivation" of children (Wood & Bennett, 1998, p. 22), and a foundation for later learning (Keating et al., 2000, p. 441), which are both related to "holistic" learning (Hunter & Walsh, 2014, p. 25).

This play-based learning orientation aligns closely to an idea espoused by DAP also: that play will always provide the child with what is necessary for their development. This is evident in the view of one educator from research conducted by Wood and Bennet (1998) into teacher use of theory in play-based learning: "Whatever the children are doing [in play] is matching their emotional, intellectual and social needs, because otherwise they wouldn't go to that activity" (p. 23). In this discourse, the role of the educator is seen as a "facilitator" rather

than a director of learning through play (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 57; Stephen & Brown, 2004, p. 327; Wu & Rao, 2011). This is significant when we consider the maternal valuing of structured over unstructured play (Fisher et al., 2008; Fuller, Holloway, & Liang, 1996; McLean et al., 2014, forthcoming; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Wu & Rao, 2011) as previously discussed. This is because mothers' expectations for structure might conflict with the educator perspective on learning through play as developmentally appropriate and thus precluding adult guidance.

In relation to the content of learning, the research suggests that ECEC educators do not appear to put a strong emphasis on academics (Opper, 1994), instead supporting physical and artistic learning through play, as advocated by child-centred approaches (Rusher, McGrevin, & Lambiotte, 1992, p. 277). They often attempt to "educate parents about [play's] value" (Olsen & Sumsion, 2000, p. 5), and are encouraged to try to align parents' perspectives with their own (Evans & Fuller, 1999; Knopf & Swick, 2007; LaloumiVidali, 1998; Whalley, 1997; Whalley & Chandler, 2007) to facilitate continuity between home and centre experiences. The value of continuity of play learning is evident in multiple national studies which have demonstrated that the alignment of ECEC and home environment objectives has numerous positive effects on the educational outcomes of young children. For instance, the "home learning environment" (HLE) exerts a stronger and more independent influence than parents' education, occupational status, socio-economic status (SES), and income on school achievement (Melhuish, 2010, p. 61). The HLE is more effective when ECEC settings "share [their] educational aims with parents" and the parents become involved in these aims (Sylva et al., 2008). Moreover, whilst the quality of the ECEC setting influences children's cognitive and social development, the single most significant factor in determining this quality is continuity, as found in integrated settings. Australian studies have also found that continuity is shown to exert an influence "over and above the influence of other child, family and childcare variables" on children's behavioural, social,

language and motor skills (Wise & Sanson, 2003, p. 16). Other studies have provided evidence that educators aligning their perspective with mothers' can have an impact greater than the family SES (Schalleret al., 2007). Similarly when parents change settings a negative effect on children's behaviour overall is evident (Melhuish, 2010). An investigation of the similarities and differences between mothers' and educators' perspectives is likely to shed more light on such influences.

A potential node of tension exists between educator and maternal perspectives. According to research (Christmas, 2005; Fisher et al., 2008; Monteflor, et al., 2006; Opper, 1994; Rescorla, Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Cone, 1990; West et al., 1993) not many mothers appear to value learning through play over direct instruction. However educators in ECEC often view the provision of play as central to the way in which they define themselves and their field, and distinguish themselves and ECEC from school teachers and school education (Cullen, 1999; Kable, 2001). As Goffin (1989, p. 195) notes,

early childhood education distinguishes itself from primary education... the exclusion of play is a philosophical decision that reflects schools' emphasis on achievement. Conversely, the dominance of play and constructive activity in traditional early childhood playrooms reflects early childhood's respect for child development and the value of individuality, personal competence, and learner activity.

ECEC educator insistence on learning through play may conflict with mothers' demands for subject content (Hedges & Cullen, 2005), which the educators feel has only heightened recently, especially in the context of high-stakes testing such as Australia's National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN; Thompson, 2013). Research suggests educators are "overtly critical" of content-centred approaches (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 116). Yet these approaches often import a more active role from educators. Basically the "pressure toward academic outcomes and the development of basic key skills in numeracy and literacy [is] at the expense of play" (Howard, 2010a, p. 93). In fact, research on

educator perspectives places the philosophies of play and educator-directed activities in “polarised” positions (Hedges & Cullen, 2005, p. 75; Krieg, 2011). To add to the tensions of the polarity, educators feel themselves

... in a cleft stick. On the one hand we’re being told that the children have to reach such and such a standard. We’re geared towards testing from the minute they come to school... You are not being given the opportunity to allow the children to develop the play because you feel this pressure that they should be sitting down with pencils and papers and they should be, you know, adding up and writing down... (Keating et al., 2000, p. 442)

Thus the pressure to teach to specific standards is at odds with the educator’s perspective because they value play-based, holistic learning. This pressure appears to arise from the consistent perception that educators often fail to support children’s learning of content through play-based curricula (Brooker, 2002; 2010a; Grieshaber, 2008; Smith, 1988; Trawick-Smith, 1989). Findings from large-scale studies have challenged educators’ Romantic notion that play necessarily leads to academic learning (Lillard et al., 2013; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2008). A recent study conducted with over 250 Australian preschools has shown that Australia ranked in the “medium range” on most measured components of quality, when compared with similar provision in developed nations such as the UK and US (Tayler, Ishimine, Cloney, Cleveland, & Thorpe, 2013, p. 13), who have greater economic disparity and lower income to account for (Colebatch, 2013). This suggests that concerns about quality in Australian (as play-based) centres are not mislaid.

Yet DAP advocates have defended their approach, seeing the failure of child-centred, play-based approaches to deliver subject content outcomes (e.g., in literacy and numeracy) not as a problem of the approach but as educators’ lack of professional training (e.g., Anning, 1991; Christmas, 2005; Cooney, 2004; DeVries, 2001; Moyles & Adams, 2001; Rogers & Evans, 2008). Writers claimed educators were pro-play “without recognising the origins of their beliefs” (Anning, 1991, p.

6) due to “the absence of professional development” (Cooney, 2004, p. 270; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Moyles & Adams, 2001; Rogers & Evans, 2008). Hunter and Walsh recently (2014) showed the contradictory aspects of educators’ perspectives in that they supported play for its ability to lead to holistic learning, but were divided equally about play always leading to learning and about their own role as adults in play (p. 26). If only educators were better trained to enact learning through play, the learning outcomes could be achieved.

Some studies have ascribed the difficulty of enacting learning through play to other factors, such as lack of research into how children learn through play and how that can be connected to curriculum and playroom activity. For example, Angela Anning (2010) sums up with a changed perspective from her earlier work (cf. 1991):

I have reviewed the role of play in policies governing the education of birth to 7 year olds in England during the past 50 years. I have referred frequently to the tensions felt by practitioners responsible for delivering curricula between their espoused theories about the centrality of play to young children’s learning and their theories in action, which reveal deep confusion about how to conform to government policy and implement learning through play (p. 25)

This quote suggests UK educators fail to “balance” curricular demands for learning through play and content outcomes such as literacy and numeracy not because they are lacking in professional training, but because there is not enough guidance from curricula as to how to balance content-centred demands and child-centred approaches. Moreover, other writers in the field have cited the misalignment of child- and content-centred approaches as principally theoretical (Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Krieg, 2011; Wood, 2007), suggesting we need to reconceptualise how the goals of both can be met in curriculum (Hedges & Cullen, 2012). There is preliminary evidence from educators that they want more guidance on how to follow state and national curricular frameworks (Garvis et al., 2012, p. 8; Hunter & Walsh, 2014, p. 27). This thesis aims to redress the lack of

research informing the nexus between play-based and adult-directed learning by listening to the perspectives of educators and children.

Educators comment on the pressure not only from parents (e.g., Christmas, 2005; Fisher et al., 2008; Kwon, 2004; Monteflor, et al., 2006; Opper, 1994; Rescorla, Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Cone, 1990; West et al., 1993), but also curriculum (Anning, 2010; Keating et al., 2000; Olsen & Sumsion, 2000; Ranz-Smith, 2007), compounding the pressure they feel to meet academic outcomes and reduce time for play: “Teachers<sup>7</sup> today ... are continually engaged in a precarious balancing act ... implementing curricular goals and objectives while attempting to maintain an environment that allows for child-sponsored activity” (Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 273). Olsen and Sumsion (2000) noted that educators comment on the lack of opportunities to incorporate play due to “the pressure of external expectations, including the need to meet curriculum outcomes” (p. 5). This becomes a source of “real anguish” for educators because they appear to identify with the child-centred ethos, which focuses on “the play activities that they knew should be provided” (Keating et al., 2000, p. 437). Learning curriculum outcomes through play as it is enacted is thus highly problematic in the educator’s perspective.

Finally, the perceived failure of educators to foster the learning of curriculum outcomes through play – whether evidenced or anecdotal, or a result of inadequate professional knowledge or unclear curricular direction – appears to have eroded the professional identity of educators (Kilderry, 2013; McGillivray,

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<sup>7</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, in the interests of consistency, teachers in ECEC will in this thesis be termed “educators” (Ortlipp, Arthur, & Woodrow, 2011, p. 56).



2008; Ortlipp et al., 2011; Osgood, 2010; 2012). It is curious to note that learning through play, which is considered fundamental to the professional identity of ECEC (Goffin, 1989), also appears to have eroded the professional status of ECEC educators. The ECEC curriculum reforms of many countries are considered to decrease references to play and increase references to learning outcomes (Anning & Edwards, 2006, p. 79), a trend which one could argue destabilises professional credibility because fostering learning outcomes through play is such a difficult issue for educators. With increasing “preoccupation with academic achievement” seen in ECEC (Hatch & Grieshaber, 2002, p. 230), and educators being construed as “technicians of proficiency” (p. 230), educators’ professional status is further challenged because educator decision making is removed by a demanding curriculum (Kilderry, 2013). In Australia in particular, the notion of professional identity has been noted as a key area that needs to be addressed, not least because it was one of the central justifications for Australia’s recent NQF reforms (Rudd & Macklin, 2007; DEEWR, 2010):

Across the field, both in sites of policy production and sites of practice, the development of the EYLF was widely seen as having a significant role in raising the status of early childhood and contributing to the recognition of all forms of early childhood education and care (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 65).

The government-led reform within the ECEC sector was seen as a remedial move for a professional identity for early childhood educators<sup>8</sup> as distinct from primary school teachers (Sumsion & Wong, 2011). This motivation was emphasised by the “immediacy” of the reform implementation in July 2009 (Arthur et al., 2011, p. 1),

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that, recently, a few countries (e.g., New Zealand, Denmark and Sweden) have tried to boost this professional status of educators through higher educational requirements for entry into the field, signalling a recognition of the issue (Peeters, 2013).

and the struggle that the writers of the curriculum document noted (Sumsion et al., 2009). The fight for professional status for ECEC educators continues through curricular reforms internationally (McGillivray, 2008; Osgood, 2009; 2012) as well as in Australia (Ortlipp et al., 2011), and is complicated by the increases in educator “accountability” in the EYLF (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 63) and the “audit culture” that has plagued reforms (Osgood, 2010, p. 119; Sofou & Tsafos, 2010). The regulation of educators in ECEC field has been widely regarded as a key factor undermining educators’ pedagogical autonomy and decision-making rights, further eroding professional status (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007; Grieshaber, 2000; Hatch & Grieshaber, 2002; Kilderry, 2013). The evaluation of ECEC educators’ professional roles and capabilities held by the broader community, and parents in particular, appears to be diminished because educators value child-centred learning through play, which tends not to deliver measurable academic outcomes (Fleer, 2011; Wood, 2008). For example, play is seen to foster learning of dispositions, skills and funds of knowledge rather than curriculum content (Hedges & Cullen, 2012). At a time when measurement of educational success in schools is foregrounded by national testing (Thompson, 2013) this can result in ECEC educators looking more like unskilled carers than professional educators. I return to a quote from one mother in a recent Australian study that alluded to these tensions in demanding more structured activities than “just baby-sitting”, which is seen as a low-status and unskilled occupation:

I think a lot of people feel like they’d rather their kids being in a structured environment rather than just... play or someone supervising, a baby-sitter really. That’s what it comes down to (Parent 8 in O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012, p. 271).

#### **2.2.4.1 Conclusion to educator perspectives on learning through play**

The literature on ECEC educator perspectives on learning through play suggests they favour an approach which is largely child-centred and DAP focused.

However, educators appear to be in a “cleft stick” between: (a) their education and training in, as well as identification with, child-centred education and its ideals of holistic learning through play and corresponding “facilitator” role; and (b) parental expectations to prepare children for school through academics (see 2.2.3.2). Further, they seem to be “continually engaged in a precarious balancing act” between the demands of play-based curricula and outcomes in standardised tests, mandated by those same curricula (Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 273; see 1.1). Presumably because it would be difficult to satisfy such polarised demands (Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Anning, 2010), educators are accused of being insufficiently trained and their professional status is degraded (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007; Grieshaber, 2000; Hatch & Grieshaber, 2002; Kilderry, 2013; Osgood, 2009; 2010; 2012). The difficulty of the position warrants further investigation, particularly in relation to the perspectives of parents, who are likely to respond to the professional status of educators in their choices as “consumers” of an ECEC service (Press & Woodrow, 2005, p. 281; Tayler, 2012). Finally, it is critical to examine how the tensions – between child- and content-centred aspirations, between child- and educator-initiated play, between curriculum and practice, and between educators and parents – might be significant in terms of children’s perspectives on learning through play. This suggests that consideration of stakeholder perspectives on play and how these intersect for children, mothers and educators is timely. These aspects of educators’ perspectives on learning through play are summarised by Howard (2010a):

Yet the centrality of play within curricula[r] documentation is not necessarily enough to guarantee its successful implementation, and that practice can be challenged by parental attitude, inadequate theoretical understanding and training, pressure to evidence learning outcomes, and the availability of physical resources (p. 91).

## 2.3 Conclusion to the Literature Review

This chapter has reviewed the status of learning through play, showing how it has been dominated by the perspectives of philosophers, psychologists and policy-makers. Dominant understandings of the value of learning through play have shifted from play as the means to holistic learning to play as requiring educator guidance in order to lead it to curriculum outcomes. This has presented a challenge for educators who are trained predominantly in child-centred approaches wherein they are expected to be facilitators of learning through play (as seen in 2.2.4).

Challenges to the dominant perspectives (of philosophers, psychologists and policy-makers) have come from others such as academics and human rights scholars, but the debate has not heard from those who must implement learning through play: insider stakeholders. This gap in the research literature is significant because these are the stakeholders who ultimately determine if the philosophical and policy ideas about learning through play are enacted.

An examination of research literature related to their perspectives reveals some important findings for this thesis. A review of the research on children's perspectives on learning through play shows some fundamental ideas – such as play being the preferred activity of preschoolers, and the significance of peers in this activity – are apparent in research. The next subsection of the chapter argued that children's perspectives on learning might be inferred from studies on metacognition. Research on one aspect of metacognition – Theory of Mind – suggests that only children over four years old are capable of discussing their perspective on learning in terms of their thinking before and after a play experience. Qualitative studies, however, are inconclusive regarding this issue. These research findings are significant because they underscore the importance of educators finding a way to engage in play in order to guide it to curriculum outcome learning. They are also important because if children under four cannot

understand their learning, reaching contextual intersubjectivity with them may be impossible.

The next section narrowed the focus on families to mothers in particular, as they were the only participants who volunteered for the study reported in this thesis. It showed that, outside western technologically-advanced societies, mothers do not consider learning through free play to have much value. Even within these societies, findings are varied, with only social learning through play appearing to be consistently valued by mothers. There are some preliminary findings to suggest mothers within these societies endorse learning through play rhetorically, but would prefer educators to guide play to learning academics such as literacy and numeracy. The connections between the perspectives of mothers and other insider stakeholder perspectives warrant deeper investigation because they are likely to reveal how they can be aligned better.

The final section showed that educators identify with the child-centred valuing of learning through free play, and even use this characteristic to distinguish themselves from primary school teachers. Their perspective shows, however, that this valuing of free play puts them in a difficult situation when they experience immense parental pressure to deliver academics and when governments impose curricular demands for measurable learning outcomes (Hedges & Cullen, 2012). Educators describe performing a precarious balancing act between the two seemingly incompatible ideals of educator-led instruction of subject content, and, on the other hand, child-centred, holistic learning through play. Some see this tension as a result of inadequate training, others a result of inadequate prescription from curricula. This tension warrants deeper investigation, particularly in relation to how it may relate to the perspectives of mothers and children. Further, when the perspectives of the educators and family members are aligned, educational outcomes for young children are improved (e.g., Melhuish, 2010; Schaller et al., 2007; Sylva et al., 2008). These findings, in light of the paucity of research on the similarities and differences between insider stakeholder

perspectives, suggests the importance of this thesis.

This thesis therefore investigates the following questions:

1. What are the perspectives of insider stakeholders, including children, mothers, and educators, on learning through play?
2. What are the similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play?

The next chapter (Chapter Three - Theory) seeks to explore some of the main components of the above two questions: learning, perspectives play, and learning through play.

## CHAPTER 3 - THEORY

In order to investigate the proposed research questions, four core concepts – learning, perspectives, play and learning through play – need to be theorised. These four concepts are derived from the research questions (in italics):

1. What are the *perspectives* of insider *stakeholders*, including children, mothers, and educators on *learning through play*?
2. What are the similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives on *learning through play*?

The first section of this chapter theorises learning and describes a model of learning used to understand the findings from the research. The second section focuses on perspectives and explains the rationale for the use of a sociocultural approach to analyse stakeholder perspectives on children's learning through play. The third section of the chapter provides an understanding of play and proposes a theoretical relationship between play and learning.

### 3.1 Theories of learning

When I began the research for this thesis, my understanding of learning relied on the assumption that learning was acquired and evident when there was a change in behaviour as a result of a particular experience. Such a view of learning as knowledge acquisition is common, and has a long history as evidenced in the views of Socrates (469 – 399 BC) and Plato (424 – 347 BC) that learning is a process of remembering (Gray & Macblain, 2012; Seeley, 2009). Anna Sfard (1998) provides a useful way of viewing the historical development of theories of learning as a broad shift in conceptualising learning as model of *acquisition* to conceptualising it as one of *participation*. The development of my own understanding of learning followed a similar trajectory to the theoretical

explanations of learning. The following section provides an overview of acquisition models of learning.

### **3.1.1 Acquisition models of learning**

The “standard” definition of learning used in many introductory textbooks on learning and learning theory argues that learning is associated with acquiring some identifiable knowledge or skills that changes one’s behaviour (Engeström, 2001, p. 137; de Houwer, Barnes-Holmes, & Moors, 2013; Lave, 2009; Matusov, 1998). This definition of learning is implied in “transmission” models of teaching, which has historically been used in many Western-heritage classrooms (Rogoff, 1995; Tishman, Jay, & Perkins, 1993) where knowledge is “transferred” from teacher to learner (Leone & Drakeford, 1999). A similar “conduit metaphor” (Reddy, 1979) model exists in the English language, where language is seen as a process of sending knowledge across a conduit to another person, who unpacks and acquires the knowledge contained therein. Both the transmission model of teaching and the conduit metaphor of communication rely on an acquisition model of learning. The acquisition model focuses on the idea that learners acquire knowledge from an external reality or world that is directly accessible:

Concepts are to be understood as basic units of knowledge that can be accumulated, gradually refined, and combined to form ever richer cognitive structures (Sfard, 1998, p. 5).

This process is therefore one of acquisition, using “a storage model of the mind” (Rogoff, 1995, p. 155) in which knowledge (such as memories) is accumulated and stored for later use (Lave, 2009, p. 203). Plato’s notion that learning is a process of remembering stored information relies on this assumption (Gray & Macblain, 2012, p. 2). There is a range of learning theories that draw on this fundamental principle, including Empiricism, Romanticism, developmentalism, Behaviourism and cognitive constructivism (Lave, 2009; Sfard, 1998).



Empiricists such as John Locke (1689/1996) in the 17th century saw learning as a process of acquiring knowledge from the senses: "there is nothing in the mind which was not first in the senses" (cited in Jordan et al., 2008, p. 12). A century later, Rousseau's (1762/2007) romantic theorisation conceptualised learning as a more active process of "induction" (p. 108) and a synthesis of outer experience to inner knowledge (Seeley, 2009). This important shift in thinking about learning indicated moving beyond the idea that learning was process of acquiring knowledge through the senses, to one that involved a relationship between the "outer" reality and internal knowledge processes. Rousseau's conceptualisation of knowledge acquisition as active was carried forward by constructivist notions of learning. In particular, Giambattista Vico's idea that "'to know' means 'to know how to make'" (Tobias & Duffy, 2009, p. 3) reflects this development. Although still associated with an acquisition model of learning (Lave, 2009), this understanding recognised the learner's active role in constructing or "making" his/her own knowledge.

By the twentieth century, the developmental view in which young children construct their own knowledge became a dominant way of understanding learning (Burman, 1994; Stephen, 2006). Adaptations of the Swiss biologist Jean Piaget's (1896 - 1980) *Genetic Epistemology* [interpreted as stages of cognitive development (Burman, 1994; Nolan & Kilderry, 2010; Walsh, 2005)] popularised the developmental and cognitive constructionist view. This view of learning had its roots in the growing interest in genetic endowment from the work of English naturalist Charles Darwin (1809 - 1882), and the emergence of the Child Study Movement in the late nineteenth century that tracked child development through observation and measurements of children's physical growth over time (Burman, 2008; Goffin & Wilson, 2000). The preoccupation with physical maturation fitted well with Piaget's proposal of stages of cognitive development evident at certain ages. Piaget (1972; 1976) characterised children's thinking as sensori-motor, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operational, which were cumulative

stages, and therefore acquisition-based. Piaget's cognitive developmental stages were readily accepted into education (Birns & Golden, 1974; Burman, 1994; Damon, 2006; Kamii, 1974; Lee & Johnson, 2007; Murray, 1979; Silin, 1987; Sullivan, 1969; Walsh, 1991). This was particularly evident in the USA (Murray, 1979; Walsh, 1991), where it was understood that providing for children's learning would be most effective if educational activities matched children's levels of development (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Charlesworth, 1998; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Ebbeck, 1996; Walkerdine, 1984; 1988). The developmental perspective came to be a dominant force in understanding children's learning in early childhood education during the 1960s and this was maintained well into the early 2000s (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005; Stephen, 2006; Taylor, et al., 2004; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008).

Historically, Behaviourist theories of learning have been dominant in approaches to behaviour guidance in the early years (Fendler, 2001), and in psychological approaches to education (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2012; Jordan, Carlile, & Stack, 2008; de Houwer, Barnes-Holmes, & Moors, 2013), where learning is evidenced by the acquisition of a certain "response" to a given "stimulus" (e.g., a rat learning to press a lever to receive food) (Woollard, 2010, p. 19). Educationally, behaviourist ideas about learning were adapted to suggest that providing information in the form of stimulus would result in learning as a response (de Houwer, Barnes-Holmes, & Moors, 2013).

Theoretical explanations for learning such as Romanticism, cognitive constructionism and behaviourism had a different emphasis on the relationship between the individual and the learning process. However these theories tended to inform each other as knowledge and understanding about learning grew over a time, with their basic assumptions largely unchanged (van Oers, 2010). One assumption of import is that knowledge is acquired by individuals from an externally observable and 'accessible' reality (Sfard, 1998), which Piaget himself distinguished:

In the common view, the external world is entirely separate from the subject... Any objective knowledge, then, appears to be simply the result of set of perceptive recordings, motor associations, verbal descriptions, and the like, which all participate in producing a sort of figurative copy or 'functional copy' (in Hull's terminology) of objects and the connections between them ... (Piaget, 1976, p. 12)

Despite how common this acquisition model remains, it has been displaced by a different set of assumptions in more recent theories of learning (Illeris, 2009). The next subsection discusses these because the shift from an acquisition to a participation model was necessary to understand the findings of this thesis. As I engaged in the process of data generation and analysis, I needed to shift my conception of learning. My acquisition model of learning focussed on the transfer of knowledge for teacher to learner and the learner acquisition of information causing an observable change in behaviour following an experience. This shifted to a more participatory model of learning.

### **3.1.2 Participation models of learning**

Participation models of learning describe learning in terms of "practice" and "activities" that are engaged in by people, rather than something that is to be acquired by them (Sfard, 1998, p. 6; Illeris, 2009). According to participatory models of learning, learning is demonstrated when a person participates in a culturally-organised activity (Arievitch, 2003; Burr, 2003; Gergen & Wortham, 2001; Rogoff, 2003) and as a result of this activity contributes to the social situation in ways that change their own understanding of participation and the nature of the organised activity (Lave, 2009). A key feature of this description is that learning is not separate from its context and other people within that context. The participation model of learning views divisions between the learner and her/his context as "abstractions" rather than a truth (Matusov, 1998, p. 326). A range of theoretical explanations for learning draw on the notion of participatory learning.

This includes social constructionist and cultural-historical theories of learning (Sfard, 1998).

Within *social constructionist* theory learning is understood as socially constructed (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), reality is created through talk and text that is generated by people (Edley, 2001) and, because text and talk are socially generated, knowledge is understood as a by-product of communal relationships (Gergen & Wortham, 2001, p. 119). Reality is therefore understood as comprising socially generated forms of language. People can only learn as they participate in the creation of the reality from which knowledge will be derived.

The notion that learning is something people do together, not something that people acquire (Burr, 2003) represents a marked shift from acquisition models of learning. In education, and early childhood education in particular, social constructionist view of learning meant the teacher imparting knowledge to children was not a predominant way of working (Cunliffe, 2008). Social constructivists focus on the learning in interactions within the “sociocultural context of families, classrooms, schools and surrounding communities” (Kugelmass, 2007, p. 272). This idea is represented in social constructionist theory by the claim that “social interaction constructs objects, these objects have an objective existence only within the social relationship which has acted to create them” (Lock & Strong, 2010).

This claim emphasised the intersubjective nature of knowledge, and the intangibility of any notion of an external reality. Within the same participatory model of learning as social constructionism lies a *cultural-historical* perspective on learning. Sometimes, theoretical perspectives within the participatory model, such as social constructionism, social constructivism and cultural-historical theory are used interchangeably (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). While they each sit within a participatory model of learning, the theories are not interchangeable because they understand differently the nature of reality and therefore the processes by which

people relate to reality and engage in learning. For example, social constructionism emphasises knowledge as textual representation (Edley, 2001) whereas cultural-historical theory focuses on how people mediate their relationship with reality through tools and objects. Within the cultural-historical perspective there are also four main traditions<sup>9</sup> for explaining learning in participatory terms. It is important to note that the traditions are not mutually-exclusive (Stetsenko, 1999) as they draw on common theoretical heritage derived principally from the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896 - 1934). In this thesis, I draw on one of the traditions associated with cultural-historical theory - namely *sociocultural theory*. Because sociocultural theory derives from cultural-historical theory (Fleer & Hammer, 2013) I briefly elaborate some of the key ideas related to learning from cultural-historical theory more generally. I then go on to explain why the North American tradition of “sociocultural theory” as it evolved from cultural-historical theory is the most appropriate theoretical perspective for understanding learning in the context of this thesis.

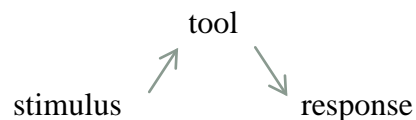
### **3.1.3 Cultural-historical theory**

Cultural-historical theory, developed and expounded by Vygotsky (1896 - 1934) (Davydov & Kerr, 1995), is considered to rely on a participation metaphor for understanding learning (Sfard, 1998). According to Arieievitch (2003), it has taken the broader scientific community more than 50 years to assimilate the ideas of cultural-historical theory, after “decades dominated by behaviourism, and then by mechanistic computer metaphors in cognitive psychology, as well as Piagetian

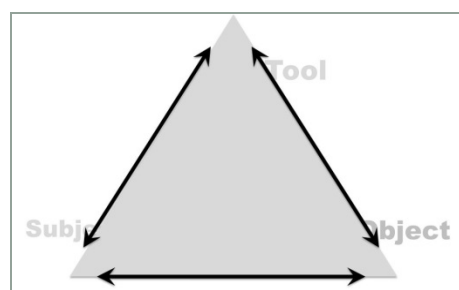
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<sup>9</sup> See Daniels’ (2001) third chapter for similar categories of the theory’s traditions.

individualistic constructivism” (p. 287). According to Daniels (2001) “the” central concept in cultural-historical theory is the notion of *mediation* (p. 7). In the language of behaviourism, Vygotsky highlighted the importance of mediating tools (such as language) in the traditional stimulus-response dynamic. Vygotsky (1978b) replaced “the simple stimulus-response process” with “a complex, mediated act” (p. 40), which he simplified as:



Vygotsky proposed that his model of tool mediated was “basic to all higher psychological processes” (p. 40). Higher psychological process included language and abstract thought. Higher psychological foundations provided the foundation of what he termed “psychological tools” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 72). Such tools were represented by humankind’s invention of “material” tools (e.g. a hammer), and allowed people to solve “any psychological problem confronting man” (e.g. the need to remember, to compare things, to communicate, to select) (p. 60). Accordingly, Vygotsky proposed a more general way of perceiving all mental processes, which are the foundation of consciousness (Bruner, 1987), but are useful here for understanding learning. This way of understanding learning is represented in *Figure 3.1* as Vygotsky’s concept of culturally tool-mediated activity. In this figure, tools are used by the subject (person) to realise a particular object – whatever it is the person would like to do or achieve.



*Figure 3.1* Vygotsky’s model: activity upon an object is mediated by a tool (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 79)

For Vygotsky, psychological tools explain why learning is participative, rather than acquisition-based, because “individual consciousness is determined by the activity of the collective subject” (Davydov & Kerr, 1995, p. 15). For example, my use of a pen relies on cultural knowledge about how to write (literacy), the rules of the language (grammar), as well as what it means to write using a pen (whether writing by hand is outdated, or old-fashioned, or my handwriting is considered well-trained). As Bird and colleagues (2013) assert “[t]ool use, and the object of activity, are always located in social systems of meaning that guide understandings of how and why particular tools are used in relation to a given object” (p. 3). For Vygotsky, this social system is not just an addition to a constructivist notion of acquisition (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2006); it is the way that learning, and all consciousness occurs (Das, 1995; Davydov & Kerr, 1995; Galperin, 1992b; Stetsenko, 1999; Wertsch, 1995). Vygotsky (1979) argued that:

the social dimension of consciousness is primary in time and in fact. The individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary, based on the social and construed exactly in its likeness (p. 30).

Because the social dimension of learning highlights the relationship between tools, people and objects of activity, cultural-historical theory was also able to argue that the learning and development is temporal and cultural. This means that tools are developed, used and adapted by people over time. Generations of people use previously developed tools to enable learning and in turn change these for the next generation. This idea is represented in the notion of *cultural-historical* – tools are culturally situated and generated and they have history of development within that culture over time. Vygotsky’s conceptualisation of tool mediation should be viewed as dynamic rather than static, in relation to cultures and their histories.

Following the early work into tool mediation by Vygotsky, several traditions of cultural-historical theory began to be developed. These have included:

- 1) US Sociocultural traditions;
- 2) Eastern European post-Vygotskian traditions;
- 3) US Scaffolding-focused traditions and
- 4) Activity Theory (Stetsenko, 1999).

In this thesis I focus predominantly on the USA-inspired “sociocultural” tradition which has drawn on the idea of social interaction as the key way in which the learner participates in the practices of social and cultural communities in order to learn. This idea fits well with the focus of this thesis on the similarities and differences between the perspectives of different stakeholder groups: such groups are sociocultural and an examination of their similarities and differences allows for some inference of how they might interact and influence one another.

### **3.1.3.1 The sociocultural theory of learning**

One of the four traditions within cultural-historical theory is sociocultural theory (Daniels, 2001; Stetsenko, 1999). This tradition builds on the core concept of cultural mediation by understanding social interaction as a main factor in learning. Prominent scholars in this tradition include Michael Cole, Barbara Rogoff, and Jean Lave (Stetsenko, 1999). These scholars built on Vygotsky’s early work by acknowledging the role of cultural mediation in connecting the person to the social and cultural context. They went on to research and further understand how social interaction provided the basis for learning amongst groups of culturally situated people. Rogoff’s (2003) work is particularly notable in this area because she researched learning in what she called “intent communities” (e.g. Samoan, Native Indian American, Japanese cultures). In these communities, learning was understood to occur in less formalised settings and forms than in the school or early childhood settings (as was more evident in dominant approaches to Western-European education). Rogoff developed the concept of “intent



participation” to explain how learning occurred for younger children in relation to their social exposure to, and participation in, socially meaningful activities with adults and more competent peers. Rogoff identified numerous examples of learning that occurred through “intent participation” as adult or more competent peers:

- structured interactions for the child’s benefit,
- allowed children to listen to narratives,
- encouraged children to observe cultural and technical practices,
- structured apprenticeships,
- facilitated children’s participation in routines and play, and
- were responsive to when the child required assistance (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 282 - 327).

From a sociocultural perspective learning is not seen in terms of knowledge passing from one individual to another, but rather as something generated as groups participate in culturally-relevant practices. Rogoff (1995) also developed the notion of “participatory appropriation” to build on the idea of intent participation (p. 142). Like intent participation, *participatory appropriation* holds that the membership of the cultural group is important because group membership defines the practices that will be engaged in by a person as they learn to participate in what matters to the group. Participatory appropriation is defined as gradually participating in the group activities until a person has learned how to be skilled at a given activity (Rogoff, 2003). Rogoff (1995) provided the example of the cultural practices that North American girl scouts partake in (such as selling cookies), and the associated practices that serve to induct the girls into more involved and complex ways of being members of the group (such as accompanying an experienced member on expedition selling cookies, gradually assisting with and eventually taking on the task of handling money) (Rogoff,

1995). Here, learning is “the process of the guided participation in culturally-organised activity with a more skilled partner” (Stetsenko, 1999, p. 238). This shows how and why a sociocultural perspective on learning differs from an acquisition approach: “Contrasting with transmission and acquisition models, in intent participation, learners engage collaboratively with others in the social world. Hence, there is no boundary dividing them into sides” (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chávez, & Angelillo, 2003, p. 182)

This is not to say the individual’s role in the learning is insignificant. As Rogoff (1995) notes, even in personal-level processes such as “participatory appropriation” children engage in an individual process of learning that enables future participation at the community level, in “a process of becoming, rather than acquisition” (p. 142). This means that appropriation is not so much about acquisition of knowledge at the individual level as it is a process of becoming an individual who belongs to the group by having learned how to participate. Instead of measuring learning as “a change in behaviour”, which assumes a before-and-after-learning state (de Houwer, Barnes-Holmes, & Moors, 2013, p. 631), learning is understood socioculturally, in terms of participation in cultural practices, ranging from watching and listening, to being apprenticed, participating fully, and apprenticing others in practices. In this way, the activities of individuals and groups are always situated in the foreground of the whole social and cultural situation (Matusov, 2007). Rogoff (2003) contrasts this view with the acquisition model:

The [acquisition] view is based on an assumption that the individual is the primary unit of analysis, with static interpersonal and cultural influences added onto ‘basic’ individual processes. In the [acquisition] model, the individual is either a passive recipient of external social or cultural influence – a receptacle for the accumulation of knowledge and skill – or an active seeker of passive external social and cultural knowledge and skill. In the participatory appropriation perspective, personal, interpersonal, and cultural

processes all constitute each other as they transform sociocultural activity (p. 157).

Rogoff's identification of personal, interpersonal and cultural processes in her explanation of learning is significant because it highlights the relationship between people and their social situations in terms of what is learned and how it is understood to be learned.

### **3.2 A sociocultural understanding of stakeholder perspectives**

Many cultural-historical and sociocultural scholars emphasise the importance of holism in sociocultural theories of learning (Chaiklin, 2012; Fleer, 2008a; Matusov, 1998; 2007; Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 2004b; Winther-Lindqvist, 2012). Holism is understood as encompassing the individual within his or her social and cultural setting, and not abstracting learning and experience from the setting. These scholars argue that a holistic view should be taken when researching how people understand particular phenomena (such as their perspectives on learning) and/or how they are learning in particular social situations. How this can be achieved for an investigation has been articulated by one prominent and contemporary sociocultural theorist in particular, Mariane Hedegaard (2008a; 2009) who has acknowledged the importance of holism.

Similar to Rogoff's (1995) three-level conceptualisation of intent and participation appropriation as occurring within the individual in relation to others in a particular community or institutional setting, Hedegaard (2009) provides a framework of three different levels from which people's learning and perspectives might be understood and analysed. Hedegaard understands people as connected

into a system of individual, institutional and societal level activity. Each level is characterised by a different form of activity. She argues that these levels can be used to analyse what is happening for people in terms of their particular perspective on a given phenomenon.

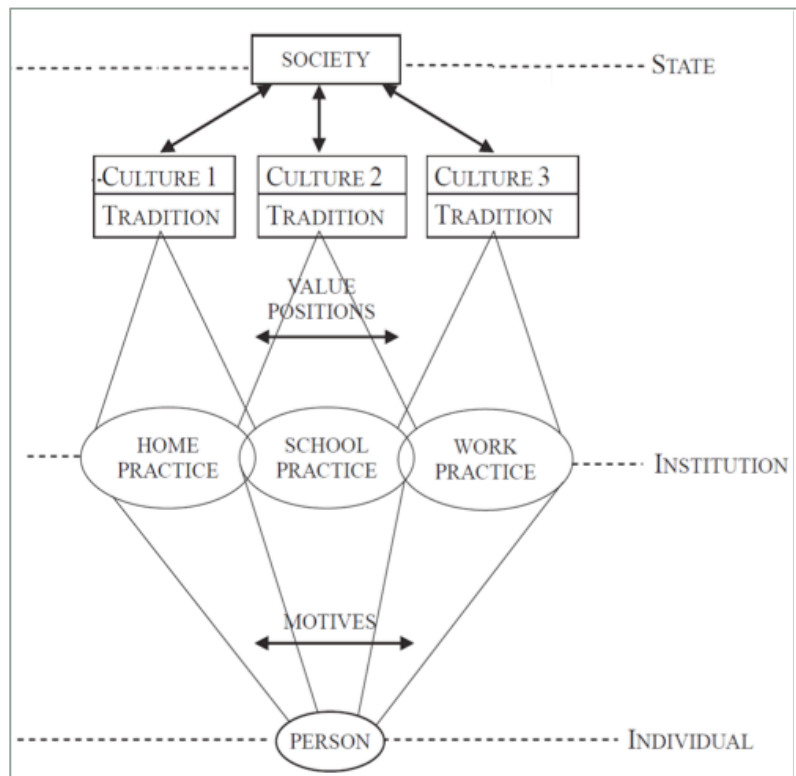


Figure 3.2 Levels of analysis of perspectives (Hedegaard, 2009, p. 73). Reproduced with permission (see Appendix, p. 435).

As shown in Figure 3.2, Hedegaard’s (2008a) framework identifies individual-, institutional-, and society- “levels of analysis” which are characterised by activity in different forms (p. 17). For example, analysis at the institutional level investigates the *practices* of the institution as a way to reveal its *values* in order to investigate perspectives that might be held by individuals participating in the social and cultural setting at this level (p. 17). Hedegaard’s framework is similar to Rogoff’s (1995, p. 139) “planes of analysis” because it provides a systematic

approach to conducting holistic research by enabling the researcher to focus on “a part of the unit of analysis – a ‘foreground plane’ – in detail while keeping the rest of the unit in the ‘background’” (Matusov, 2007, p. 324). This means that a researcher may seek to understand the individual perspectives of a person but is able to consider what the practices and values associated with their perspective are in relation to “the whole”. Hedegaard’s framework means that it is insufficient to consider perspectives as only generated within an individual as something they have acquired, and that the cultural setting and institution to which the person belongs also needs to be considered. This is because the practices and values within that institution provide the context in which an individual is likely to develop their perspective on a given activity. In the case of this thesis, this is learning through play.

Further, as mentioned in the Literature Review (see 2.2.2.3, p. 77), analysing practices is an appropriate way to investigate children’s “perceptions, knowledge and experiences” rather than merely what is seen from the researcher’s perspective (Sommer et al., 2010, p. 21). Analysing practices highlights the inherent agency of children because they enact in the world through those practices (Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 12). This focus on children’s capacities aligns with the ideals of the sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2011; James & Prout, 1997) and children’s rights (UN, 1989) because they are not seen as products of society or in terms of becoming adults (Hedegaard, 2009, p. 64).

In this thesis, the stakeholder perspectives investigated are children’s, mothers’ and educators’ perspectives on learning through play. The institutional level of analysis as defined by Hedegaard provides an appropriate means of understanding stakeholder perspectives, because each of the participating individuals in each stakeholder group has one thing in common: their institutional membership to their group. For children, this is their membership in the *playground* (i.e. the institution of playing and being a player), for the mothers the institution of *family* and for the educators the institution of the ECEC centre and

early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a field of practice more generally. These institutions were chosen because they are the key distinction between stakeholder groups and the common factor to all members within the group. For example, a child's membership in the institution of playground is heightened by the fact that no mother or educator is considered part of that particular institution because they cannot again be a child. Yet, a child is also connected to the mothers and educators in the broader framework of Hedegaard's analysis, which suggests s/he is also always experiencing the institution of "home" and "work" or "school" (the early childhood setting). This way of considering the practices and values at the institutional level is useful for understanding stakeholder perspectives on learning through play.

At the institutional level, this classification might be problematic, however, if participants are members of more than one group. This was the case with Rose and Allysha, for example, as both were educators and also mothers. This is where the notion of "practices" is useful (Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 17). Stakeholder groups are defined and distinguished by their institutions, and also by their practices or activities at the institutional level. For example, the practices of educators are to ensure the education and care of children at the ECEC centre, whereas mothers' practices are broader, such as making decisions about extracurricular (e.g. swimming) classes or medical attention (e.g., treatment of behavioural disorders). This distinction was useful for classifying Tarni and Allysha, who were both educators and mothers of children at the ECEC centre. Because Allysha recorded play of her son in the home with family practices occurring, she was classified as a mother. Inversely, because Tarni recorded play in the ECEC centre and spoke about ECEC centre practices, she was classified as an educator. In this way, Hedegaard's framework helped me define stakeholder groupings meaningfully.

Hedegaard's framework was therefore selected as theoretical conception on learning and for understanding stakeholder perspectives on learning through play. The application of Hedegaard's framework has enabled the investigation of

the stakeholder groups as groups (belonging to particular “institutions”) and enabled individual members to be understood as existing in relation to a social and cultural situation. It was also chosen as a framework for the study because it is located in the sociocultural tradition and enables research to be conducted that allows a holistic approach to understanding stakeholder perspectives (Chaiklin, 2012; Fleer, 2008a; Matusov, 1998; 2007; Rogoff, 1995; Sawyer, 2002). A holistic approach involves taking a unit (e.g., an institution) as one aspect of the whole sociocultural situation; that is, the societal, cultural, institutional, interpersonal and individual levels of analysis (Rogoff, 1995). Taking a unit of analysis as a characteristic understood in relation to the whole was argued by Vygotsky (2004b) to help understand the individual in relation to the social and cultural situation. He established this in his insistence that the atomistic approach used in mainstream Psychology to study a phenomenon by separating out different “variables” actually fails to account for a phenomenon because it does not explain the whole system. Vygotsky illustrated this argument with an analogy of breaking water into its elements (hydrogen, oxygen) which no longer bear the characteristics of the whole (e.g., the fire-extinguishing properties of water). Thus, a unit which possesses “all the basic characteristics of the whole” (e.g., a droplet) is more accurate than elements (e.g., oxygen) if we are trying to explain some aspect of the whole:

Psychology must identify those units in which the characteristics of the whole are present, even though they may be manifested in an altered form. Using this mode of analysis, it must attempt to resolve the concrete problems that face us (p. 37).

The way that Hedegaard proposes that a “systematic analysis ... be developed in relation to Vygotsky’s theory” is “within everyday activities at home and in the community” (Hedegaard, 2007, p. 247). Her framework (see Figure 3.2) provides a protocol to analyse children’s, educators’ and mothers’ perspectives on learning through play as a unit comprising their activities at the societal, institutional and

individual levels. Specifically, she recommends conducting an analysis of perspectives at various levels by examining “activity”, which is widely considered to be the unit of analysis for sociocultural research (e.g., Chaiklin, 2012, p. 209; Engeström, 2001, p. 134; Galperin, 1992b, p. 39; Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 30; 2008b, p. 202; Klerfelt, 2007, p. 339; Matusov, 2007, p. 324; Rogoff, 1995, p. 140; Sawyer, 2002, p. 285; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2006, p. 87; Wertsch, 1995, p. 61; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 6). At the cultural level, activities are realised as “traditions” (Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 17). At the institutional level, they are realised as “practices”. The motives behind these practices are represented as “values” (p. 17). This then provides a thorough protocol with which to analyse institutional perspectives. Further, the focus on practices and values inherently respects the agency of children to act in their world as adults do (Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 12), which aligns with the generation of children’s perspectives rather than a child perspective (Sommer et al., 2010).

Therefore, just as this thesis will view learning in relation to participation in practices, it will also see institutional perspectives in relation to practices. The values that these practices imply are also important to the analysis.

### **3.3 Theories of play**

Play has occupied the imagination of scholars, researchers and theorists for many years (Kane, 2004; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play is of interest to researchers in the areas of education because it is often linked to children’s learning. Sutton-Smith (1997) says there are seven rhetorics of play, including play as progress, imagination, selfhood, power, identity and chaos. Of these, the “play as progress” rhetoric connects most strongly with the use of play in early childhood education to promote children’s learning (Rogers, 2013). Despite many years of work, and multiple publications about play however, there is little consensus about its



definition (Sutton-Smith, 1997; van Oers, 2013) or its function in children's and adults' lives (Elkonin, 2005). While there are a range of theoretical perspectives associated with play [such as its intrinsic value (Lillemyr, 2003; Moyles, 2010; Wood, 2013), its natural occurrence as "the child's work" (Isaacs, 1929) and play as a basis of all human culture (Huizinga, 1944/1970; van Oers, 2013)], two of the main perspectives in the "play as progress" rhetoric are developmental and sociocultural understandings of play. These perspectives draw predominantly on the work of Piaget and Vygotsky and are evident in approaches to ECEC (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002; Thomas, Warren, & deVries, 2011; VCAA, 2008). Examples of these approaches include High/Scope (Schweinhart, Barnes, Weikart, Barnett, & Epstein, 1993), the Reggio Emilia Approach (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998; Malaguzzi, 2011) and Project-Based approaches (Helm & Katz, 2011). Many early childhood curricula utilise Piaget's and Vygotsky's ideas, such as Te Whariki (MOE, 1996) and Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). They also contribute to the professional training of early childhood educators as evidenced by reference to these works in many pre-service teacher education texts (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2012; Brock, Dodds, Jarvis, & Olusoga, 2009; Edwards, 2009; Talay-Ongan & Ap, 2005).

### **3.3.1 Developmental understandings of play**

A dominant view of play has been maturationist, meaning that play is seen to mature in complexity, often in predetermined stages (Burman, 2008). Developmental understandings of play typically view play developing in separate, yet overlapping domains. As discussed in the Literature Review, the DAP understanding sees play developing in physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). What is important for the argument I present in this thesis (see specifically 6.5, p. 286) is that the

developmental understandings of play focus on domains because of the emphasis they hold on *processes* of development (Gibbons, 2007). Rather than an emphasis on *products* of learning, as do less child-centred approaches, developmental understandings of play see development occurring in different domains in parallel but separate lines of maturation. Critically, this development is seen as internally-driven, autonomous and independent of the adult (Burman, 2008), and demands only that suitable resources are provided. This is important for the context of this investigation (see 1.1, p. 19) because the developmental perspective has expected educators to only provide for (or facilitate) learning through play so that “normal” development can occur (Burman, 2008).

I will now elaborate how play is understood to develop in social, physical and cognitive domains. These are exemplified in Mildred B. Parten’s (1932; 1933) theories of social development of play, Anthony D. Pellegrini and Peter K. Smith’s (1998) theories of physical development in play, and Piaget’s (1962) theories of cognitive development in play. It should be noted that Piaget’s understanding of play was also considered *constructivist* because it articulated children’s capacity to construct their own meaning. However, his views of play were also frequently taken in support of the developmental view as much as (if not more than) the “philosophical thinking” to which it was intended to contribute (Goffin & Wilson, 2000, p. 131; Lee & Johnson, 2007, p. 233; Mays, 1972, p. 1; Nolan & Kilderry, 2010; Walsh, 2005). Piaget’s magnum opus, the *Epistemologie Génétique* (or the “genesis” of “knowledge”), was originally written as a contribution to the philosophical study of how knowledge develops in the mind, as opposed to regulating when children were expected to be able to cognitively understand certain concepts, which is how they were taken up in the ECEC field (Birns & Golden, 1974, p. 117; Goffin & Wilson, 2000; Kamii, 1974; Mays, 1972; Murray, 1979; Smith, 1988, p. 212; Sullivan, 1969, p. 130). Along with what Walsh (2005) termed the “romantic maturationism” of the late 20th century (p. 42), his theory was considered an account of development following “the individual’s unique biological clock”

(Walsh, 1991, p. 114; Stephen, 2006). Piaget's writing is not incongruent with the developmental understanding of play; and, for the purposes of this thesis, his understandings of cognitive development will be considered as a developmental view.

### **3.3.1.1 Developmental understandings of social domain of play**

The most influential theorist on dominant thinking about social aspects of play is Parten (Xu, 2010; Lillard et al., 2013). Both Fleer and colleagues (2009) and Xu (2010) have argued how prolific the view is that infants start out playing by themselves and increasingly incorporate other players. This idea is most commonly attributed to the influence of Mildred B. Parten's (1902 - after 1932) work. Parten (1932) is best known for her studies of the "social participation" in the play of preschoolers (p. 252; 1933). Parten (1932) attributed numerical value to how much social participation she observed in children's play. In order of this value, she categorised play as either "unoccupied behaviour, solitary play, onlooker behaviour, parallel play, associative play, or cooperative play" (p. 253). Parten used these values to suggest that "normally" developing children played with increasing sociality. This way of thinking about play suggested that younger children were less social than older children, an idea that proliferated through the writing of French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858 - 1917) (Wyness, 2006). Subsequent research suggested that children's play indeed increased throughout childhood, giving the idea greater currency in the field (Xu, 2010). Some 20th-century writers argued that children enjoy the social aspects of play more than solitary play because in social play they control others (e.g., Garvey, 1974, p. 179). This idea may be seen to endorse Parten's premise because it construes children as seeking greater and greater control through play as they strive for it to be increasingly social. Other critiques (e.g., Salamon, 2011) have suggested that infants, for example, are immensely responsive to subtle social cues from as young as four months of age. Parten's (1932) depiction of their sociality through

observation belies the possibilities when adults are more actively engaged socially with children. This critique highlighted the passive role the observing adult had taken within these views, which is relevant because it implies that Parten's ideas have fitted well with the developmental understanding of social play, wherein children's development is seen to occur independently of the adult or sociocultural environment.

Parten's theory is often hybridized with Sara Smilansky's (1922 - ), which "has been used extensively" in western ECEC (Takhvar & Smith, 1990, p. 112), presenting children's play as progressing towards sociodramatic play and games with rules in a similarly sequential, developmental trajectory to Parten's theory (Smilansky, 1968, p. 5). This deterministic view of play and children has been criticised (Wyness, 2006), particularly for its implication that there is such a thing as a "normal" child (Burman, 1994, p. 16), and that infants are asocial beings (Salamon, 2011, p. 4). Of particular relevance is the implication that sociality increases as egocentrism decreases throughout the child's autonomous development (Piaget, 1962), and that this only occurs because children are innately competitive (Burman, 1994, p. 178) and seeking control (Garvey, 1974). Nonetheless Parten's categorisation has been highly influential; as the "most comprehensive description of young children's social play behaviour" (Xu, 2010 p. 490) it is the "most often" used categorisation of social play today (Lillard et al., 2013, p. 5), and evident still in the perspectives of educators (Fleer et al., 2009). These understandings of children's play and learning are relevant because they continue to influence the field today.

### **3.3.1.2 Developmental understandings of physical domain of play**

Another developmental understanding of play is exemplified in theorisations of physical play. For example, Pellegrini and Smith (1998) provided a comprehensive model supported by empirical studies which showed that three stages of physical play corresponded with early infancy, preschool and late primary school periods.

The first of these stages is “rhythmic stereotypies”, which peak at six months of age, are gross motor movements to which “goal or purpose” are difficult to ascribe (Thelen, 1979, cited in Pellegrini & Smith, 1998, p. 578). Examples include body rocking or foot kicking, and some infants spend as much as 40% of their time engaged in rhythmic stereotypies.

The next stage, “exercise play”, is theorised to begin six months later and peaks around four and five years of age. Exercise play is characterised by the presence of, such as running, chasing, wrestling, jumping and climbing. It has been found to account for some 20% of children’s activities between three and four (Smith & Connolly, 1980).

The third stage, “rough-and-tumble play” (R&T), is seen to arise during playful interactions with parents, and accounts for only 8% of parent-child behaviour and three to five percent of all play at around age four (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998, p. 579). R & T peaks around age nine, where it is often thought to be influenced by parents, particularly fathers (Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). The notion that R&T is initiated by fathers to stimulate and momentarily destabilise children to develop bravery and assertiveness has been claimed in alignment with the developmental view (Paquette, 2004), although critiques have been levelled at the euro centrism of such ideas (e.g., Lancy, 2007; Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). The developmental view of physical play has been reinforced by many scientific studies of animal behaviour, particularly that of primates such as chimps (e.g., Paquette, 1994; 2004), where trends of “normal” behaviour are recorded (Lancy, 2007). Often these accounts of R & T depict children (human and other primates) developing physical play towards physical domination in accordance with their innate drive to control and be superior to peers (Paquette, 1994; 2004). The notion of progress is seen in such a view because play is seen less for what it provides for the present child than for the future child (Burghart, 2011; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). In conclusion, dominant theories of physical play are largely developmental because they see this play as progressing towards the realisation of more mature or adult

behaviours, characterised by confidence and autonomy (Paquette, 2004; Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). As with other developmental understandings, these views usually exclude the role of adults in extending this development (Ryan & Goffin, 2008).

### **3.3.1.3 Developmental understandings of cognitive domain of play**

Piaget's theoretical formulations of development were influenced by his "hours observing children at play" (Guldberg, 2009, p. 73), including over a thousand observations of games in school (the Maison des Petits in Geneva) and the home (Piaget, 1962). As with other developmental understandings, the focus is on autonomous processes of development, failing to account for the influence of more knowledgeable peers (such as adults) (Edwards, 2003; Vianna & Stesenko, 2006); Piaget's theory of development was "particularly concerned with the development of cognitive functions" (Piaget, 1976, p. 11). It would appear that Piaget did not ascribe as much weight to play as it is commonly given in early childhood education approaches, curricula and professional learning (Smith, 1988; Trawick-Smith, 1989; Burman, 2008), but his account serves to illustrate the independent and agentic role of the child in her/his own development.

While Piaget dedicated some of his writing to describing the development of play – especially in *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (1962) – the main reason play was not ascribed significant value for children's learning is best understood through the mutual mechanisms of adaptation that Piaget described: *accommodation* and *assimilation*. Accommodation describes the process of constructing new schemata (cognitive models) to understand the world; usually when the developing mind comes into contact with information that existing schemata cannot logically accommodate. A common example given is when a child sees a cow for the first time, calling it "doggie" because she believes that all quadrupeds are called "doggie". In being told it is a cow, and imitating her father saying, "no, cow" she accommodates with a new schema for two types of four-

legged animals.

Assimilation, on the other hand is a form of integration; it describes the refinement of these schemata when specific cases integrate into them (Piaget, 1962). For example, the same child may have only seen big dogs, and on a certain day hearing her father call a small dog “doggie” means she must assimilate this characteristic into her schema of what size a “doggie” can be.

Piaget argued that both these processes activate in a complementary way in the developing mind (Piaget, 1976, p. 167) to achieve a state of “equilibrium”, the whole process being the learning process (Piaget, 1972, p. 42; 1962). He stated, “Imitation is a continuation of accommodation, play is a continuation of assimilation, and intelligence a combination of the two” (1962, p. 104).

Piaget was clear that play serves assimilation only (Piaget, 1962; Smith, 1988; Trawick-Smith, 1989). Piaget (1962) believed that play could be distinguished from intellectual development “by the ratio of assimilation to accommodation”, as play involves no accommodation (p. 104). Piaget held that the play was the mind repeating existent schemata for pleasure. In describing this pleasure he references K. Bühler’s “Funktionslust”, which was the pleasure the child derived from being able to carry out an action. Once a child has learned a new attribute of a particular situation (e.g., objects suspended on string will swing back once pushed) – s/he will repeat the associated actions (pushing the object), almost testing its consistency, and enjoying the power associated with being able to perform this act. For this reason, play is not associated with acquiring new concepts or abilities, but the pleasure of assimilating them. An example of an observation of play from which Piaget deduces this idea is with a preverbal infant:

When several times in succession I put my hand or a piece of cardboard between him and the toy he desired, he reached the stage of momentarily forgetting the toy and pushed aside the obstacle, bursting into laughter (p. 93)

This 'pleasure-action' attribute of play is evident in all of the stages of play that Piaget described in detail (1962). It appears to be recognised by the DAP guidelines (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) as they state, "From infancy, children act on the world around them for the pleasure of seeing what happens; for example, repeatedly dropping a spoon on the floor or pulling the cat's tail" (p. 14). This suggests Piaget's view has been taken up as the predominant theory for developmental understandings of cognitive domains of play (Kugelmass, 2007, p. 273; Warash et al., 2008, p. 443).

Piaget relates this pleasure to the act of assimilation, stating quite explicitly his belief that play is predominated by such "Funktionslust":

Play begins, then, with the first dissociation between assimilation and accommodation. After learning to grasp, swing, throw, etc., which involve both an effort of accommodation to new situations, and an effort of repetition, reproduction and generalization, which are elements of assimilation, the child soon or later (often even during the learning period) grasps for the pleasure of grasping, swings for the sake of swinging, etc. In a word, he repeats his behavior not in any further effort to learn or to investigate, but for the mere joy of mastering it and of showing off to himself his own power of subduing reality. Assimilation is dissociated from accommodating by subordinating it and tending to function by itself, and from then on practice play occurs (Piaget, 1976, p. 167)

It can be maintained that at this stage the reaction ceases to be an act of complete adaptation and merely gives rise to the pleasure of pure assimilation, assimilation which is simply functional: the 'Funktionslust' of K. Bühler (Piaget, 1962, p. 90)

Piaget proposed six stages of play in the sensori-motor period of cognitive development (birth to two years), followed by five stages (with four sub-stages) of symbolic play, then two stages of rule-based play. To this sequence, Piaget adds construction play, which can divert the progression along this sequence, and may



pave the way for what he saw as adult work. Thus, Piaget provides a linear progression for play to follow but provides numerous pathways by which play may go into “diminution” (p. 146). For Piaget, play is important in the very early stages of life. He has said, “Everything during the first months of life, except feeding and emotions like fear and anger, is play” (Piaget, 1962, p. 90).

Play begins in a pre-play phase that he called the “purely reflex adaptations” phase (Piaget, 1976, p. 168). The sucking reflex is an example activity that Piaget considers relevant to the appearance of play is, as it happens even when not feeding. The first true form of play is in the form of “primary circular reactions” that take on a ludic quality. When a child garners some reaction from her environment, such as looking at things upside down and seeing her environment inverted, this Piaget calls a “circular reaction”, in that there is a predictable result every time the child does something (e.g., the world is inverted every time she throws her head upside down) (p. 169). Piaget argues that these reactions become ludic when children then repeat the action not for the reaction, but for the pleasure of doing so.

It will be remembered that T., at 0;2, adopted the habit of throwing his head back to look at familiar things from this new position. He seemed to repeat this movement with ever-increasing enjoyment and ever-decreasing interest in the external result: he brought his head back to the upright position and then threw it back again time after time, laughing loudly. In other words, the circular reaction ceased to be serious or instructive ... and became a game (ibid).

This stage Piaget equates with the sensorimotor phase of cognitive development, yet he insists that only already learned actions can be used in play. Once assimilation of the learning has occurred, play “is no longer an effort to learn, it is only a happy display of known actions” (Piaget, 1962, p. 171). For Piaget play at this stage does not involve pretence, which was seen more as an indicator of development rather than “a promoter of development” (Lillard et al., 2013, p. 3).

After further development, play does take on “the feeling of make-believe” (Piaget, 1962, p. 97) as children use an object to represent another. In this development, the objects the child plays with are used symbolically for the first time. This marks the acquisition of duality as evident in the child's use of signs, as opposed to symbols. Whereas symbols are the suggested extension of the meaning of one thing to another (e.g., toy bear to a real one), signs use an arbitrary connection between the signifier and the signified (as in language). Coincidentally, this function is usually acquired around the time of the child's first words.

Although at this stage the child can use signs, the nature of these is such that it "is within the framework of the child's behaviour (pretence of sleeping) and cannot be taken out of it... this, then is the most advanced state that the ludic symbol can reach in sensorimotor development ... the symbol is not yet freed as an instrument of thought" (p. 120). Thus, the next major stage of play is symbolic.

Symbolic play begins when ritualized activities (e.g., cooking, cleaning) become symbolic, as seen when they are applied to new objects (ages four to seven). This shows a separation of “the signifier” from “the signified”, constituting “symbolism” (p. 120). Symbolic play develops through various sub-stages and comes to an end when the symbols begin to mimic “the consequences of not obeying rules or advice” which adults have given (p. 135). This anticipation is often exaggerated and thus ludic. This marks the rise of collective symbols, with “an expansion of socialization” (p. 140) and a great deal of attention to replicating reality more exactly. This stage occurs around the age of ten.

Finally, play with rules is the self-initiated application of rules from outside, or the “interiorizing a social behaviour” (p. 143). It frequently requires playmates. It rarely occurs in the preceding age bracket (four to seven) and “belongs mainly to the third period (from seven to eleven)” (p. 142). In these later forms of play, there is a greater amount of accommodation than before, as the child’s ego gives way to

reality, and she interacts with others more. Piaget notes that this stage can evolve out of practice games (sensorimotor stage), skipping the symbolic aspect altogether. Other diversions from this trajectory include practice games becoming “fortuitous combinations” (sensorimotor), which then become construction play, and may then become work, marking the end of play.

While Piaget’s (1962) theorisation of play was highly respected in the field (Barnes, 1995; Butler, Gotts, & Quisenbery, 1978; Ebbeck, 1996; Guldborg, 2009; Kamii, 1974; Walkerdine, 1984) many have argued that it was rarely understood (Burman, 1994; Ebbeck, 1996; Lillard et al., 2013; Murray, 1979; Smith, 1988; Trawick-Smith, 1989; Walsh, 1991). The developmental perspective underwent a period of significant challenge in the 1990’s and early 2000’s (Burman, 1994; Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Silin, 1987; Walsh, 1991; 2005). This challenge came from scholars who were interested in the social and cultural contexts associated with children’s play and consequent learning and development (Göncü, Mistry, & Mosier, 2000; Rogoff et al., 1993; Roopnarine, Johnson, & Hooper, 1994). It also came from scholars interested in challenging assumptions about children’s play and learning based on “ages and stages” of development (Walsh et al., 2010, p. 55; Burman, 2008; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005; Soto & Swadener, 2002, Walkerdine, 1984; 1988). Of importance for this thesis is that Piaget’s view was challenged because it failed to account for how much more developed children appeared to become once their thinking was extended by more knowledgeable peers (Weiten, 2007). A consequence of these challenges to Piaget’s ideas was the rise of sociocultural perspectives in understanding play and learning in early childhood education. Vygotsky’s work has been highly significant in this respect.

### **3.3.2 Sociocultural understandings of play**

Vygotsky regarded play as an important activity of early childhood (Fleer, 2011;

Vygotsky, 1976); “a leading factor in development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 101). His description of play, though brief (Holzman & Newman, 1993), is compelling and arguably more concise than the theories that were popularised thereafter [such as that of Rubin and others (1983), Monaghan-Nourot and colleagues (1987) or Pellegrini (1991)]. Pellegrini (1991), for example, argued not for a definition of play, but rather of activities that might be seen more or less playful, spread across a continuum based on a set of other criteria.

Vygotsky (1976; 1978b) focused his writing on the play of preschool and primary school-aged children, rather than the earlier forms of play evident in the activity of infants and toddlers such as object manipulations and explorations that were significant for Piaget. The first characteristic of play Vygotsky (1978) raises is the oft-cited quality of evoking pleasure in the child. He is quick to point out its “inaccuracy” (p. 92), noting that many activities, such as sucking one’s thumb, are pleasurable for the child and yet they are not ludic in orientation. He mentions the act of losing a game as a counter example of play being pleasurable. Yet Vygotsky is also quick to qualify this refutation, saying that the child’s needs are central to his understanding of play. He states that needs must be understood as the child’s motive for action. This links with Hedegaard’s (2008a) contention that the values of an institution are realised in its practices just as the motives of an individual are revealed in her/his activity. People’s actions are always motivated by something (Vygotsky, 1978; 1987; 2004b), and Hedegaard’s model extends this to say that all institutions’ practices are motivated by values (Hedegaard, 2009). Vygotsky believed that motives are the key to understanding human action (Chaiklin, 2012; Engeström, 2001; Galperin, 1992b; Hedegaard, 2008a; 2008b; Klerfelt, 2007; Matusov, 2007; Rogoff, 1995; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2006; Vygotsky, 2004b; Wertsch, 1995). This is the same for play: the child satisfies certain needs in play. A child’s motives to play are to realise these desires immediately. As Vygotsky illustrates, “no one has met a child under three years old who wants to do something a few days into the future” (p. 93). Vygotsky reminds us that it is at the preschool age

that the child first comes across unrealisable desires (e.g., wanting “to ride in the cab”, or stay with her mother all day), and it is no coincidence that unrealizable desires appear at the same time as play.

Another core idea for Vygotsky was that play is characterised by an imaginary situation. Here, Vygotsky (1978) departed from Piaget’s (1962) consideration of play as a form of assimilation because the imaginary situation was connected to “rules”:

The imaginary situation of any form of play already contains rules of behaviour... The child imagines himself to be the mother and the doll to be the child, so he must obey the rules of maternal behaviour ... What passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behaviour in play (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 94 - 95)

Thus Vygotsky explained how play always has an imaginary situation, and that situation (e.g., of being a mother) determines what behaviour can be carried out (i.e., only “mother-like” behaviours). Vygotsky was therefore the first theorist to formulate the idea that play is not totally free, and “instead contingent on players abiding by a set of rules” (Bodrova, 2008, p. 359). He showed how even games with rules (e.g., chess) include an imaginary situation (i.e., that the pieces can move in certain rule-based ways that do not pertain to the physical pieces themselves). Thus we can loosely define the imaginary situation as van Oers (2013) does: “an imagination of the action potentials of this situation: what can be done and how do people relate to each other within this activity?” (p. 190). Equipped with this understanding, Vygotsky expressed his dissatisfaction with what were in his day considered the defining characteristics of play: its pleasure (Piaget, 1962), symbolism (Goethe; Piaget, 1962), and satisfaction of ungratified desires (Sigmund and Anna Freud) (Holzman & Newman, 1993). He insisted instead that the rule-based nature of play was its unique characteristic. It is possible to see that other characteristics – the pleasure of playing, freedom from (adult) rules, attention to means over ends (Monighan et al., 1987; Rubin et al.,

1984) – all become secondary to the rules creating the imaginary situation. Thus we arrive at a Vygotskian theorisation of play as any activity within an imaginary situation:

I think that in finding criteria for distinguishing a child's play activity from his other general forms of activity it must be accepted that in play a child creates an imaginary situation ... wherever there is an imaginary situation in play there are rules. Not rules which are formulated in advance and which change during the course of the game, but rules stemming from the imaginary situation ... an imaginary situation in the sense that as soon as the game is regulated by certain rules, a number of actual possibilities for action are ruled out (Vygotsky, 1976, pp. 540 - 543)

This was quite a revolutionary proposition because it meant that play could be contained within the act of play according to the rules established to maintain the imaginary situation.

### **3.4 A sociocultural approach to learning through play**

Vygotsky used the notion of the imaginary situation – and the resultant rules – to explain not only play itself, but also why a child learns in play. When a child plays, an imaginary situation unfolds (e.g., a dog escaping the pound). The role associated (e.g., of a dog) with the imaginary situation is restricted (e.g., not being able to talk, walking on all fours, etc.) Thus, the child playing must suppress her own desires (e.g., telling others what to do, running away on two legs, hitting others, etc.) Such real-world desires “are ruled out” in favour of the rules of the imaginary situation (p. 543). For example, walking on two legs, although faster in the real-world, is not possible when playing a dog in the imaginary situation of play. In an inversion of what I discussed earlier, the child must suppress certain desires. That is, the desire to play out a dog in a pound means that other desires

(such as walking on all fours or talking like a human) are suppressed by these rules (to act like a dog, not a human). In satisfying one's desire in play, many others must be restrained, making the child "a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1976, p. 552) because s/he can restrain her/himself in play in ways unseen in non-play situations. These characteristics of the imaginary situation were why Vygotsky considered play so important for preschool learning and development. Another example he gives is refraining from eating lollies when those lollies represent something inedible in the imaginary situation of play. Thus, in adopting "the line of least resistance" in choosing a play topic, at the same time the child learns to follow "the line of greatest resistance" by subjecting herself to rules and resisting what she wants (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 99). This is because subjection to rules and self-restraint also generate "maximum pleasure in play" (p. 99). Bodrova (2008) outlines how the greatest self-regulation occurs in joint play because those rules are observed socially, with others collaborating in the imaginary situation that is held in place by the rules. This "other-regulation" then dictates a child's suppression of impulses concurrently as well as in the future (p. 362). This is why "a child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 100). Critical to this thesis is Vygotsky's appreciation of the extending and enriching role more knowledgeable peers (such as educators) can take in children's play to reach their greatest achievements (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a).

### **3.4.1 Four ways imagination is connected to reality**

Another aspect of the imaginary situation is explored in Vygotsky's important writing about imagination (Vygotsky, 2004a). Here, Vygotsky provides a compelling argument that the popular conception that imagination is removed from reality is in fact incorrect. He outlines four ways that children's imagination is in fact an appropriation, or a reconfiguration, of reality.

1. Imagination draws on reality
2. Understanding others' reality requires imagination
3. Imagination evokes real emotions
4. Imagination affects reality

The *first of these* ways is that the building blocks of imagination must come from reality. Vygotsky draws examples from what our societies have considered to be the furthest stretches of our imagination – fairy tales, myths, and dreams – and argues that these are just reconfigurations of reality with the “distorting action of our imagination” (p. 13). He goes on to say that the richness of a person’s imagination depends on the richness of their experience. A crude analogy would be drawing Scrabble™ letters from a bag. If there were only three letters in a bag, it does not matter how many times I draw from this, I can only make 15 words of one to three letters’ length. With 26 letters, I can make many, many more words.

The *second way* that Vygotsky sees imagination linked to reality is that any product of the imagination can only be understood through our own experiences. The “dependence of imagination on previous experience” relates to imagination being communicated to others (e.g., in stories, books, or television). In another sense, our experience of that story is dependent on our imagination. This relationship serves to show that imagination is inextricably linked to reality. Vygotsky saw learning occurring through play in that

...imagination takes on a very important function in human behaviour and development. It becomes the means by which a person’s experience is broadened, because he can imagine what he has not seen, can conceptualise something from another person’s narration and description of what he himself has never directly experienced (Vygotsky, 2004a, p. 17)

Thus, Vygotsky also saw learning occurring in imaginary play as understanding what it would be like if that particular reconfiguration of reality were to become



manifest in life. Learning through play is a “trying out” of imaginary configurations of what one already knows from reality. Research has suggested that such play can give new perspective to situations that would not otherwise be available to young children (Bateson, 2011; Henricks, 2009 ; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Whitebread, 2010; Wood & Hall, 2011).

The third way reality and imagination are linked is through the evocative power of imagination. This may be true for great works of art or performance, where the imaginary situation evokes emotions in the viewer. Whilst we may know that the story of a horror movie is not real, the emotions they evoke in us nonetheless are. Another allure of play for children is that the imaginary situation creates real emotion; the rules of the imaginary situation determine what children do in play, and this may sometimes lead to emotions such as power, fear, or a sense of achievement. This compelling account adds to Vygotsky’s previous argument that pleasure alone cannot be a “defining characteristic” of play (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 92; Holzman & Newman, 1994) as indicated by Piaget (1962) and Bühler. However, Vygotsky has pointed out that all play seeks to satisfy ungratified desires (e.g., for power or autonomy), and that much play is carried out with this objective (e.g. play with imaginary objects that give a sense of power such as guns, swords, and special amulets). This notion connects with a second link between emotion and imagination, in that “emotion seeks specific images corresponding to it” (2004a, p. 17). Fear has physical impacts such as sweaty palms, heart palpitations and dry throat, but it also influences imagination in that we tend to imagine fear-inducing images such as ghosts or knife-wielding murderers. Thus emotions in turn affect imagination.

The final way in which imagination and reality are linked is an extension of this last point. Vygotsky argues that the world of the imagination creates conceptual products that come to exist in their own right, and are bound by “an internal logic of their own” (p. 24). For example, the fictional bear character, *Winnie the Pooh*, is depicted as having his own way of interacting with other creatures in the

imaginary world he inhabits (Milne, 1926). This particular way of interacting, though the fruits of an English writer's imagination, have been taken to have special relevance to reality in terms of the ancient Chinese philosophy, Taoism (Hoff, 1982). Through the imaginary configurations of events and characters in the book (Milne, 1926), Benjamin Hoff wrote principles which have apparently affected the behaviour of many people as they aspire to embody "Pooh-like" qualities, such as being peaceful and still, and simplifying one's life (the book is often considered a self-help text). Thus, the final way in which imagination is bound to reality comes full circle, and shows how the two concepts are inextricably linked in creation and influence. An example might be having an imaginary friend in order to feel able to affront situations in reality [e.g., through providing a sense of security (Gleason, 2005)]. This final way that imagination is tied to reality also has implications for how Vygotsky sees learning through play, as the imaginary situation of play may have a concrete impact on the children's lived experiences. Through the imaginary situation which characterises play, children reconfigure reality in new ways in order to understand it. They may also play out scenes in order to experience them first-hand. The connection between imagination and emotion also serves to explain children's play as a means to satisfy ungratified desires, which suggests an emotional development aspect of learning through play. Finally, children may also utilise the products of their imagination, such as an imaginary friend, in order to learn how to have certain qualities in real life, such as security.

These four ways in which imagination is linked to reality thus imply that learning through play occurs in four main ways. One prominent Russian psychologist to carry forward cultural-historical thinking initiated by Vygotsky, Aleksei Leontiev (1903 - 1979) and Alexander Luria (1902 - 1977) was Piotr Galperin (1902 - 1988). Although Galperin received less attention from the West, his work promises to unify some of the disparate ideas of cultural-historical theory, particularly related to mental formation, which are highly pertinent to the links Vygotsky established

between imagination and reality.

### **3.4.2 Historical materialism**

Galperin dedicated some writing to theorising certain aspects of consciousness and thought. These included attention (Galperin, 1989), mental formations (Galperin, 1992a), activity (Galperin, 1992b), and internalisation (Arievitch, 2003). Given that all mental formations (what Vygotsky called “psychological tools”) are formed based on objects and relationships in external reality, Galperin showed through experimentation that new concepts are first understood “at the material level” (Arievitch, 2008, p. 50). Galperin (1992b) argued that what distinguished human from other animal activity was that activity can be mediated by psychological tools and signs. He argued that these tools, or thoughts, are completely reflective of material reality. He illustrated this with the most basic form of activity – “actual, productive activity that really did something” – stating that in our efforts to make a transformation of something (e.g., to turn a flat surface of soil into a hole, by digging), the material conditions of what is possible and what is not possible impact on the subject or doer (e.g., the digger). For example, in digging a hole for the first time, a child may find the dirt gets under her fingernails and is too hard to move without the force of her arms. These material conditions then impact on the child, because these experiences become part of her mental formation of digging. This, Galperin (1992b) argued, is “the genuine foundation for mental development” (p. 40). Returning to Vygotsky’s model of psychological tools depicted in Figure 3.1, the subject (the child) acts upon the object (the soil) by attempting to dig, but the object also changes the subject because new experiences allow the subject to understand the object in terms of the material conditions. In this way, “material object-related activity [is] the starting point of mental activity formation” for Galperin (Arievitch, 2008, p. 50).

As learners distil “the key attributes” of the material conditions related to the

activity from the “attendant attributes” (inconsequential characteristics) of material reality, their understanding of these becomes “sharply abridged, to the point of immediate recognition” (Galperin, 1992a, p. 62). For example, the child may find that the dirt getting under her fingernails is inconsequential to being able to dig. Yet a “key attribute” of the soil is that it requires the force of her whole arm to move, and this attribute is highlighted as important. Galperin (1989; 1992a) covered in detail how the isolation of “key” from “attendant” attributes is dependent on attention, and how lack of attention can slow learning because certain attributes are not noticed, just as when we read a manuscript for meaning without noticing spelling errors. However, as she becomes more familiar with the process, and isolates the important characteristics, the learner will often then carry out the activity in “overt” speech (out loud) (p. 62). Eventually, this speech becomes internal (“covert”), and the action is converted to “pure meaning” (Arievitch, 2008, p. 50). This represents the transformation of an action into thought. In this way, Galperin argued that thought was material in origin and foundation, moving “step-by-step” to greater levels of abstraction (1992a, p. 60).

Similar to Galperin’s stepwise formation of mental actions, Vygotsky (2004a) argued that imagination occurs as a process of the “accumulation” of experiences, “reworking” of these by dissociating certain characteristics and associating others, “exaggeration” of some of these, and finally “their unification into a system, the construction of a complex picture” (p. 25 – 28). This *decoupage of reality* alludes to the learning through play that Vygotsky discussed as children “actively communicate and interpret their individual and collective social realities through the play frame” (Meckley, 1996, cited in Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 21). Galperin concurred with Vygotsky in that thought grew “from the outside inwards” (1992b, p. 37), and thus saw manipulations of the material realm as having an effect on the subject. This effect can be considered learning. Galperin’s writing regards all thought and understanding as a re-construction of material reality, one he does not indicate can be understood completely. Rather, he states that all thought is

understood through its relationship to object-oriented activity:

... the true reality of [humankind] and his (sic) real connection with the world are constituted not by the 'internal world of consciousness', but by this meaningful, object-related activity. The true source of cognition of the world for the subject and the source of the psychologist's cognition of the mind are thus not only inner experience, and not only the transmission of external influences through the sense organs to the brain and from the brain to the motor periphery, but rather purposeful action upon, and purposeful transformation, of the world (Galperin, 1992b, p. 40).

In this way, thought and the process of learning are bound by material reality. Yet describing the process as such also depicts all mental formations (learning) about that reality as equally valid because they are the only means which humankind has to understand the world. Thought and learning are the only tools (the *tool* in Figure 3.1) by which all learners (the subject) understand the world (the object).

To illustrate, an example of a gun may prove useful. My conception of a gun would traditionally be considered more mature than a young child's because I understand its basic mechanics, the scientific properties of the materials involved, the consequences of its use, and what it might mean in some cultures. Yet I have never touched a gun. Further, my own understanding is still a mere representation of my experience, rather than a direct assimilation of "reality". A young child's understanding of a gun is this also. This is significant for learning through play because it implies that children might be learning about concepts such as a gun through their play, even if it appears to onlookers to have no relationship to reality. A sociocultural understanding of learning through play insists that all imagination and learning comes from reality, and imagination can exaggerate or disregard certain attributes in order to understand reality in new ways. Galperin's writing on attention (1989; 1992a) suggests that learning requires attention to certain attributes over others in order to develop new psychological tools and progress one's learning. Vygotsky (2004a) highlighted how imagination

is merely the highlighting of certain attributes by exaggeration or eliminating extraneous attributes. A sociocultural understanding of imagination, thought and play combine to provide an insightful and robust theorisation of learning through play for the purposes of this thesis.

### **3.5 Conclusion to the Theory Chapter**

This chapter has presented a theoretical perspective on each of the three main concepts informing the research questions within this thesis. These include: learning, perspectives and play. Section one considered theories on learning in terms of two dominant models: acquisition and participation. Within the participation model of learning, cultural-historical theory has been presented as an explanation for learning based on participation in cultural practices. Sociocultural theory (as a tradition located within cultural-historical theory) has also been explained with its emphasis on group membership, intent participation and participatory learning (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 282). Because stakeholder group membership is determined by people's practices, and because Hedegaard (2008a) stipulate that practices are the equivalent of activity at the institutional level, practices were identified as a deductive analysis tool. Practices in turn reveal values, which are the representation of motives at the institutional level. Hedegaard's framework for understanding the individual in relation to institutional membership was proposed as a way of understanding stakeholder perspectives in terms of the practices and values of their institution, which is important for the deductive analysis used (see 4.10.3, p. 187). Finally, the chapter considered two of the dominant theoretical perspectives on play evident in approaches to ECEC, including the works of Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget's (1962; 1976; 1972) work mostly highlighted the pleasure in play as a defining characteristic, and that only half of the learning process, assimilation, would occur

in play. Vygotsky's (1978) theorisation of play was much more useful for the purposes of this thesis as it characterises play through the rules of the imaginary situation. In Vygotsky's work (2004a), the "four ways" imagination is connected with reality were outlined to provide a sociocultural understanding of learning through play. The theoretical ideas used to understand each of these concepts, (learning, perspectives and play) will be drawn on in the Methodology Chapter to explain the process of analysis (see 4.10.2 and 4.10.3, pp. 183 - 190), the presentation of the Findings (see Chapter 5, pp. 193 - 243) and importantly in the Discussion Chapter regarding the various stakeholder perspectives on learning through play and how these are similar and different from one another (see 6.6.6, p. 298).

## CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY

This thesis takes a sociocultural approach to theorising learning, perspectives, and play, so it must also take this stance on knowledge for the purpose of conducting the research. The first section of the chapter describes the theoretical framework of the thesis as a whole, and how it determined the ontology, axiology, epistemology and methodology informing the investigation. The middle section of the chapter is dedicated to justifying the methodological choices made, showing how the decision to conduct research with children was an important consideration. This also includes a section that describes some of the areas which needed to be negotiated carefully such as ethics and my own biases in researching the topic. The final section details how the research was carried out, how the data were analysed and identifies some of the limitations of the methodology.

### 4.1 The sociocultural framework

A theoretical framework is a general “set of ideas” that theorists in a particular discipline draw on (Uljens, 1997, p. 146). However, each of these ideas are not arbitrary, but consistent with one another (Flick, 2008). The theoretical framework for this thesis will determine its general view on the world (ontology), its stance on how humans come to know things (epistemology), what knowledge it values (axiology) and how that knowledge is obtained (methodology) (Carter & Little, 2007; Creswell, 2003; Grix, 2002).

I revisit the research questions for this thesis to frame how the concepts of ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology have been embedded in the thesis since its inception:

1. What are the perspectives of primary stakeholders, including children, mothers, and educators, on learning through play?



2. What are the similarities and differences between primary stakeholder perspectives on learning through play?

The *ontology* (or “world view”) is a general approach to the world, and the focus on perspectives (as interpretations) of the world situate the research in an “interpretivist” ontology (Creswell, 2014, p. 8; Denzin, 2001). An *epistemology* which sees knowledge as generated by different stakeholders, rather than as existing in the outside world (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Denzin, 2001), is consistent with the above questions. An *axiology* which values the perspectives of primary stakeholders would suggest that the knowledge generated through perspective expression is valued for all stakeholders. A research question investigating seldom-heard stakeholders implies all perspectives are valued and valid (Creswell, 2003), which is particularly important for research with children (Corsaro, 1997). Finally, because this research focus seeks to describe perspectives on which “little research has been done”, then qualitative *methodology* is most appropriate (Creswell, 2014, p. 20). Ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology will now be explained.

#### **4.1.1 Sociocultural ontology**

The epistemological stance taken determines the *ontology* of the research, or the claims I as a researcher have made about what knowledge is, according to my view of the world (Creswell, 2003). Knowledge is not something static, as is held in dominant scientific discourse, but something that is collaboratively constructed by groups (Engeström, 2001). It is something that is informed by the shared history of that group, something that also is creating that history in the very act of knowing something (Edwards, 2010). Vygotsky himself (1979) is widely cited for underscoring:

... the ‘socialization’ of all consciousness, the recognition that the social dimension of consciousness is primary in time and in fact. The individual

dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary, based on social and construed exactly in its likeness (p. 30).

With this statement, Vygotsky gets to the centre of the sociocultural ontology, which holds that the internal world of consciousness (and indeed, perspectives) is merely a representation of the external, social world. This is a difficult premise to adopt. Vygotsky explains the ontology in a footnote, quoting the German philosopher Paul Natorp (1854 – 1924): “Even in isolation from others, even when thinking in silence, we continually use words and hence maintain at least the fiction of this communication” (Natorp, cited in Vygotsky, 1979, p. 35).

A sociocultural ontology sees consciousness as a re-presentation of the social and cultural world, even when it is only the “fiction of communication” (p. 35). This ontology fits very well with the investigation of the perspectives of stakeholder groups because perspectives represent the “social dimension” that precedes thinking (p. 30). Further, the configurations of these groups, and how they relate to each other, are central to perspectives because they rely on communication. The fact that this thesis investigates perspectives in many ways determines its epistemology as sociocultural.

#### **4.1.2 Sociocultural epistemology**

This study’s focus on *perspectives* – rather than, for example, concrete facts – assumes certain things about how knowledge is known by people. The *perspective* focus implies that knowledge may not be acquired from an objective and constant external reality, as positivist epistemologies assume (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Denzin, 2001). Instead, because knowledge can be understood as a representation of the external, social and material realm (Galperin, 1992a; Vygotsky, 1979), any perspective on reality is the mind’s attempt to understand it. Thus, all stakeholder perspectives may be considered to be of equal value (Corsaro, 2001). This is important for research investigating the perspectives of stakeholders such as

children because traditional research has assumed children's perspectives are of less value than adults' (Valentine, 1999; Sommer et al., 2010), and sociocultural research emphasises the equal value that children's perspectives hold as an interpretation of the world (Hedegaard, 2009, p. 46; see also 3.2, specifically p. 117).

This epistemological stance is within a sociocultural approach, which sees knowledge as an act of participation in social interaction (rather than as an act of acquisition) (Sfard, 1998; Stetsenko, 1999; Lave, 2009; see *Theory Chapter*). In other words, knowledge is generated through stakeholders participating in the practices that comprise their perspectives; the expression of perspectives not only crystallizes and consolidates perspectives, but also adds to the body of knowledge that is their group's perspective overall (Rogoff, 2003). This is the "socialization of all consciousness" of which Vygotsky (1979, p. 30) spoke above.

### **4.1.3 Sociocultural axiology**

The focus on perspectives as opposed to a focus on measurable, external reality is more than just a choice of why the knowledge (that Vygotsky referred to above) is important. This focus is also a commitment that represents values. The importance being given to perspectives over other forms of knowledge suggests something about the value and validity of certain types of knowledge – known as *axiology* (Creswell, 2003). For this thesis, I attributed a high value to stakeholders generating knowledge through their everyday practices. This is because I saw this value align with the sociocultural emphasis on participation in practices. Knowledge about learning through play is *generated* by stakeholders in the early childhood community, not a *product* that has been acquired by them. Knowledge does not exist *per se*, it is evidenced through participation in everyday practices (Galperin, 1992b; Stetsenko, 1999). For this thesis, practices were those of children, family members and educators that were mentioned by stakeholders in their perspectives. Thus this

thesis values *who* enacts knowledge and *how* it is enacted, rather than just the content of the knowledge itself.

This brings me to Vygotsky's central contention about any psychological investigation: "activity" is the basic unit of analysis, and has been pin pointed as the key to sociocultural research by several leading academics of the theory (see Chaiklin, 2012, p. 209; Engeström, 2001, p. 134; Galperin, 1992b, p. 39; Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 30; 2008b, p. 202; Klerfelt, 2007, p. 339; Matusov, 2007, p. 324; Rogoff, 1995, p. 140; Sawyer, 2002, p. 285; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2006, p. 87; Wertsch, 1995, p. 61; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 6). This is because all thought is comprised of human activity, and it is the activity which allows one to use a given "tool" to achieve a certain motive (an object) (see 3.1.3, specifically, p. 110). Thus, I must again return to mediated actions in the study of anything socially constructed (e.g., perspectives), because those actions allow us humans to achieve what we want (an object). Within a sociocultural axiology, human activity in its cultural context is the most valued window into any phenomenon (Vygotsky, 2004b).

#### **4.1.4 Sociocultural methodology**

When I mentioned the axiology for this research, I drew on the idea that knowledge is represented by sociocultural practices. This is a key idea in Vygotsky's epistemology. He not only investigated the "how" of knowledge processes (by using psychological tools to participate in the practices of the culture), he also investigated the "why" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 282). Behind all knowledge Vygotsky saw motive, and this was what he sought to determine through an analysis of activity:

[Thought] is not born of other thoughts. Thought has its origins in the motivating sphere of consciousness, a sphere that includes our inclinations and needs, our interests and impulses, and our affect and emotions. The affective and volitional tendency stands behind thought. Only here do we find the answer to

the final 'why' in the analysis of thinking (p. 282).

This aspect of sociocultural theory underpins all research within its frame. Any individual's *motives* are revealed in their *actions*. As explored in the previous chapter (3.2), the equivalent of this dynamic for a group is that the group's "values" are revealed in their "practices" (Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 17; see Figure 3.2, p. 116). Thus, a sociocultural analysis of stakeholder perspectives must reflect on the group practices for each stakeholder as they express their perspectives.

Now that I have defined a sociocultural methodological framework for this thesis, and how it is consistent with the ontology, epistemology and axiology of the approach, it is possible to explain my primary justification for the methodological choices I made: research with children.

## **4.2 Research with children**

Researching children's perspectives has been shown to be different to researching with adults (Aubrey & Dahl, 2005; Bird, Colliver, & Edwards, 2014; Fleer, 2008a; Mandell, 1991; Smith et al., 2005). This is because of a number of reasons, including children using a variety of communication modes (Clark, 2005; O'Kane, 1999; Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Klerfelt, 2007), research methods not being suited to children (Clark & Moss, 2001) and the lower position of power children traditionally have in established institutions (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2012; Mandell, 1991; Robson, 2011). The view that children's perspectives are difficult to interpret is shared widely by other scholars (Brooker, 2011, p. 140; Clark, 2005, p. 492; Mandell, 1991, p. 39; Mashford-Scott et al., 2012, p. 241; Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 40), particularly as there is a history of privileging adult perspectives over children's (Elbers, 2004; Hviid, 2008; Smith et al., 2005; Turmel, 2008). This meant that it was

important that methods chosen for the research be accessible for children. First and foremost it was vital that my epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodological framework be suitable for eliciting children's perspectives. It was important to consider how stakeholder perspectives were studied by other scholars before undertaking this research. Sociocultural scholars have expressed their stance on methodology and data analysis in several publications, particularly in relation to research with *young children* (Chaiklin, 2012; Daniels, 2008; Davydov & Kerr, 1995; Fleer, 2008a; Hedegaard, 2009; Hviid, 2008; Matusov, 2007; Vygotsky, 2004b). In much of this research, a holistic approach to viewing children's perspectives is considered crucial (Fleer, 2008a; Matusov, 2007).

To address this, it is important to place the child at the centre of the research (Corsaro, 2011; James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 2002; Sommers et al., 2010). This involves three components according to Mayall (1996, p. 12). First, children must be viewed as competent reporters of their own experiences, second, they should be taken seriously and, third, social change requires researchers to work *for* children rather than *on* them (Mayall, 1996). The prioritization of these requirements means that the decision to research *with* children determined many of the research decisions with respect to data generation, and later data analysis, for the current research project. As noted later (see 4.7.5, p. 166), while I had a theoretical commitment to these ideals, I found them challenging to enact in practice in relation to conceptions of learning.

### **4.3 Research with children within a sociocultural framework**

As discussed above, the research design had to prioritise the methods most supportive for the children to share their perspectives over those most appropriate for adult perspectives. Researching children's *practices* in expressing their

perspective became the main concern in deciding how to examine all three groups' perspectives. Sociocultural research has tended to "move further away from an individualistic approach toward a contextualized social approach" (Arievitch, 2003, p. 283). Preschool children's perspectives on learning through play were investigated in relation to their "everyday activities at home and in the community" (Hedegaard, 2007, p. 247). This approach is the most supportive of the children because it takes their practices as the starting point for the investigation, rather than an adult perspective (Clark, 2005; Corsaro, 2011; Hedegaard, 2008a; Pascal & Bertram, 2009). The focus on their practices positions children as active agents in their own lives, rather than passive recipients of socialisation (Hedegaard, 2008a), a key tenet of contemporary approaches to research with children (Sommer et al., 2010; Wyness, 2006).

For Rogoff (2003), the interpersonal, personal and cultural-institutional aspects of an event explain the mental activity of children. "No aspect exists or can be studied in isolation from the others" (p. 58). Likewise, Hedegaard (2009) argues that one way past unethical, developmentally-positioned research with children is to account for the practices of institutions in "concrete settings such as home or school" in childhood studies (p. 64). This condition for researching children was already satisfied by the research focus on educators and mothers, but is elaborated very precisely in this thesis by using of Hedegaard's (2008a) "levels of analysis" that stipulate that institutional perspectives are understood via "practices" and "values" (p. 17) (see *Theory Chapter, 3.2*). This approach takes into account the whole social situation, including the individual, interpersonal, institutional and societal levels (Hedegaard, 2009). The approach must focus on the case of each level at a time, with the other levels in the background (Chaiklin, 2012; Matusov, 2007; Rogoff, 1995). It is for this reason that case study was the most appropriate methodology in which to house the research of stakeholder perspectives, as will be explained in the next section.

## 4.4 Case study

Kaplan (1964) defines methodology as “the study – the description, the explanation, and the justification – of methods, and not the methods themselves” (cited in Carter & Little, 2007, p. 1318). In this thesis, case study was chosen as an appropriate methodology to examine stakeholder perspectives, and is best understood as an overarching *approach* to methods. As mentioned above, this approach is to focus on one case as a representative of the whole. Doing so fits with the sociocultural imperative that the case being studied has “all the basic characteristics of the whole” (Vygotsky, 2004b, p. 37), as discussed in Chapter Three (3.2).

The focus of the thesis – stakeholder perspectives on learning through play – is broad, complex and involving multiple sources of evidence. In his oft-cited book on case study, Robert Yin (2003) claims these are all of the three reasons one should use case study research. The idea behind the study of a *case* – as opposed to a representative sample, for example – is a choice of qualitative rather than quantitative social science. Tobin and colleagues (2009), working with preschool children, “do not think or write in terms of research subjects, representative samples, and statistical correlations but instead in terms of contextualized meanings, cultural patterns, and social discourses” (p. 8). This approach is consistent with the sociocultural insistence on a “wholeness approach” to researching with children, families and educators (Fleer, 2008a, p. 103; Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 11; Winther-Lindqvist, 2012, p. 119). The case, then, must be seen embedded in a web of other cases and contexts, from which it can never be removed or demarcated (Vygotsky, 2004b). As Stake (2000) contends:

Case study provides a picture of the phenomenon in a broader context via a study of the complexity of a particular instance of that phenomenon (Stake, 2000, in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)

Rather than an individual approach, sociocultural research focuses on a social practices (Arievitch, 2003), or “socially assembled situations”, within which



individual cases of perspectives might be enacted (Stetsenko, 1999, p. 238). This is not an arbitrary choice, but because Vygotsky saw individual perspectives to be determined by the activity of the collective subject (Brennan & Institute for Early Childhood Studies, 2006; Davydov & Kerr, 1995; Palincsar, 1998). For this reason, the current study investigated three cases of stakeholder perspectives, keeping each other in the background as each one was foregrounded. This is the key aim in examining “practices” as representative of “values” (Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 17), as a way of determining “why” each stakeholder group has the perspective they have (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 282). That is, each *case* of the stakeholder perspective is represented by the group’s practices and values (which gives the group’s motives), but they are not lost in the context of the other institutional perspectives, nor in the “societal” tier of Hedegaard’s levels of analysis (2009, p. 72), so that context itself can also be a focus of the study (Stake, 1995).

Vygotsky’s approach to “units” of analysis aligns with one of Stake’s (2006) classification of three types of case study:

1. Intrinsic case study: A study of one particular case (a person or group), driven by an interest intrinsic to that case.
2. Instrumental case study: A group of representative participants that are bounded to a case but are generalizable to an extent only.
3. Collective case study: The researcher has interest in the case only for the sake of generalisation to the larger population (p. 8).

In this thesis an *instrumental case study* of the perspectives of the stakeholders allowed perspectives to be presented from the point of view of the meaning-maker and still have significance for the larger population of stakeholders in early childhood educational settings.

## 4.5 Video-stimulated recall dialogues (VSRD)

To determine how this case study would need to be conducted, the key words from the research questions (*perspectives, stakeholders, and learning through play*) were considered. For example, stakeholder perspectives on learning might have been researched most effectively with in-depth interviews. Informal, in-depth interviews have been shown to be very effective in generating nuanced and sensitive information such as perspectives (Currie & Kelly, 2012). However, interviewing children in the traditional forms might be seen to be problematic because they may not be interesting to the child or because of the pressure children may feel to give an adult-desired answer (Aubrey & Dahl, 2005).

A summary of some the problems - and their potential solutions - identified in previous research interviews conducted with children is presented in Table 4.1. First, the idea that children are less mature and knowledgeable than adults has “dominated the social sciences”, making the format of “interrogation and answer” unsuitable (Hviid, 2008, p. 139). Second, it is well documented that younger children utilise “other than the verbal” communication strategies such as facial expressions, gestures, body language, intonation and silence (O’Kane, 1999, p. 139; Pascal & Bertram, 2009), which can all be captured *verbatim* on video (Klerfelt, 2007), but for which interview protocols are not suited. As Dupree and others (2001) contend, “interviewing young children is a valid technique for ascertaining children’s perceptions, but for more in-depth work, this would probably be most useful when used in conjunction with other methods” such as video, drawings, and observations (p. 21). Third, video has the advantage of a rich variety of information about the scene recorded which can serve as common referents in conversations about the scene, as common referents are often lacking in other media (Pascal & Bertram, 2009). Thus *video-stimulated recall* interviews were selected as an appropriate way of researching with children.

| Authors*                                      | Topic  | RQ  | Methods   | Best Method   | Justification for VSRD  |
|---|--|---|---|---|---|
| Wesson & Salmon (2001)                        | Emotionally-laden event  | What accounts do children give of emotionally-laden events?                                   | 1) drawing and telling event<br>2) re-enacting and telling<br>3) telling only   | Drawing and re-enactment = more info, more descriptive items  | Video will be most accurate form of re-enactment; creative aspect of making a video similar to drawing.   |
| Priestley & Pipe (1997)                       | Children's accounts of visiting a pirate                           | What items facilitate communication of visit details?   | 1) varying the similarity of props  | Increasing number and similarity of props to actual event facilitated children's accounts of event.   | Video will act as most realistic props. Video will be better as children will indicate significant objects.   |
| Powell, Clare, & Hasty (2002)                 | Recall of independent event and enjoyment of that recall           | Does use of a computer program improve enjoyment or accuracy of reporting?                    | 1) traditional verbal questioning<br>2) computer-assisted questioning   | Children favoured computer assessment over verbal interview but traditional verbal interviewing techniques elicited more accurate responses   | Video will have the novelty and appeal of a computer interview but having an interviewer present should make responses more accurate.   |
| Waterman, Blades, & Spencer (2001)            | Recall of two short stories using closed- and open-ended questions | What effect does the age, format of question and validity of questions have on their answers? | Three independent variables:<br>1) adult/child respondent;<br>2) yes-no/'wh' questions<br>3) questions related to known or unknowable information from short stories.   | Found that yes-no questions would sometimes be contrived (by both children and adults). Closed questions should be validated with open-ended questions.                                       | Having a common and realistic re-presentation to refer to (the video), the interviewer can reconfirm dubious answers with other open-ended questions.   |
| Hay, Zahn-Waxler, Cummings, & Iannotti (1992) | Recommendations for tactics to resolve peer conflict               | What effect does child gender and maternal advice for peer conflict resolution?               | 1) asking children with depressed or non-depressed mothers about conflict resolution  | Not asking children with severe circumstances (such as maternal depression).  | Video allows more opportunities for the videoed child to request withdrawal from the child videoing.  |
| Clark & Moss (2001)                           | Different approaches to gathering data with children               | How do children co-construct meaning?   | 1) Visual with verbal approaches<br>2) mapping, modelling<br>3) taking photographs<br>4) drawing, collage<br>5) child-to-child interviews<br>6) drama, puppetry   | No one technique, although all children seemed to respond to having opportunities to edit and revisit their data  | The VSRD technique asks children to reflect upon and edit their video data, and make that into a video to present to others. This process should provide opportunities to reflect and extend their thinking about learning experiences. |
| Thomas and O'Kane (2000)                      | Participatory techniques   | What are the most effective participatory techniques?   | 1) Co-creating a chart of who makes decisions on specific aspects of the children's lives<br>2) Generating a 'story of the day'<br>3) Drawing a favourite place<br>4) Pot of beans (more beans indicated more power in that decision) | Using pots of beans to indicate how much influence children had in certain decisions was effective. Group settings benefitted most from games and visual props such as role play and posters. | The VSRD technique using very realistic reproduction of the experience under interrogation, and thus may be best. Involving children in the production of this video should also engage them in the research.                           |

Table 4.1 Studies investigating effective methods of child interviews, justifying VSRD

The use of video research for understanding how social membership of a group at the institutional level comprises perspectives is considered highly effective (Currie & Kelly, 2012) and is well explained by Fler (2008b) within a sociocultural framework:

Researchers following a cultural-historical tradition for studying children's development do not seek to capture everything they see through digital video technology. Rather, they aim to record the dynamic and evolving nature of the social situation in which children are located across institutions (family, community groups, and preschool)...a cultural-historical approach examines the person in relation to the conditions and possibilities for development found within the institutions in which a particular person participates, such as family, school, clubs, etc. (p. 106).

These contextual facets - "interpersonal, personal, and cultural-institutional aspects of the event" - are necessary foci of a sociocultural analysis (Rogoff, 2003, p. 58) associated with using video-recording. It has been shown that the use of video to stimulate discussion between different stakeholders can transmute differences and misunderstandings between them (Whalley & Chandler, 2007). Because research participants can normally forget specific instances of an event (e.g., play episodes), video can greatly enhance recall (Morgan, 2007) and ensure everyone is talking about the same event (Haw, 2008, p. 193). Such *intersubjectivity* can be difficult to attain with children otherwise because they do not use verbal articulation on which adults are so reliant to differentiate the event at hand from other events (O'Kane, 1999). Video-stimulated recall may be the best medium to mitigate such confusion. Furthermore, video is often an engaging way for children to participate in research. For instance, in Morgan's (2007) trial of video-stimulated recall, 88 of 90 children expressed "enthusiasm" for research with video (p. 219). This amenability of video research to the inclusion of contextual information makes it arguably one of the most appropriate media for sociocultural research.

Further, for the purposes of comparison between stakeholders, it was concluded that the best manner in which to compare stakeholder perspectives would be to use the same format for all stakeholders (Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Yin, 2009). As the research seeks to investigate *perspectives*, a form of data generation which was suitable to record events and also *reflect on those events* was necessary. In other words, the data generation had to be able to not just record an event (i.e., play), but also what stakeholders thought about it (i.e., their perspective on learning through play). The most feasible method was in this case *video-stimulated recall dialogues* (VSRD) (Morgan, 2007).

VSRDs use participant-recorded episodes of an event (e.g., play) to stimulate discussion (or “dialogue”) related to it. Typically, this involves:

- a) The recording of an event, by researchers or participants themselves (Event A)
- b) The assembling of participants to watch that video (Event B)
- c) Participants commenting on the video, often in relation to a given focus (also Event B)

The reflective dialogue involves “pooled thinking about practice using a shared source of information – a video” (Moyles, Hargreaves, Merry, Paterson, & Esarte-Sarries, 2003, p. 142). This delay from *Event A* (e.g., a play episode) and *B* (e.g., thinking about learning in that play episode) often allows time for reflection, and the passing of time has been shown to give the participants a distanced perspective on *Event A*. This is particularly appropriate considering the literature on children’s perspectives on their learning (see 2.2.2.2, p. 71), which argued that participants would need to reflect on mental states *before* and *after* play in order to give their perspective on learning from it, at least within acquisition models of learning, which state learning is acquired *after* an event (de Houwer et al., 2013).

The use of video of the children's daily lives is understood as an authentic way of gaining access to experiences which have meaning for the children, particularly from a sociocultural perspective (Fleer, 2008b). Inviting children to record their own play was expected to significantly add to the sense of relevance to their own lives.

#### **4.6 Benefits of using cameras with children**

Contemporary thinking on interviews with children argues that in order for children to fully participate in the study, they must become co-researchers with the principal researcher (Cook & Hess, 2007). One way in which children may be given greater opportunity to express their views is via still and/or video cameras (Clark, 2005). Specifically, the use of the camera becomes a "useful prompt for children's dialogue" (Pascal & Bertram, 2009, p. 259). Apart from being a prompt for conversation, a screen in front of participants creates a viable "platform of communication" between the adult and child co-researchers which reduces ambiguity about common referents (Clark, 2005, p. 494). For example, this format has been suggested as an easy way to aid conversation between family members and educators also (Whalley, 1997).

Further, video may be considered initially at the "textual realism" level; at the level of "the story that the material is telling and how it is telling that story." (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 596). Such realism is highly suitable for children to communicate about the video data in a much more detailed and rich way, the "thick description" that qualitative research aspires to unveil (Geertz, 1973). Unlike quantitative data, qualitative data derives its power not from greater sample sizes, but from categories which can account for all the "nuances" of the data (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000, p. 114). The rich video data can for children and other participants alike form a common platform to which they can

continually refer, as they concurrently discuss their perspectives on learning through play. Video allows children to talk about their thinking about their thinking in more detail. This “thinking about thinking” is termed *metacognition* (Morgan, 2007), of which VSRD has been found to be highly “encouraging” (Moyles, Hargreaves, Merry, Paterson, & Esarte-Sarries, 2003, p. 152). How children experience their daily activity in terms of practices is important for understanding their perspectives (Reifel, 1988). Sociocultural research seeks to investigate the child and the dialectical relationship with her/his social situation “across time and institutions”, multi-dimensional aspects which are arguably best captured through the textual realism of the video medium (Fleer, 2008a, p. 103). Vygotsky himself was an “interpretivist” that saw such thick description as indispensable because it reveals the motives of the speaker (Bruner, 1987, p. 6).

The task of listening to children effectively and on their own terms may be enhanced not only by the richness of the information available in video, but also by its versatility. Many who research with children insist that “activities should be varied and enjoyable, and recognise the different ways children may choose to express themselves”, and video is arguably the most descriptive technology available to most people (Clark, 2005, p. 492). As is documented in the well-known *Mosaic Approach* (Clark & Moss, 2001), providing children with the freedom to express their perspectives in a variety of ways is considered most appropriate; there is a “need for diverse and multiple opportunities for dialogue” (Pascal & Bertram, 2009, p. 259). The use of video, and more specifically, the use of video-recall for interviews that are video recorded, may be seen as one of the most effective ways to unite a variety of media and modes of communication to prompt dialogue. Recording play episodes with video cameras affords children opportunities to incorporate dance, drawings, role play, stories and other activities. As O’Kane (1999) clearly argues, “it makes sense to utilize the alternative forms of communication – play, activities, songs, drawing and stories”

(p. 139). In fact, others go so far as to claim “there is no one, single approach or method that works” (Pascal & Bertram, 2009, p. 259). However, it is possible to find one medium that unites most forms of communication – video. Clark and Moss (2001) concede that their use of the *Mosaic Approach* was “exploratory in nature” (p. 2) and “could be improved [by] introducing video as well as still images, using a laptop computer to review images and including a review of a child’s learning journey in interviews with key persons” (p. 61). Thus, the flexibility of the medium of video – specifically, VSRD – provides a format which is adaptable to the many forms of communication young children may use, but in one format which is appropriate for both children and adult stakeholders.

## **4.7 Methodological considerations when using cameras**

### **4.7.1 Ethics of using cameras**

The use of cameras in educational settings and children’s homes poses some complicated ethical issues. First of all, all participants (and, in the case of children, their legal guardians) must consent to research (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). This means that all people filmed need to have consented *before* any video is taken of them – which may be difficult when involving children in a playground where they may move around quicker than a camera operator can avoid filming them.

Secondly, especially in early childhood settings, video technology may be used by centre directors as a form of surveillance to assure employee performance (Beatty & Ulewicz, 2001). This is relevant to the current research when considering that videos were recorded at the centre with educators and non-participating children in the background. Videos often operate so that family members can check they are pleased with the service the educators are giving. Further, the connotations of



surveillance in shops and banks create significant power imbalances as soon as a camera is introduced into a professional setting. Such uses of video technology “place subjects in a vulnerable position because the observer is in a position to intervene to prevent a bad outcome, and in possession of legal evidence of any actionable wrongdoing” (Beatty & Ulewicz, 2001, p. 19). This power imbalance is doubled when one considers the authoritative role professionals may take in relation to children: duty of care stipulates that educators frequently need to guide children’s behaviour, and the resultant power imbalance means that children may feel obliged to assent to being video recorded when they are asked by adult researchers, as those adult researchers are in a context where adults manage acceptable behaviour in the centre (Mandell, 1991). As Rogers and Evans (2008) recognise, when undertaking research with children “there is a double-bind in terms of the power imbalance: first between the researcher and interviewee, and second between the adult and the child” (pp. 46 - 47). Three approaches that might mitigate such power imbalances include (1) taking the “least adult role” (Mandell, 1991), (2) inviting children to record their play and (3) obtaining informed consent from all participants. These are explored in the next three subsections.

#### **4.7.2 Least adult role**

Suggestions for mitigating these power imbalances have included taking “the least adult role” (Mandell, 1991) - actively refusing opportunities to take an authoritative role, or insisting that the researcher is just another player in the children’s play. This is seen as a little problematic in terms of negating the power of social roles outside of the centre (Epstein, 1998) - as children are “well aware of their conditions of life in the wider world as well as their preschool” (Pascal & Bertram, 2009, p. 259) - but is nonetheless something that was utilised by becoming a co-player with the children, with the intention of reducing potential

power conflicts. The Findings Chapter (5.3) shows how children appeared to treat me as a co-player rather than an adult authority. For example, the dialogues about learning through play appeared to in many instances be *informing me as a co-player* of the rules of play for my future participation. The mere fact that children consistently gave the same responses to my questions despite my inability to understand their perspective on learning through play (see 5.3, p. 229) also stand as evidence to the resilience of the children's perspective and my (at least partial) assumption of "the least adult role" I possibly could. The two-week familiarisation stage (see 4.8.1, p. 170) where I was mostly initiating or joining in play with the children seemed to establish this role.

The notion of "the least adult role" is consistent with the sociology of childhood view that children's peer cultures are central to any investigation of children's perspectives (Corsaro, 2012). This is because taking the least adult role privileges the capacity of children to generate peer culture once they can trust the researcher to bypass the institutionalised "adult-child" relationship.

### **4.7.3 Inviting children to record their play**

A second way some of these power differences can be mitigated is to give cameras to children, so that they may film when and what they like. Initially, in line with the literature on children's rights, the research proposed to give the children the video cameras to record their own and other children's play. This became problematic in four ways (Bird, Colliver, & Edwards, 2014). First of all, many children did not hold the camera facing the direction they were watching the play - many videos of the ground or the wall adjacent to the play were taken in the trial period of the research. Other examples include the children running with the camera, leaving the picture so shaky that it is near impossible to follow. At other times, I asked children playing if they wanted to record their play, and, upon acceptance of my proposal, the act of recording the play would actually remove them from the co-creation of that play, as they monitored the images in the

viewfinder. Likewise, although children narrated the play whilst being recorded, they usually chose not to as soon as they were focused on recording the play themselves. Another problem with giving the cameras to the children was the constant monitoring that was necessary to make sure cameras were being used safely and fairly. Smith and others (2005) call such concerns “crowd management” issues, which often plague the early childhood researcher (p. 474). After two weeks of having children record play themselves, it became much more conducive to the timeframe and the aims of the research for me to ask children if they believed it was play they were engaged in, to ask for their permission to record their play and observe externally when they obliged for me to do so.

#### **4.7.4 Informed consent**

Another way to mitigate these power differentials was to obtain informed consent from all participants (or “informed assent” from children (Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2012). In accordance with *the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (NHMRC, 2007a) and *the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (NHMRC, 2007b), this thesis ensured:

1. informed consent (or assent) was given;
2. that participants were fully aware of what the researcher was doing and what they were going to do if they agreed to participate;
3. participant anonymity and respect for privacy (Stephen *et al.*, 2008)
4. that all participants were informed of the potential risks of participation; and,
5. stress and harm was minimized.

This research project relied on stakeholders agreeing to participate. It was important under the codes above that all participants were informed of the risks of doing the research, and were asked if they still wished to continue doing the research despite these risks. Adults signed a form indicating they agreed to these risks, but how assent was attained from children was quite different (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005).

Informed assent is a term used for research with children; “given the imbalance in power between adults and children... and the pressure of social conventions” which mean children do not always refuse to participate in research in ways that adults might (Stephen et al., 2008, p. 106). For this research, all efforts to ensure each child understood the risks involved were made before asking for assent. After this had been clarified, the child was presented with an Assent form which had black and white pictures of traffic lights next to each of the four questions. Questions included “Would you like to talk with me about how you learn through play?”, or “I would like to write about your ideas in my book. Would you like to think of a pretend name to use for the book?” Parents/guardians who signed a Consent form for their child also explained the Child Assent form to their child and had the child colour-in the traffic lights to say “yes,” “maybe,” or “no” with green, orange, and red, respectively. In cases where guardians did not complete this activity with their child, the Director explained the consent forms to the children, so that I as the researcher was not seen to inadvertently pressure children to participate. The Director asked whether research with that child could “go ahead” and requested the child colour the appropriate light with paint (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005, p. 574). Further, upon commencing each new session of research, the children showed their agreement to participate in that day’s session with their “agreement mark” (the letters *OK*) to ensure ethical participation and to emphasise that it was alright for children to not want to participate at any time (as used in Harcourt, 2011, p. 336, see Figure 4.1, p. 173). All *Expression of Interest Forms*, *Letters to Participants*, and *Consent Forms* are included in the Appendix

Chapter (see 0, p. 423).

All people in the ECEC setting were potentially filmed, but videos of people who had not consented were not included in *Edit One* or subsequent edits of the video data (see Table 4.2, p. 170). This meant children or children whose legal guardians did not give consent did not feel excluded from normal group activities. These children did not contribute to the editing process or Focus Groups. Thus, children wanting to participate in the tasks but not the research were still provided with these opportunities.

Participants were asked if they wanted their identity revealed. The identities of all participants requesting confidentiality were masked using pseudonyms and blurring facial features when screenshots of video were included in publications (as in Plowman & Stephen, 2008). Children were asked what pseudonym (if any) they would like to use (see 0, p. 423).

In accordance with the above-cited Codes, all efforts were made to mitigate participant stress. For children, this meant assisting “the articulation of the children’s perspectives by adopting techniques that respect their preferred methods of responding and interacting and ensuring that they [were] comfortable with the presence of the researchers” (Stephen *et al.*, 2008, p. 103). An interim “familiarisation” period of two weeks occurred where I contributed to the group activities and daily routine (cleaning, serving food, assisting children’s activities) so that children became accustomed to and comfortable with my presence in the room.

It is argued that the potential benefits of the research (i.e., implications for pedagogical practice and being more sensitive to the perspectives of primary stakeholders about the educative value of play) outweighed the extent and severity of risk (e.g., embarrassment or minor anxiety in participation in focus

groups). At all times in recording and reporting data, respect for inherent dignity of the individual was of central importance.

Having addressed Mandell's (1991) three suggestions for centring the child, I was also able to consider my role and motives as a researcher.

#### **4.7.5 Reflexive research**

My own personal impetus to conduct this research is another key factor which influenced the way I carried it out (see 1.4, p. 44). I have always been fascinated by childhood. Even when I was a primary-school-aged child myself, I had the idea that we lose something when we grow up. I thought of "growing up" as abandoning a child-like orientation towards the world, supplanting it with a more "mature", adult-like orientation.

My interest in childhood began to focus on an interest in *incidental and informal* learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). I knew, however, that a universal example of this learning was first language acquisition (Rogoff et al, 2003, p. 176). My undergraduate research thus began in linguistics and psychology. My postgraduate research then moved into the field of play in education.

Having read widely about researcher "reflexivity" (Duncan & Watson, 2010, p. 51), I had duly made the self-examination with respect to the researcher's position in the research so that the lenses brought to bear on data generation (and the consequent analysis) were made clear (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, & Widdop Quinton, 2013). In order "to keep reliability", I had clarified the "motive" of my goals as a researcher to get "good" data about leaning) and those of the children (to play) (Hedegaard, 2008d, p. 207). I considered myself ready to tackle the differences in perspectives with group interview strategies and inductive data analysis. I felt prepared to listen to children in all the forms they might communicate "both verbally and non-verbally, both intra- and interpersonally"

(Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 23). I was aware of the literature detailing strategies to minimise power inequalities that might trample the children's natural communication (Mandell, 1991; Moore, 2014, forthcoming).

[T]he child's perspective, being a fragile notion, can easily be crushed by adult [researchers] who cannot move from their own version of experience, or, in the urgency of their research, find it difficult to see the alternative interpretation (Cook & Hess, 2007, p. 44)

Within the field of ECEC, there is now a growing recognition of the rights of the child (UN, 1989), and the responsibility of researchers to conduct research in line with these rights (Boström, 2006; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Not only are their perspectives valued (Johansson & White, 2011; Hedegaard, 2008b; Howard, 2002; Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011), but are a vital aspect of our endeavour to improve their educational and life outcomes (Reifel, 1988; Thomson, 2008). To understand their perspectives, it is acknowledged that researchers must view children "from an additive rather than deficit perspective" (Boström, 2006, p. 228; Wragg, 2013). This includes respecting their perspective for itself, not qualifying it in relation to other perspectives, such as adult norms (Cook & Hess, 2007; Mayall, 2008). As we have a history of favouring adult perspectives over children's (Elbers, 2004; Hviid, 2008; Smith et al., 2005), many scholars have acknowledged that this can indeed be a difficult task (Brooker, 2011, p. 140; Clark, 2005, p. 492; Mandell, 1991, p. 39; Mashford-Scott et al., 2012, p. 241; Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 40; Wragg, 2013), yet because I had understood all of this at the theoretical level, I assumed myself to be equipped to understand the children's perspective.

When I came to analyse the findings from the adult stakeholders, their perspective on learning through play (and specifically, on learning) was easy to understand. In my psychology degree, I had duly studied the many adult models of learning. For example, Piaget's (1972) *Genetic Epistemology* (how knowledge grows as the

child develops) detailed scenarios where children playing with water in beakers would represent learning of abstract concepts such as “conservation” (p. 32) and “reversibility” (p. 33). The adult stakeholders expressed learning in a way congruent with this understanding, seeing learning through play in terms of abstract concepts such as “cognitive” or “social” learning. For example, one educator commented on why she recorded an episode of children playing with Lego™:

The reason that I chose this [play episode to record] was because there was a lot of dialogue ... I instantly thought, 'Wow, this is such a great example of the social learning that's happening there' (Tarni, 0:55#1).

However, the children’s conception was clearly different. Of the 772 comments children made about learning, almost all appeared to be about concrete activities rather than abstract concepts. One conversation I recall with four-year-old Danielle was about a video of her playing pirates and digging up treasure.

[Yeshe:]           What were you doing there [\*pointing to video\*]?  
[Danielle:]       Digging for treasure.  
[Yeshe:]           What are you learning when you’re playing with treasure?  
[Danielle:]       Pirates.  
[Yeshe:]           Ah, you’re learning pirates. [\*Pause\*] But you can’t *learn* pirates, Danielle! What does that mean? [\*Danielle walks away\*] (Danielle, 2#49)

My responses to Danielle’s answers clearly show how my understanding of learning as involving abstracted concepts prevented me from understanding or continuing our dialogue. Here I clearly went against my intention to value the children’s perspective in and of itself, because I compared it to adult perspectives about what learning is. Just as Cook & Hess (2007) warned, I could not move “from [my] own version of experience” or see “the alternative interpretation” of learning (p. 44). When I implored, “You can’t learn pirates, Danielle! What does that mean?”, I was assuming she did not understand the concept of learning.



Upon reflection, it is now apparent that my “motive” in the research was to hear about learning as I understood it, not any other way (Hedegaard, 2008d, p. 202). It was so difficult for me to understand, in fact, that the same pattern of interaction repeated for the three months that I collected data. It was only after re-analysing the data more than seven times, along with the application of a sociocultural analysis [in the form of Hedegaard’s (2008a) framework], that I could see the practice that their comments were demonstrating. This allowed me to go past my previous understanding of learning as necessarily about abstract concepts and begin to understand the children’s perspective in and of itself. Until that point, I had not realised that being a reflexive researcher meant challenging my own “adultist assumptions” even about basic concepts, like *learning* (Valentine, 1999, p. 142). My inability to do so during the implementation phase (see 4.8, p. 169) meant that all my interactions with the children were still within my *adultist* model of learning, and becoming *reflexive* was only possible in the phases of data analysis (see 4.10, p. 183). I declare this here not to wash my hands of the biases that have affected the findings of this thesis in some kind of “positional piety” (Cousin, 2010, p. 9). I provide this section on reflexivity as an affirmation of the value in remaining “uncertain” even when one believes oneself to be “wise”, of remaining reflexive about the unknown that lies behind every “Truth” one believes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2010). I provide it to also demonstrate that not only the findings, but also the process of generating them, have been a learning experience for me, and one that continues to unfold.

## 4.8 Implementation

The project was implemented in five phases: (1) the familiarisation phase, (2) the recording phase, (3) the VSRD phase (editing comments), (4) the movie-viewing

phase, and (5) the confirmation phase (Table 4.2). These will each be explained in turn, followed by a section on the data generation, the data analysis.

| <b>Phase</b>       | <b>Children</b>  | <b>Families</b>  | <b>Educators</b>   |
|--------------------|--|--|--|
| 1: Familiarisation | Discussion about use of cameras, demonstration of video recording, free-play trial   |  |  |
| 2: Recording       | Researcher and consenting <sup>10</sup> children record other consenting children's play experiences   | Family participants record play experiences  | Educator participants record play experiences  |
| 3: VSRD            | Child participants select educational play experiences ( <i>Edit One</i> ), comment on editing and video design (process is video-recorded) (see Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011) | Family participants select educational play experiences ( <i>Edit One</i> ), comment on editing and video design (process is video-recorded) | Educator participants select educational play experiences ( <i>Edit One</i> ), comment on editing and video design (process is video-recorded) |
| 4: Movie-viewing   | Focus Group Discussion: Children, family member, and educator participants present their video to other stakeholder participants (Video recorded also)                             |  |  |
| 5: Confirmation    | Analyse data and present finished thesis and proposed publications to all participants for permission and revision before their submission/publication.                            |  |  |

*Table 4.2 Research project design*

### **4.8.1 Phase One: Familiarisation**

Following ethics clearance by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and Australian Catholic University (ACU), I approached the Director of an inner Melbourne community children's centre about the

<sup>10</sup> The term "consenting" here is used to indicate those who signed an informed consent form and whose legal guardians also signed a Consent Form on their behalf.

prospect of conducting research at her centre. The pseudonym applied for the Centre is *Tall Eucalypts Children's Community Cooperative* (hereafter, *Tall Eucalypts*). With a prompt enthusiastic response, a time was arranged to introduce my research proposal to the staff at a staff meeting at *Tall Eucalypts* shortly afterwards. This is a recommendation of Hedegaard's (2008d) for any sociocultural research: to "begin the research with an orienting meeting, where involved partners such as parents, pedagogues or teachers can meet and questions can be asked" (p. 202). After a warm response from the staff, I organised a convenient time to begin a two-week familiarisation stage where no formal research was conducted. It was reasoned that a "familiarisation phase" was necessary to build rapport with children and stimulate interest in the project (Mortari, 2011, p. 349). As Mayall (2008) explains, "In the first days, part of my aim was to become a familiar figure, for whom the children did not behave in a special way during their class work and with whom children might confidently talk" (p. 108).

As did Mayall, I volunteered to assist in the three- and four-year-old settings with everyday tasks and chores such as cleaning and preparing for activities such as art, craft, games, and meal times for the duration of the two-week familiarisation phase. When this assistance was not required, I was able to play with these children and build relationships. As noted earlier in the chapter, this was done to foster the "least adult role" (Mayall, 1991), reduce power imbalances, establish my interest in the children's play outside of the research motive. As a male adult who enjoyed doing so, my presence soon sparked many of the children's curiosity and interest. At morning Circle Time on several days I was able to introduce the research and explain the use of video cameras to the children. Another recommendation of Hedegaard's (2008d) is that "[o]ne has to introduce the research project orally so that it can be also understood by the children in the

project... [explaining] the aim of the research so that it can be understood why the researchers will repeatedly come back into the activity setting or ask the children to talk to them" (p. 203). I also frequently engaged the children with prompts about the differences between still and video cameras and how to operate that particular model, which commenced and terminated recording with one red button (Bird, Colliver, & Edwards, 2014). The children used the cameras over one week to become acquainted with the technology and its novelty, as Hedegaard (2008d) suggests. The videos of non-consenting children were deleted according to ethical protocol.

At the end of this two-week process, many of the children, especially in the four-year-old group where I spent most of my time, would call out to me using my first name and often greet me with hugs or news of recent events in their lives. As well as initiating games myself, I was often invited to play with children. Children would also often detail the content of their play to me, presumably because I showed an interest in it.

For the family and educator participants, information posters were placed on the Information Board at the entrance to the centre. The Centre Director and educators explained my daily presence in the centre to the family members as they arrived at the centre to pick up their children, and – along with news from children about this – that presence also apparently stimulated interest in the project. The result was a high level of engagement from those at the centre, as well as higher-than-expected participation rates. At the end of the two weeks, I had received 24 guardian consents for children to participate, eight family consent forms, and five educator consent forms. I asked the Centre Director to walk through a Child Consent form with each of the children whose legal guardians had consented. All children consented, using the "child-friendly" Child Consent form adapted from the findings of Harcourt and Conroy (2005; 2011) and Dockett and colleagues (2012). I also used an "OK sheet" that children signed off on at the start of every research session to signify their ongoing consent (Harcourt, 2011, p. 336). See

Figure 4.1 (an example of the Consent Forms in 0, p. 423).

| ACU education     |  | Name: Danielle |
|-------------------|--|----------------|
| THE "OK SHEET"    |  | ACU            |
| Day 1 of research |  | OK sign<br>OK  |
| Day 2 of research |  | OK             |
| Day 3 of research |  | OK             |
| Day 4 of research |  | OK             |
| Day 5 of research |  | OK             |
| Day 6 of research |  | OK             |

Figure 4.1 Example Okay Sheet

### 4.8.2 Phase Two: Recording

This phase of the research involved consenting family members, educators and the researcher video-recording examples of learning through play. These occurred at the centre and in the children’s homes.

During data generation at Tall Eucalypts, the original data generation method was to invite the children to record their play. This was part of the Familiarisation Phase of two weeks and some weeks after. However, there seemed to be very few recordings of play that I could use for the purposes of the research, as they were of unconsenting children, were too shaky to follow, or were recordings of the ground or sky. As a result, the first methodological change to be made was when I observed an activity I thought was play, I approached the children and asked if they also thought it was play. If they thought it was, I asked if it was acceptable for me to record. If they gave me verbal permission to do so, I would record the

play with a Flip™ camera until enough of that play was recorded that I deemed sufficient to stimulate their recall in Phase 2. In total, 683 videos of children's play were recorded over the 2 months, averaging two minutes in duration. See Table 4.4 (p. 179) for a complete summary of the numbers of participants and videos recorded.

When an educator approached me at the Centre asking if they could participate, I gave them an Expression of Interest form that they could read and return signed if they wished to participate. After this was completed, I would bring them a Consent form to sign and loan them a camera. Generally, educators would sign the form on the spot and leave the camera in their room for those times when they were not too busy to record a play episode. I asked them to record roughly 15 minutes of instances of children learning through play.

Because the second research question for the project was *What are the similarities and differences between primary stakeholder perspectives on learning through play?*, it was appropriate to have the perspectives of family members from the children who had consented. This generated perspectives from different stakeholders on the learning through play of the same children. Having perspectives from children who participated was a way to generate a form of "triangulation" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126), which is a way of verifying evidence by showing that it comes from two or more sources (Hickman & Kiss, 2010; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). As such, even though participation was encouraged from all families at the centre, I specially sent home *Family Member Expression of Interest forms* with the children's Consent Forms. This meant that all family members who consented to participate were the legal guardians of consenting children, and that their perspectives could be compared (as similarities and differences) directly to those of their children.

### 4.8.3 Phase Three: VSRD

After some videos of children had been recorded, it was possible to stimulate further interest in the movie-making project by setting up an imaginary cinema where children could watch the videos they had made. This imaginary cinema also had the purposes of stimulating discussion about learning that I could record with the Flip™ camera, and also providing the children who had recorded the videos some feedback about their recordings (e.g., when a shaky video was shown, children commented on how difficult it was to watch). The two educators in the room supported the cinema activity by encouraging children to join in and setting the room up like a cinema with cushions as seats, and closing doors to reduce background noise. I connected a laptop to a projector and speakers, and darkened the room as much as safely possible. I also invited two or three children to be in charge of drawing up tickets for the cinema, and invited others to distribute these to children in the playroom. Children promptly took up the imaginary situation of a cinema. All this activity in the room piqued many children's curiosity and encouraged participation. Before screening the videos, I invited one or two children to take the role of "ushers" who took tickets from those children who had come to watch the videos. After each video of two to four minutes, I would then invite the children to comment on what they thought the children in the videos were learning. These comments were recorded as editing instructions. However, the nature of having so many (5 - 12) children in one room watching the videos was that several demonstrated their interest in other activities such as playing with chairs or discussing with each other play not related to the videos. It became increasingly difficult to maintain all children's attention on the video as the novelty of the imaginary cinema dissipated. Drawing so many children together allowed for some peer power dynamics and social exclusion to emerge also.

In the subsequent weeks, I had by then enough videos of individual children's

play to invite them in for one-on-one VSRDs using the videos. Children chose to watch all of their videos and make comments for around ten minutes before apparently losing interest. An incidental finding with this type of VSRD, contrary to findings in the literature (e.g., Morgan, 2007), was that children appeared able to remember fine details of the play videos made up to 6 weeks earlier. I had been concerned that children may have had difficulty remembering play episodes that far into the past, but findings showed recall was highly detailed.

The VSRDs generally functioned as sufficient stimuli for discussion but all of the sessions had an interview schedule in the case that the discussion went off topic. For both the adult and child VSRDs, participants were given a very clear explanation of the research aims, and for both adults and children these needed to be repeated at times throughout the discussions to keep them talking about what they saw the children to be learning through their play. For instance, if the discussion went on to explaining the play (as was often the case with the children) or the child's character (often the case with family members), I would guide the discussion back to the focus by asking, "That's interesting; What does that say about what they are learning?" These main questions were asked "to allow for comparison of answers when analysing the data", but "follow-up questions" and "probes" were sometimes necessary to "pursue themes uncovered during the [discussion] to explore the implications of certain lines of thought" (Hickman & Kiss, 2010, p. 32). In the case of children's VSRDs, the next section explains some methodological changes that were necessary for the discussions.

Before continuing, it should be noted that the term "video" here refers to the raw product resulting from recording with a camera; the term "movie" refers to the edited videos, including text, music, and sound equalisation. The videos from the VSRDs were used as data for the research, whereas the three movies made were used only for the movie nights to present the findings of the research to the participants.



As discussed in 4.7.5 (see p. 166), it took me as a researcher a long time to understand the children's perspective, and my initial attempts to do so caused other methodological changes to be made to the planned use of VSRD. Pope and others (2000) advocate for concurrent data analysis, "allowing the researcher to go back and refine questions" (p. 114). As I asked children questions about the learning evidenced in the videos of play, it occurred to me that children's understanding of "learning" might be different from my own (see 2.2.2.3, p. 77 and 5.3, p. 229). Even though I had not understood their perspective, I did not want to use a deficit model of the child (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Salamon, 2011; Wragg, 2013), and assumed that children's conception of learning was not *under-developed* or *incomplete*, just *different*. It was quite logical to expect that children who had not yet come into first-hand contact with models of learning involving sitting and studying might not have had the same understanding of learning that I initially held going into the project. After the first 80 videos of VSRD with the children, I trialled a less direct way of asking about learning, avoiding the term *learning* (e.g., "If you were to play that again, what would you do differently now?"). Having a number of different questions meant that I also had alternative options if the first question asked did not elicit an answer from the child. Table 4.3 shows the direct questions asked in the first 80 videos of children, and the indirect questions asked for the remaining 123. All VSRDs with *adults* used direct questioning as there was seen to be no significant discrepancy in our philosophical understandings of "learning."

The findings from the two different questioning types (in/direct) did not differ greatly, suggesting that the children's perspective on what learning might not use the same acquisition model of learning I did (see 4.7.5, p. 166). As I discussed in 4.7.5, my understanding of learning was still based on an acquisition model, and the change described here did not significantly impact the results of this change; the children's perspective appeared to be stable across different contexts and

forms of questioning. After the two types of questioning were completed, a total of 203 videos were recorded.

| Questions asked in first 80 videos (Direct)                 | Questions rephrased in the last 123 videos (Indirect)  |
|---|--|
| What are you learning when you play that?                   | What was different when you first played this game?  |
| What do you think they were learning when they played that? | How would you make the play better next time?<br>If a two-year-old wanted to play with you, what would you tell them so they could play with you?<br>What do you know about ___(topic of play)___?<br>What do you know about this play that ___(other child)___ doesn't know?<br>Tell me about your play.<br>What do you know now that you've played this a few times? |
|   | What are you getting better at when you play this?   |

Table 4.3 Direct and indirect questions asked in VSRDs with children

The educator VSRDs were much more difficult to schedule than child VSRDs. As employees of Tall Eucalypts, educators appeared to have little motivation to donate their free time to being in the centre and discussing children's learning. As such, the times the educators volunteered to do the VSRDs were in breaks or before shifts, and it was impossible to coordinate these to overlap so that they could be undertaken as a group. However, all of the six educators who had signed Consent Forms were generous enough to carry out a 30-minute VSRD in their free time individually with me.

Of the 12 family members (fathers as well as mothers) that signed Consent forms to participate in the research, eight mothers responded to emails about when they were available. Similar to educators, their busy schedules made it difficult to coincide free times. Ultimately, only three of the mothers were able to make the same VSRD, meaning that five of them did individual VSRDs with me. The notion

that group interviews would stimulate more discussion and consensus of opinion was not evident in the data (see Findings Chapter); rather, the “manners” of having only one person talk at any one time meant that the 30 minutes set aside for discussion was reduced on average one-third. Whilst I had expected the group setting to stimulate more discussion and collaboration, it only reduced the amount of time for each individual to speak. Further, the data from the group VSRD compared with the individual VSRDs appeared to differ no more than the differences between individuals in this stakeholder group.

|   | Researcher | Children       | Family members | Educators      |
|---|------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Consenting Participants                       | 1          | 28             | 13             | 5              |
| Participants in the data                      | 1          | 26             | 8              | 5              |
| <b>Videos of children’s play (Phase 1)</b>    |            | 683            | 326            | 35             |
| Location of play recordings                   |            | Tall Eucalypts | Homes          | Tall Eucalypts |
| Weeks needed                                  |            | 7              | 2              | 7              |
| <b>Videos of their perspectives (Phase 2)</b> | N/A        | 203            | 6              | 11             |
| Comments relating to learning                 | N/A        | 772            | 328            | 191            |
| Location of VSRD recordings                   | N/A        | Staff room     | Staff room     | Staff room     |
| VSRDs using direct questioning                | N/A        | 80             | 6              | 11             |
| VSRDs using indirect questioning              | N/A        | 123            | 0              | 0              |
| Weeks needed                                  | N/A        | 4              | 5              | 4              |
| <b>Videos from group VSRD (Phase 3)</b>       |            |                | 1              |                |
| Total number of participants in data          |            |                | 39             |                |
| Total number of weeks collecting data         |            |                | 16             |                |
| Total number of videos                        |            |                | 1,264          |                |

Table 4.4 Summary of participant numbers and videos by stakeholder type

#### 4.8.4 Phase Four: Focus group VSRD

Towards the end of the six-month data generation phase, a movie night was organised with *Tall Eucalypts’* Director and staff. It coincided with a staff meeting that was due to start two hours after the school day had ended at Tall Eucalypts. Roughly a month before the night, invitations were sent to all adult participants

and the parents/guardians of all consenting children for the movie night. The invitations asked for an RSVP and dietary requirements, which were catered for with pizza, drinks, salad, and popcorn. Invitees were asked to view the movies together at Tall Eucalypts after the school day had ended and were invited to share their opinions on the movies they watched. I chose that particular day as the centre was staying open for the staff meeting.

On the night, 14 consenting participants attended the movie screening. There were three movies representing the perspectives of the three stakeholder groups. Most children sat for the first two movies (educator and child perspectives), but became more interested in outdoor play for the final seven-minute movie. Opportunities for the expression of stakeholder perspectives were limited by the constraints of what Smith and colleagues (2005) call “crowd management” issues with the children – playing outside, touching the screen, making shadows on the projection with their hands, taking food without asking, etc. (p. 474).

Another factor which may have caused less discussion than expected was the apparent tension between some parents and educators – both in the sense of judgements that parents might have had about educators’ past actions, as well as judgements that some educators may have had about the parenting abilities of some of the parents in the room. However, I was not sure if this was indeed a real or imagined issue, and thus cannot be elaborated any more than to say it may have caused less discussion.

The result of these dynamics for this focus group VSRD was a shortened and abbreviated discussion that might have been more productive if done in stakeholder groups. The format actually used brought together so many participants that only the more confident participants spoke, with shyer or less certain participants remaining quiet. Having smaller groups would have felt more personal and possibly generated more discussion. Also, if there had been some way to make the complex and rather “adult” themes accessible to children, this

may have stimulated more perspective sharing from the children.

#### **4.8.5 Phase Five: Participant confirmation**

This phase was completed after the Findings and Discussion section and sent to all participants who requested them. This was to reciprocate the effort participants had gone to in divulging their perspectives, hopefully providing insight into the outcomes of the research. A second function of doing so was to have participants confirm the veracity of the findings, and that there is no sensitive information included. None of the participants who received copies of the Findings and Discussion section reported any sensitive information or discrepancies in the findings of this thesis.

### **4.9 Participants**

The following table (Table 4.5) shows how the participants were distributed across the four rooms of *Tall Eucalypts* (*First* to *Fourth*) and the ages of these “playrooms”. The underlined and bolded participants were from the same family. For example, the consenting educator, Tarni, was the mother of Thomas, even though she took videos of the play of children from *Room D*. Similarly, Allysha was an educator in *Room B*, but took videos of her son Benji and spoke about practices of the family, so her perspective was analysed as a mother, not an educator. The other mothers who consented did not work in *Tall Eucalypts*. Merri is listed twice as the mother of two consenting children, thus is in brackets in her first listing.

| <b>Ages</b>   | <b>Playroom name</b> | <b>Consenting Educator</b>       | <b>Consenting Children</b> | <b>Consenting Mother</b> |
|---------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Birth to two  | <i>Room A</i>        | Merindah                         | Ernest                     |                          |
| Two to three  | <i>Room B</i>        | Teresa (Director)                | <b>Jacob</b>               | <b>[Merri]</b>           |
| Three to four | <i>Room C</i>        | <b>[Tarni]</b>                   | <b>Thomas</b>              |                          |
|               |                      | Kirra                            | Gwen                       |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | <b>Benji</b>               | <b>Allysha</b>           |
|               |                      |                                  | Belle                      |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | Simone                     |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | <b>Davis</b>               | <b>Hayley</b>            |
|               |                      |                                  | Rene                       |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | Ross                       |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | Sharon                     |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | William                    |                          |
| Four to five  | <i>Room D</i>        | Lowanna (Roaming <sup>11</sup> ) | <b>Flynn</b>               | <b>Richard</b>           |
|               |                      | Tarni (Administration)           | <b>Anna</b>                | <b>Judith</b>            |
|               |                      |                                  | Bindi                      |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | <b>Danielle</b>            | <b>Merri</b>             |
|               |                      |                                  | Esha                       |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | Dural                      |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | Kaiya                      |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | <b>Amy</b>                 | <b>Fiona</b>             |
|               |                      |                                  | <b>James</b>               | <b>Leena</b>             |
|               |                      |                                  | <b>Chris</b>               | <b>Kara</b>              |
|               |                      |                                  | <b>Maggie</b>              | <b>Pam</b>               |
|               |                      |                                  | Marie                      |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | <b>Ariel</b>               | <b>Ellie</b>             |
|               |                      |                                  | <b>Saule</b>               | <b>Mimi</b>              |
|               |                      |                                  | Tilly Billy                |                          |
|               |                      |                                  | Zahra                      |                          |

Table 4.5 Table of consenting participants and corresponding Rooms

<sup>11</sup> The term “roaming” is here used to denote a supplementary educator role, an educator who is capable of working in all four playrooms

## 4.10 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three stages; sorting and shortening videos; inductive coding and deductive coding (see Table 4.8, p. 189).

### 4.10.1 Sorting and shortening videos

A necessary process was “cleaning” the data for its next stage. I copied videos of children into files ready for the VSRDs with each child. Videos with only non-consenting children needed to be deleted also. For example, copies of a video with Flynn, James and a non-consenting child playing pirates would need to be put in Flynn’s and James’ folders to show to them in their respective VSRDs. No non-consenting children’s data were included in the findings.

### 4.10.2 Inductive coding

A defining characteristic of qualitative data analysis is that it is “open-ended and inductive rather than focused and deductive” (Blaikie, 2000, p. 38), however occasionally deductive analysis is used (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). Inductive *reasoning* is the act of forming conclusions from observations of a socially created reality (Goel, Gold, Kapur, & Houle, 1997). Inductive *analysis* is “the process of identifying analytical categories as they emerge from the data (developing hypotheses from the ground or research field upwards rather than defining them *a priori*)” (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000, p. 114; Shank, 2006). For Braun and Clarke (2006), this is a process of “coding” data (p. 83) – a now common term for qualitative data categorisation (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 130) – without trying to fit them in a pre-existing frame or the preconceptions of the researcher. It is therefore “data-driven” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

Initial categories I identified were what are termed “sensitizing concepts” (Bowen,

2008, p. 14): the concepts which inform a study “whether researchers state this or not and whether they are aware of them or not” (Gilgun, 2002, cited in Bowen, 2008, p. 14). As Gilgun claims, moreover, sensitizing concepts inform the beginnings of research, but may prove irrelevant as contradictory categories emerge. The initial categories (“fuzzy themes”) will arise but will be reduced and refined as data is coded (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000, p. 114). For this thesis, this meant repeatedly watching videos of stakeholder perspectives until I could identify stable categories (in this case, “types of learning through play”) based on what stakeholders said. After watching the videos time and again, parallels, coincidences, assumptions and similar sentiments were identified as comprising categories (Gibson & Brown, 2009).

For this thesis, “data-driven” meant categorising learning through play according to the types *identified by the stakeholders*. For example, Tarni (55) made the comment:

The reason that I chose this [play episode to record] was because there was a lot of dialogue, there was a lot of negotiation about what they were building. Tilly Billy was definitely directing the play about what they were making. So for me, I instantly thought, 'Wow, this is such a great example of the *social learning* that's happening there.' And I guess the hierarchy of friendships and play et cetera.

This excerpt gave clear indications of the mental categories that one educator (Tarni) used for sub-types of learning through play such as negotiation, dialogue and friendship hierarchies. Thus, this comment was coded in the manner demonstrated in Table 4.6.

Educators named another type “intellectual development” (Lowanna, 8:07#1) or “cognitive understanding” (Merindah, 6:45#1). These were similar enough that I could code them as “cognitive learning through play” (see the first type of learning through play in Table 5.1, p. 195). Educators called another type “social



learning” (Tarni, 58), so this I categorised as social learning through play. Another type identified by educators was “physical development” (Teresa, 11:53#1), which I categorised as physical learning through play (see Table 5.1).

| Type of learning             | Freq | Sub-type                       | Freq |
|------------------------------|------|--------------------------------|------|
| Social learning through play | 1    | Negotiation skills             | 1    |
|                              |      | Dialogue/ communication skills | 1    |
|                              |      | Friendship hierarchies         | 1    |

Table 4.6 Example of inductive coding from Tarni’s (55) comment

Other types of learning through play that were not so directly identified (e.g., by mothers and children) were inducted from participant descriptions of learning through play. For example, mothers spoke of learning how to enjoy oneself, learning to be independent, and learning how to create a sense of security. The idea that was common to all these descriptions seemed to be *intrapersonal learning through play*. The way this was coded is illustrated with another example, see Table 4.7 (and Table 5.2, p. 212).

Mothers also spoke about “cognition” (Fiona, 9:54), which I coded as cognitive learning, and “learning the social side of interacting” (Hayley, 4:57), which I coded as social learning through play. The children’s comments were the least straightforward to code inductively because they did not include direct references to overarching categories (see Table 5.3, p. 229).

Even though the inductive categories were the product of my subjectivity, they were also largely the product of multiple iterations of analysis of what the

stakeholders were talking about with respect to their perspectives on learning through play. This is a process of “collect[ing] many stories and inductively creat[ing] conceptual groupings from the data” (Riessman, 2003, p. 706). It is a process that has been used by other researchers with similar data. For example:

Parents’ responses to these questions were coded for the occurrence of spontaneously expressed ideas as the fell into several inductively derived categories (Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2004, p. 100);

We viewed the footage in its entirety and selected vignettes that reflected the major themes arising from what the parents had filmed (Lee & Thompson, 2007, p. 33).

| <b>Type of learning</b>  | <b>Sub-type</b>  | <b>Freq</b> | <b>Per</b> |
|--|------------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. Intrapersonal learning through play<br>(82 references, 25%) | (a) Enjoyment    | 31          | 9%         |
|  | (b) Independence | 28          | 8%         |
|  | (c) Security     | 9           | 3%         |

*Table 4.7 Example of inductive coding of intrapersonal learning through play*

The unit of analysis was the stakeholders’ expressions of perspective; I coded stakeholder comments for how they saw learning through play occurring. Types of learning through play that were drawn from three or more participants were kept, deleting all those which were mentioned by less than three people. This is not to say that those types of learning through play were valueless, but rather lacked “triangulation”, implying the lack validity of categories in qualitative data (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 58; Creswell & Miller, 2000). When types of learning

through play were established across multiple participants, this built internal validity (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2005).

This process was undertaken with the assistance of NVIVO® version 10, a computer program used for the analysis and presentation of qualitative or non-numerical data. This program allows the user to generate nodes (types of learning through play) into which data might be coded, and to organise those nodes hierarchically as well as thematically: the types of learning through play drawn from the findings for that stakeholder group in order of their recurrence – that is, the most often-mentioned categories are described first, the least often-mentioned last. This measure of frequency is used in descriptive statistics to crudely outline trends (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2004), but is appropriate in qualitative data as a means of providing a “useful summary of some aspects of the analysis” (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000, p. 114). Doing so can help in determining “the character of relationship between the categories” (Dey, 1993, p. 195), which in this data was a hierarchical one.

### **4.10.3 Deductive coding**

While inductive analysis was justified as a way to let the interpretations of stakeholder groups direct the coding as much as possible, which is in line with Vygotsky’s (1987) *interpretivist* stance on analysis (Bruner, 1987), the data generated by the children regarding their perspective on learning through play was qualitatively different from that of the adults (see 5.3, p. 229).

Whereas I could use the terms the mothers and educators used in their own words for the types of learning through play (e.g., cognitive, social, physical), the children’s comments about learning through play were not easily categorised in this way (see 5.3). Comments such as “I’m learning to turn things into pigs” (Maggie, 0:10#58) or “learning how to be in the sea” (Ariel, 7#21) were very

difficult to code into a few types of learning through play with multiple instances. This was extremely problematic because it made it difficult to apply a consistent analysis across all stakeholder groups.

To address this problem I reconsidered theoretical ideas regarding perspectives and the sociocultural basis of knowledge construction. Specifically, I focussed on Rogoff's (1995) "planes of analysis" (p. 139), which suggests perspectives can be viewed from a personal, interpersonal and cultural planes to generate a holistic analysis (see also Fleer, 2008a; Matusov, 2007; Vygotsky, 2004b). Specifically, the "institutional" plane appeared to be the most appropriate plane of analysis for thinking about the children's data because each stakeholder group occupied a different institution (e.g., "playground", family or ECEC setting). A full justification of why this was undertaken was given in 3.2 (see p. 116).

When I realised that Rogoff (1995) described the institutional plane as characterised by the developmental process of "apprenticeship" (p. 139), the children's data started to make sense. Not only did their comments bind them to the institution of the "playground", but their comments could also be seen as apprenticing others in the rules of play. I realised that the process of data analysis would benefit from using a predominately inductive approach to more deductive orientation to make sense of the children's data.

Returning to the theoretical literature on perspectives and on the conceptions of learning, I then drew on Hedegaard's (2008a) "levels of analysis" (p. 17). Hedegaard's levels of analysis describe perspectives as represented by "practices" and "values" (p. 17). Using Vygotsky's (1987) idea that "activity" must be analysed to understand the subject's "motive" (p. 282), Hedegaard (2008a) showed that *activity* is realised as "practices", and *motives* are realised as "values" at the institutional level (p.17). This was a significant shift for me because it meant I was able to upgrade the analysis from an individual level (e.g., trying to understand what it meant when Danielle (45#25) said she was learning "pirates")

to an institutional level (i.e., understanding what “practice” was represented by the children describing the main rule of play). As I transitioned from viewing the perspectives as representative of individuals to representative of their social membership within each “institutional” group, the children’s data became easier to analyse. This transition was significant conceptually, but also methodologically because it meant that the inductively-derived types of learning through play I had established for the educators and mothers now required a second layer of analysis.

|                    |                               |  |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>Stage One</b>   | Sorting and shortening videos | Organising videos according to participants;   |
| <b>Stage Two</b>   | Inductive analysis            | Letting the data suggest categories. Adding categories as they are suggested, then reiterating process several times more. |
| <b>Stage Three</b> | Deductive analysis:           | Examining <i>practices</i> and <i>values</i> that each comment suggests  |

Table 4.8 The three stages of data analysis

This transition meant I stopped looking at the data inductively as way of categorising what the stakeholders were saying about learning through play, and began trying to understand the practices and values when they expressed their perspectives in terms of the social membership of their given institution. This analysis allowed me to see the practices that were represented in the comments as a whole, rather than only coding at the individual level to particular descriptions regarding learning through play. This was useful because once the *practices* were

identified, I was able to identify the *values* associated with each group's perspective on learning through play. This allowed me to make sense of what the children were saying and to better understand what the adults were saying instead of relying only on the types of learning through play derived from the inductive analysis (see Table 5.3, p. 229). Having deductively analysed the children's data in this way (see Table 5.4, p. 241), I returned to the educator and mother data and recoded the initially inductive established types of learning through play.

Combining the inductive and deductive analyses into a rigorous method for analysing data, I was able to analyse all utterances for their practices and values (see Table 4.8).

#### **4.11 Limitations of the research**

The methodology presented above had some limitations to it. For example, instrumental case study was selected as a means of investigating three cases – the perspectives of three groups of people – in order to make inferences about those stakeholder groups in society generally. Of course, the socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions of the cases are unique and will only have preliminary value in representing the groups in the more general context of a developed nation.

In particular, the research was conducted in a wealthy area of Australia, very close to the richest suburb in Australia (ABS, 2012), and thus arguably presents a skewed depiction of primary stakeholder perspectives. This appears to be particularly relevant for mothers, of whom socio economic status and education levels have been shown to affect the perspectives on child-rearing (Gecas, 1979; Holloway et al., 1995; Kohn, 1979; Luster et al., 1989; McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1982;

Ninio, 1979;), particularly in relation to play (Cohen, 1981; Fisher et al., 2008; Fogle & Mendez, 2006; Haight et al., 1997; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 1990; Pirpir et al., 2009). In particular, higher socio economic status has been linked to views in favour of the child's autonomous learning through play. However, it was a deliberate delimitation of this thesis to not investigate socio economic status or other demographics.

Participant numbers were also limited to 39, which will have limited the opportunities to get a more representative sample, even if this was not the overall aim of the research (Tobin, Hseuh, & Karasawa, 2009), because the findings may have had more far-reaching implications. The fact that only those adult stakeholders that had time ended up participating may have skewed the data. As for the children who had guardian consent, all who were invited to participate volunteered except one three-year-old child. The children's enthusiasm to participate [which has been found with a similar project using VSRDs with young children (Morgan, 2007)] may have been more a reflection of the larger movie-making project than the idea of contributing to research per se, indicating the ethical shortcomings of this research because children were not enthusiastic to participate for the same reasons the research was originally imagined.

Finally, while I have justified my choice of sociocultural theory as the only framework which could explain the findings of the thesis, which offered a productive characterisation of play, which provided a rigorous framework to deductively analyse the children's findings after the inductive analysis provided little meaningful findings (see 4.10, p. 183 and 5.3, p. 229), and which also gave a meaningful definition of stakeholders by emphasising their membership to institutions, this choice also limited the findings and conclusions drawn from them. It is possible that other frameworks may have provided equally or more valuable insight regarding primary stakeholder perspectives.





## CHAPTER 5 - FINDINGS

This chapter introduces the main findings to the study. Findings included inductively-derived types of learning through play (see 4.10.2, p. 183) and deductively-derived practices and values (see 4.10.3, p. 187). Each stakeholder group indicated that many different types of learning through play were associated with their perspective (according to their stakeholder group). The practices and values associated with each stakeholder perspective differed according to the participant's social membership in each group. Educators' practices of justifying their pedagogical choices according to content- or child-centred approaches to ECEC revealed the value of balancing the two. Mothers' practices of the family revealed the value of their child's competent participation in the family. Children's practices of maintaining the imaginary situation of play revealed the value of the imaginary in play and the act of playing. The chapter presents these findings for each stakeholder group, beginning with educators, then mothers and concluding with the children's perspectives on learning through play.

### 5.1 Educators' perspectives on learning through play

Findings for the educators comprised three main inductively-coded categories, including cognitive, social and physical learning through play. These are presented in Table 5.1 (see p. 195). Deductive coding for practices and values identified the practices of citing child- and content-centred approaches and their value for the children's education. The inductively identified types of learning are presented in the left side of Table 5.1 and accompanied by a deductive reading in which the practices and values for educators are listed in the right columns.

### 5.1.1 Cognitive learning

The educators spoke most about cognitive learning through play, mentioning it on average once every 100 seconds. Sub-types identified for educators' perspectives on learning through play were about cognitive learning, including the properties of objects, literacy learning, and making sense of the world. Educators' perspectives showed the practices of justifying play provision in terms of curriculum and citing subject content such as literacy and numeracy.

#### 5.1.1.1 Object properties

This sub-type accounted for half of the educator comments related to cognitive learning through play. Merindah, a long-serving educator in the infants' playroom, Room A (see Table 4.5), made a detailed comment about children learning object properties (here, 'mathematical concepts') in a video she made of Ernest, an eighteen-month-old boy playing with water.

Water play is also another mathematical concept. Talking about evaporation, talking about the force with which you hit the water, then it splashes up, but if you do it softly then it doesn't splash up as much. ... Having playdough around the room can be also be a mathematical concept because they're talking about the texture or the force of, 'What happens if I hit it? What happens if I roll it down? If I add something to it, for example, if I come outside and add tanbark, how does it change the properties of the play dough?' So it's all these different things that, you know, everyday learning: there's always something mathematical behind it (Merindah, 21:56-22:47).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The symbols used in all transcription excerpts follow the standardisation used in traditional discourse analysis, as stipulated by DuBois and colleagues (DuBois, Scheutze-Coburn, Cumming, & Paolino, 1993). A glossary of the symbols used is included at the end of the thesis (see Chapter 8 -, p. 349), before the Reference List.

| Inductively coded                          |                               |      |      | Deductively coded   |  |
|--|-------------------------------|------|------|---|--|
| Type of learning                           | Sub-type                      | Freq | Perc | Practices   | Values   |
| 1. Cognitive learning (92 references, 48%) | (a) Object properties         | 45   | 24%  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Play material provision</li> <li>Children's independent learning through play</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Numeracy (mathematics as a subject discipline)</li> <li>Defined curriculum content (e.g., naming primary and secondary colours).</li> </ul>   |
|  | (b) Literacy                  | 13   | 7%   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Following the child's interest</li> <li>Providing materials for play-based learning (Audiobooks; picture books)</li> <li>Children's independent learning of content</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literacy content</li> <li>Child-centred approach</li> </ul>   |
|  | (c) Making sense of the world | 13   | 7%   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing play materials</li> <li>Relating play to curriculum content (e.g., scientific facts).</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child-centred approach</li> <li>The subject discipline of Science.</li> <li>The child's interest.</li> <li>Specified subject content</li> <li>Balance between child- and content-centred approaches</li> </ul>                                      |
| 2. Social learning (36 references, 19%)    | (a) Negotiation               | 16   | 8%   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Play provision for social interaction</li> <li>Providing freedom to negotiate</li> <li>Justifying non-intervention via human rights discourses</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child-led activity</li> <li>Peer group creation and participation.</li> <li>Children's rights</li> <li>Individual comfort levels (with physical play)</li> <li>Social harmony.</li> </ul>   |
|  | (b) Communication skills      | 9    | 5%   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assessment of children's needs and adapting pedagogy towards them</li> <li>Balancing the need to respect children's interests but also scaffold their learning to cooperate</li> <li>Music instrument play and exploration</li> <li>Educating the "whole child", including emotional learning</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tailoring professional decisions to the individual needs of a situation (e.g., the chaos of Room D)</li> <li>Project-based approaches</li> <li>Educator-led activity</li> <li>Subject content</li> <li>Emotional expression and learning</li> </ul> |
|  | (c) Sharing                   | 5    | 3%   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating rules for equity</li> <li>Scaffolding sharing behaviour</li> <li>Knowing stages of cognition appropriate practice</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social harmony and equity</li> <li>DAP, Piaget's stages of cognitive development</li> <li>Quiet and polite groups.</li> </ul>   |
| 3. Physical learning (31 references, 16%)  | (a) Gross motor skills        | 22   | 12%  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Caring for children</li> <li>Balancing between allowing the children to be agentic and intervening for their safety</li> <li>Citing physical learning</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children's rights and agency</li> <li>Children's well-being and safety. Content-related learning through play</li> <li>Child-centred, wholistic learning</li> </ul>   |

Table 5.1 Educators' perspectives on learning through play according to inductive and deductive coding

All the comments Merindah made were framed within the educator practices of play material provision: principally, “having” buckets, water, play dough, and tanbark. When she used the first person pronoun *I*, Merindah appeared to be referring to the children’s independent learning rather than “talking about” mathematical concepts with the children herself. In this way, her practices seemed to referring to the children’s internal learning processes independent of her intervention (see the right half of Table 5.1), rather than “talking about” the learning with them, as in “sustained shared conversations” in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). The practice of material provision for free play (see “practices” column of Table 5.1) is a key characteristic of traditional, child-centred approaches. What is also salient about this perspective is the value she attributed to “mathematical concepts” behind the “everyday learning” in playing with different materials. Yet her practices as an educator are not active or “intentional” in making the play that she facilitated through provision of materials connect to the content learning she appeared to value. Merindah’s comment suggested her valuing of the school-based discipline of Mathematics, and numeracy content related to this (see “values” column of Table 5.1), but also how this is achieved within a child-centred approach of only providing materials. There is no mention of any intentional or active practices.

Similarly, Kirra’s comment about Ross (of three years) playing with paint (see Figure 5.2) showed her perspective on the learning the properties of paint and how colours mix.

It was cool because they were going through all the colours that they were making....

[Yeshe:] So they're learning colours, and practising?

[Kirra:] Yeah. We had the three primary colours there so they can learn the secondary colours. But I think they've got them all mixed up so they're coming out brown instead of yellow [\*laughing\*] (Kirra, 5)



Figure 5.1 *Play in the sandpit*

Figure 5.2 *Ross mixing colours on paper*

Kirra's comment reflected the idea that playing with paints leads to learning "the secondary colours" through her and the other educators providing ("having") play materials. Her use of the definite article "the" implies there are a certain number of secondary colours (i.e., three), suggesting the practice of children learning specified subject content through play (see Table 5.1, p. 195). Enumerating primary and secondary colours suggested Kirra's valuing of content (see "values" column). However, her comments are framed in terms of the children's practices of "going through all the colours" independently, without her actively extending the learning possible (see "practices" column). Her own practice of just her "having the primary colours there" was framed as facilitating the children's active learning rather than intentionally teaching the colours. Similar to Merindah, Kirra's comment showed the practice of facilitating child-

centred play experiences that lead to learning valued curriculum content, but do not show the educator's active role in engaging with and extending children's learning, as would be seen with more "intentional" practices (see "practices" column of Table 5.1).

### 5.1.1.2 Literacy

Literacy was the second sub-type of the cognitive learning through play expressed in the educators' perspective (see the "sub-type" column of Table 5.1). Many educators discussed literacy in terms of learning language, a form of literacy content which is focused on in EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, p. 38). One "roaming" educator (who worked in multiple playrooms; see Table 4.5, p. 182), Lowanna, was the designated music teacher and frequently spoke about educating "the whole child" through a rigorous Arts program. She commented on a video of two three-year-olds listening to an audio book of *The Gruffalo's Child* (Donaldson, 2004), remarking that they were learning literacy by memorising the words and rhyme of the book:

This is one of the strategies for literacy, for sure. Repetition. But this particular book has all the elements that will appeal. It's got rhyme, it's got a great story, it's got tension, and it's got humour, and it's got that climactic kind of ending. ... - And of course when they go to the actual book, they can read it. I've seen Wally before reading it [\*makes page-turning gesture with hands\*] (Lowanna, 20)

Lowanna alluded to the practices of strategising for literacy as well as choosing activities that "appeal" or interest children. Her "strategies" show the practice of ensuring children meet academic expectations, valuing subject content in a similar way to Kirra and Merindah above. Yet her practice of "appealing" to the children is reminiscent of child-centred approaches which follow the child's interest (Chung & Walsh, 2000; Entwistle, 2012). Providing "a great story" which children can use to engage in literacy-based activity (memorising an audio book) implies

the child-centred practice of providing materials for play-based learning, where what the child chooses coincidentally leads to the learning of desired content. Lowanna appears to expect the child-centred approach to lead to curriculum content learning, and the educator practices of engaging with or extending learning through play are largely absent (see “practices” column of Table 5.1).

Merindah also listed the practices she used in her (birth to two) playroom within a wider definition of literacy that included music and foreign languages.

Language. So we use a lot of different types of text- So we've got- We've got a lot of magazines in the room. I bring in music. Music is a different type of text. But also, different languages, so I have bilingual books (Merindah, 26:50).

Again, by referencing skills that are precursors to literacy, Merindah situated her practice within curricular demands, such as the EYLF’s broad literacy-related Outcome, “Children are effective communicators” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 10), as well as *Outcome Two* that suggests educators “expose children to different languages” to connect with “their world” and its “diversity” (p. 27). Yet the practices that her perspective demonstrates are facilitating and passive rather than active and engaged, meaning that the connection between what the children have chosen and what she wants them to learn is purely happenstance. Through providing a rich environment with materials suited to the learning of curriculum content, the children are seen to actively and independently learn.

### 5.1.1.3 Making sense of the world

As part of the cognitive learning through play they saw, educators spoke frequently about learning how the world worked, making this the third most mentioned sub-type of cognitive learning through play. For example, Tarni - a long-serving educator who oversaw multiple playrooms - commented on

a really good example. I had a woman in a baby's room that I was mentoring and we were outside and it was in the sandpit and there was a little ant trailing along the edge of the sandpit and the child was just like [\*leans over and looks down, wide-eyed\*] mesmerised. And the adult was just like, you know, 'Oh look, let's dig and, here, come and fill up the saucepan.' So I went over there and said, 'This is actually a really good opportunity for you to talk about this' [\*pointing to the ground\*]. And she sort of just looked at me, so then with the child, I was like, 'Wow! What are the ants doing? Look, they're in a line', and, 'Where do you think they're going?' So it's recognising those little things. And then from there, they could have gone on to look at insects, like, 'What other kinds of insects can we find in this garden? Or, 'Let's go on a treasure hunt.' So that to me is learning through play. More of the instruction stuff (Tarni, 19:17).

Tarni's perspective on learning through play was that "instruction" should follow the child's interest because s/he is interested in understanding her/his world. In contrast to the other comments, this approach appeared to value a more active approach than a developmental, child-centred approach to play and the child's interest. Tarni distinguished herself from the more facilitating role of the pre-service educator in her example, who appeared to see the play materials (sand pit, shovels, buckets, etc.) as determining the learning through play available. Tarni showed how she would "guide" the child's interest in ants to "sustained shared thinking" about ant behaviour and other insects, which might be considered scientific both in sense of learning observation skills and learning categories of animals such as insects as opposed to, for example, humans (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). Thus she saw the cognitive learning through play about the world as content that could be "extended and enriched" (p. 5) by adults through "the instruction stuff" (Tarni, 19:17).

Another example of cognitive learning through play about the world was a theme that Kirra had brought into Room C (a theme of "living things"). Kirra (7:44) expressed her perspective that the children's play was consistently purposeful



because the children always chose play topics related to living things: “Even if it’s a book [that the children are choosing to have read to them], it’s not just a random book chosen. It’s all related [to the theme in the class]”. In this way, Kirra expressed her perspective with the practices of the children’s independent learning practices through play and their interests, indicating the educator practice of providing for free play (the children choosing a book for the educator to read to them) (see “practices” column in Table 5.1). While she did not mention science content, her choice of the example of living things is one that sits well in the EYLF’s notion of “exploring relationships with other living and non-living things” to connect with “their world” in *Outcome Two* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 27). Thus the practices she mentioned were the children’s active learning processes, and her valuing of the curriculum (see “values” column in Table 5.1) makes an arbitrary link between the two, as if her practices as an educator have not actively led to the children’s learning of content. Her comment that “[i]t’s all related” demonstrates this child-centred approach to learning through play which contrasts the more “intentional” and directive approach of the NQF reforms.

Lowanna similarly bound learning through play to science knowledge as “making sense of the world” in one comment:

But creative play, it’s about making sense of the world. It’s just you making sense of the world. Which is why I think kids like facts. Things like fairies are adult inventions. And cartoons. You give children facts like, 'This is the bee and this is what it does and da-da-da-da-da,' you know, [and] they really respond to real things. They’re trying to make sense of the world, how it works, 'Why do people do what they do? Why is this happening? How do I fit this together?' (Lowanna, 5:40)

Lowanna’s references to the children’s curiosity and to “creative play” seemed to value the child-centred approach to learning through play and imagination. Yet

her perspective on learning “facts” about the world through play also demonstrated the value she saw in specified curriculum content such as scientific “facts” about “real things”. Her juxtaposing of imaginary play and real-world learning appeared to value a balance between child-centred aspirations and content-centred demands. Her use of “give the children facts” was a more active, instructing role and was in relation to the children’s play interests fitted well with the EYLF’s directives to “use strategies such as modelling and demonstrating, open questioning, speculating, explaining, engaging in shared thinking and problem solving to extend children’s thinking and learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). This is consistent with the EYLF imperative that “educators take on many roles in play with children” (p. 15). This comments stands as a good example of following the children’s interests towards content learning, even though it remains as open-ended questioning rather than discovering learning together as co-players.

## **5.1.2 Social learning**

*Social learning* was a term educators used to describe the second type of learning through play. The sub-types identified were: learning negotiation, communication skills, and sharing. These were understood deductively as referencing the values of social harmony and equality via the practice of balancing content- and child-centred discourses (see Table 5.1).

### **5.1.2.1 Negotiation**

The first sub-type of social learning was negotiation. Learning negotiation was usually framed in the context of limited resources such as toys. For example, Tarni spoke about Tilly Billy, Marie, and Danielle’s Lego™ construction play.

The reason that I chose this [play episode to record] was because there was a lot of dialogue, there was a lot of negotiation about what they were building. Tilly Billy was

definitely directing the play about what they were making. So for me, I instantly thought, 'Wow, this is such a great example of the social learning that's happening there.' And I guess the hierarchy of friendships and play et cetera (Tarni, 55).

Here Tarni included dialogue, negotiation, directing, and hierarchies of friendships (power negotiation) as part of such “social learning” (see Table 4.6, p. 185). That Tilly Billy’s leadership was a catalyst for Tarni’s discussion of social learning implied the value of “power hierarchies” in social learning showing the value Tarni attributes to child-led activity. She also stated that one child was “directing” the play, showing her facilitating, rather than directing, educator role. Her “hands off” practice of child-centred pedagogy denotes her value of the autonomy of the child’s learning (see “values” column of Table 5.1).

Teresa, the Centre Director also demonstrated the same value in her perspective on a video of informal, 18-minute sustained running and jumping play that evolved out of several three-year-olds’ play. Teresa discussed all the different ways that children negotiated their participation, first through observation, then through participating in an abbreviated way. The following comment showed Gwen’s (a three-year-old from Room C) non-verbal negotiation with a boy:

What I noticed about [the boy] is that when the other boys jumped onto the mattress, they jumped in a group. So I noticed that every time, he times his run- Oops! [\*In response to a child falling over in the video\*]- In the meantime, Gwen decides she's not going to have a bar of that, so she goes to help [someone] out, so she only *watches* the whole thing. In the meantime, there's [sic] the three boys. These are the most predominant boys that kept wanting to take the mat, so [the boy] goes \*around\* and jumps. So I think he actually strategized, 'Obviously, only three boys are going to fit safely to jump like that, so I need to go around and I'll crash on the mat like that' [where there was room] .... Doesn't it show that in children's play, intuitively they know how to establish safe parameters for themselves? And then they also find a way to negotiate who does what, without ever talking... The

powerfulness of the play is the fact that the children influence each other. They can intuitively work out a game and they can continue to persist with the game, without anybody giving them the rules or the length of time. They can collaborate. And bring in other elements, and continue to play. Like, they were able to accommodate other children who wanted to come in. See Gwen actually brought in a different game, and she influenced him to take his shoes off (Teresa, 4:46-18:21).



*Figure 5.3 Danielle, Tilly Billy and Marie's Lego construction*

*Figure 5.4 Negotiating how to crash like Wally while feeling safe*

Teresa framed non-verbal negotiation in terms of space on the mat (a resource) as well as personal boundaries (what the boy felt comfortable with). The first of these, providing materials for play, is an instance of the developmental perspective in which educators provide resources for children's independent learning through play. The second seems to introduce a human rights perspective, of which Teresa was a big supporter, in which play is the right of the child which adults must not interfere with. The comment as a whole demonstrates Teresa's practices of not interfering with play, merely observing and understanding the children's developmental level and learning through play. Teresa's perspective

was that “they are learning all what they need to learn without us predetermining what all that learning is about” (Teresa, 28:44), which appeared to be a clear reference to the DAP approach and corresponding lack of direct teaching practices in learning through play. Teresa demonstrated the value she attributed to the children’s autonomy and rights, and therefore to the child-centred approach which supports this (see “values” column of Table 5.1).

### 5.1.2.2 Communication skills

Communication skills were the second most frequently mentioned sub-type of social learning through play in the educators’ perspective. Comments about learning to communicate well were often made in reference to educator- as well as child-led play experiences. For example, over my time at Tall Eucalypts, educators often commented on the children of the Room D being chaotic. When Tarni was supervising these children, she recorded teacher-led games she played with them such as Musical Chairs. When asked if it was learning through play, Tarni replied:

It is definitely play, because you're playing a game, and I think that there's learning behind it because, hey, you had to *listen* [\*laughs\*]... I just think its the basic learning. So they were learning about space, and cooperating, and listening, and taking direction from the teacher, and all that physical stuff too (Tarni, 21:19-24:06).

In the above perspective, “taking directions from the teacher” revealed a more traditional view on the autonomy of children (than, for example, Teresa’s): valuing educator-led activities, which are more commonplace in content-centred approaches because specific content needs to be taught. Tarni presumably showed this perspective to counter Room D’s reputation for lacking cohesion. Yet Tarni’s laugh appeared highly significant as a marker that she was aware of the politics of being so didactic that the children’s voices were quashed (such as human rights-

based approaches). Thus, Tarni tempered the group's need for more direct instruction with the rights-based discourse, prevalent in arguments for free play curricular provision. Further, Tarni's comment about "the basic learning" she saw as commonplace in play-based practice was later contrasted with "deeper learning" (24:20) she saw possible through play (as in the previous example with ants in the sandpit, see p. 200). In citing the "deeper" learning possible (e.g., by balancing educator- and child-led activities, as in the EYLF), she showed her valuing of knowledge of contemporary curriculum. However, apart from learning "to listen", the other learning Tarni saw was directed by the children and not extended through her direction, such as space and cooperation, which presumably are learned independently by children in the DAP sense.

Lowanna also saw learning communication in terms of self-expression. She video recorded drumming and dancing through which she saw children learning to express emotions:

But music, as you know, is just about expression of emotion. They were just expressing. Last night, it was quite wild with the drums and stuff, it brought out this primal [expression] (Lowanna, 11:45).

Her pedagogy of teaching music and dance encouraged self-expression. Doing so valued the child-centred philosophical stance on holistic education because emotional expression and learning is highlighted in this approach. For instance, in this comment, the practices of self-expression that Lowanna mentioned show the value she placed on children's autonomous learning through play and her facilitating role as an educator.

Thus the educators demonstrated their perspective that children were learning communication skills through play. These perspectives revealed the practices of citing content- and child-centred approaches with minimal adult interference.



Figure 5.5  
*"Primal" dancing  
 in Room D*

Figure 5.6  
*Shaking maracas*

Figure 5.7  
*Drumming*

Figure 5.8  
*Shaking ankle  
 bells*

### 5.1.2.3 Sharing

Educators also noted the learning of sharing as a sub-type of the social learning through play. The notion of sharing was perhaps pronounced for educators because of larger group sizes. Nonetheless, Kirra (Room C) spoke about her group sharing toys:

[I]n terms of sharing I have seen them, you know, 'Oh, so-and-so has got four trains', you know, like, 'he needs another one.' Or, 'You need to share with so-and-so because he's got- As I said before, you know, sticking up for each other isn't the word, but making sure that everyone's happy. For that age range, for me, that's like, 'Wow!' (Kirra, 15:41)

In being impressed by their sharing, Kirra showed her values of social equity and camaraderie in ensuring classmates are respected. The practices of children “sharing” and “sticking up for each other” suggests the value of independent learning that was fostered through Kirra’s provision of resources. Interestingly, her interventions in play to encourage social equity were frequently demonstrated during my stay there, which contrasted her otherwise non-interventionist values

in relation to learning through play. This highlights even more strongly the educator perspective that play leads to children's independent learning, as evidenced by the practices mentioned (see "practices" column).

As an exception to this perspective, Merindah commented on how she scaffolded similar values.

We start by doing simple things like Group Time in terms of dancing and singing, so that's a beginning way of encouraging them just to be aware of their friends around them. That's almost the beginning of how we do it. Then we use small group experiences, for example stacking rings in size, where the children get a disk and put the disk onto the stem. We will then encourage children to take turns one-by-one and celebrate their achievements. When the child has actually put it on the stick, then we, you know, we celebrate it, and we encourage all their friends around them to celebrate it with them. So that's a good achievement by themselves, so, 'I do this, and then she does this, and then I do this'. So they start to grasp the knowledge. From there, in terms of the sandpit, we start to extend the play bigger and bigger, but anything more than three people we don't do in [Room A] because it's not realistic for them to be able to cognitively understand that 'I have to share with four people around me' (Merindah, 15:38).

Merindah's practices here included "doing" activities and small-group exercises, "encouraging children", "celebrating" achievements, "extending the play", demonstrating an active role in learning through play. Yet Merindah thought it unrealistic for under-tuos to share with four or more others when these practices during Group Time valued encouraging turn-taking and sharing. This linked with several references Merindah made to "developmentally appropriate" (20:20) behaviour of children, as well as "regression" (11:21), which indicated her practice of knowing developmental theories. Her use of the word "actually" also suggests the practice of looking for demonstrated (rather than assumed) behaviour, reminiscent of observational charts and tests used within DAP curricula. Finally,



Merindah has not “extended” child-initiated activity, but rather initiated and directed herself. Thus, not only did Merindah balance content- and child-centred approaches, but she also appeared to take on different roles that allowed for independent or more guided learning, as is expected in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), but did not allow the children to initiate the activity themselves, casting doubt onto whether the activity would be considered play by the children themselves (see 2.2.2.1, p. 67).

### **5.1.3 Physical learning**

Physical learning via play was the third most-mentioned type, with a frequency of 31 times, and constituting about 16% of all comments. While there were references to fine- as well as gross-motor skills as sub-types, half of the educators mentioned the former (the minimum number to warrant inclusion here), while only three mentioned fine motor skills. Therefore, I will explore some of the comments related only to gross motor skills learned through play.

#### **5.1.3.1 Gross motor skills**

Gross motor skills were mentioned 22 times as a sub-type of physical learning. One example of the type of comment that was made was from Teresa, about the running and crashing game. The comment seems to be framed in terms of her own caring role, concerned they might have an accident due to the “sloppiness” of their motions:

They're really pushing their [own] limits. When I asked them, 'Now, is it a time to stop?', because I could really see that this was getting to a tricky place, intuitively I could see that this might be a nice place to stop, and I kept the camera rolling, but now I can see that they're getting tired, and they're getting sloppy, and they're not getting around the pole all that well either. Almost in

slow motion now (Teresa, 12:39).

The practices evidenced in this comment are all children's practices of independent learning that values child-centred approaches to learning through play with the exception of Teresa's practice of "seeing that this might be a nice place to stop" and asking the children to determine if that was the case. Her asking questions framed from the child's agency (asking because children are capable of making an assessment of their own body's fatigue) are simultaneously from a care and risk-prevention perspective, evidencing her role as a carer, particularly for infants and toddlers (*Rooms A and B*). Her display of nuanced knowledge about care, safety, agency and when they are appropriate to consider was a practice of valued educators, who are entrusted with the care and education of many families' loved ones and responsible to ACECQA for children's safety (ACECQA, 2012, Standard 2). These practices appear to be consistent with the EYLF directive to take on multiple roles in the ECEC centre but do not evidence Teresa's entry into play despite her concerns about safety, suggesting she as an educator did not want to interfere in the play.

A second example of gross motor skill learning through play commentary came from Tarni - who saw this learning as less "deep" than learning from guided pedagogy - framing it as subconscious and visceral:

it's more about that subconscious learning, so, 'How does my body work?  
How can I push myself? What are those limits?'-type of thing (Tarni, 15:38)

Her comment showed the practice of relating physical play to the learning which is expected in the centre. While the learning mentioned does not fit as closely with curricular and parental expectations as, for example, numeracy learning, physical learning is pinpointed as an area of DAP (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), the NQF (DoE, 2013) and the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). However, Tarni's practices in this comment were facilitating the child's autonomous learning rather than entering and extending it as the EYLF demands (p. 4).

### **5.1.4 Conclusion to the educators' perspectives**

This section has presented the findings regarding the perspective of educators on learning through play in their centre. Types of learning that were mentioned by most educators were cognitive, social, and physical. Practices associated with these perspectives were either child- or content-centred approaches, yet rarely were associated with the educators' active practices. Instead, the link between the play that children had chosen and the learning of subject content that resulted was purely coincidental, demonstrating mostly facilitating educator practices. Examples of referencing child-centred approaches included valuing the child's agency, developmentally appropriate practice, following the child's interests, and holistic education (e.g., emotional and physical learning). Examples referencing content-centred approaches included valuing predetermined curriculum content (e.g., facts, primary colours, text), literacy, and mathematical concepts. The values presented were predominantly of the children's independent learning through play.

## **5.2 Mothers' perspectives on learning through play**

As is shown in Table 5.2, there were three types of learning through play to emerge from the mothers' data in the inductive analysis (left half of the Table). These types are organised in terms of frequency and the percentage of the frequency relative to how many comments were made overall.

The inductively derived findings indicated that intrapersonal, conceptual, and social learning were mothers' most-mentioned types of learning through play. The practices and the values associated with learning through play for this stakeholder group are represented in the right-hand side of Table 5.2.

| Inductively coded                                    |                              |    |     | Deductively coded   |  |
|--|------------------------------|----|-----|---|--|
| Type of learning                                     | Sub-type                     | Fr | Per | Practices   | Values   |
| 1. Intrapersonal development<br>(82 references, 25%) | (a) Enjoyment                | 31 | 9%  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discovering one's passions/interests</li> <li>Allowing children to resolve family conflicts</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individuality</li> <li>Personality development</li> <li>Participation in the family</li> <li>Enjoyment/fun</li> <li>Becoming independent from siblings and parents</li> </ul> |
|  | (b) Independence             | 28 | 8%  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical play provision</li> <li>Playing music</li> <li>Washing dishes</li> <li>Organising own activities</li> <li>Segregation of child play from adult work</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Playing without adult intervention/ supervision</li> <li>Learning through play/ play's extrinsic value</li> <li>Independence</li> </ul>                                       |
|  | (c) Security                 | 9  | 3%  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Play provision (imaginary)</li> <li>Allowing outside adult rules to be broken</li> <li>Freeing children from the disempowerment of the external world</li> <li>Playing in ways that provide sense of security, compensating for being smallest in family.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling powerful and autonomous</li> <li>The internal realm of imagination</li> <li>Feeling like an equal/ individual</li> </ul>  |
| 2. Cognitive learning<br>(50 references, 15%)        | (a) Exploring ideas          | 20 | 6%  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Play material provision</li> <li>Allowing children to explore concepts and interests freely</li> <li>Cooking.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conceptual roaming</li> <li>Freedom from constraints of time and order.</li> </ul>  |
|  | (b) Organisation             | 12 | 4%  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reconciling tensions</li> <li>Drawing. Acting out ideas from their lives.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reconciling emotional and conceptual conflict</li> <li>Family cohesion.</li> </ul>  |
|  | (c) Properties of objects    | 11 | 3%  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Play material provision</li> <li>Understanding the world</li> <li>Commuting to work</li> <li>Playing family games (Twenty Questions, Eye Spy)</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Purposeful and functional adult activities (e.g. professional work)</li> <li>Persistence</li> <li>Reasoning</li> </ul>  |
| 3. Learning social skills<br>(44 references, 13%)    | (a) Different social roles   | 18 | 5%  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Modelling social roles</li> <li>Going to cafes and restaurants</li> <li>Cooking</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Role play</li> <li>Different social codes</li> <li>Family cohesion</li> </ul>   |
|  | (b) Cooperation/ negotiation | 17 | 5%  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reaching agreements through experimentation</li> <li>Adult mediation</li> <li>Preparation for school practices</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School readiness.</li> <li>Family harmony.</li> <li>Individuation from siblings.</li> </ul>   |

Table 5.2 Mothers perspectives on learning through play according to inductive and deductive coding

## **5.2.1 Intrapersonal development<sup>13</sup>**

The most extensively mentioned type of learning – mentioned over 80 times in the 6 VSRDs conducted (see Table 4.5) – was considered intrapersonal development. Each mother mentioned this type of learning an average of every two minutes. The learning was of emotionally significant, internal resources that the mothers believed children acquired through play at home.

As listed in Table 5.2, intrapersonal development included learning how to enjoy oneself, learning independence, creating a sense of security, developing patience, and creating a sense of achievement. These will be elaborated.

### **5.2.1.1 Enjoyment**

The most evident maternal perspective on learning through play was that children can find their interests and passions through discovering the activity they enjoy the most. Many of these comments were in relation to the practices of exploring likes and dislikes, to discovering activities which might express the child's individual personality (and potentially their future adult career choices). One mother, Allysha, commented on a video she made of her three-year-old son's play with washing baskets he had lined up in their living room to make train carriages. Her perspective reflects the notion that he was exploring his being "into" trains and the enjoyment associated with his interest:

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<sup>13</sup> Some of this section has been published already, wherein "intrapersonal learning" is termed "personal learning" (Colliver, 2014, forthcoming).



Figure 5.9 Benji's basket "train"

Figure 5.10 Davis plays the ukelele

...he was really intensely into trains. So he sees the trains and he has that really intense feeling, like 'Wow! I looove it' [\*eyes light up\*]! You know, that really kind of 'wow'. So with building this [train in his play] up he wants to get back to that feeling. Maybe it has a lot to do with getting that good feeling back (Allysha, 1:26#2).

When asked what her son was learning, Allysha described the emotionality of personal interests. For Allysha, play allowed her son to explore the emotion of enjoyment. This was particularly relevant in light of the dynamic with his older sister, which Allysha saw as power-imbalanced. As will be explored in the next subsection, play (and specifically Benji's interest in playing with trains) was a way that he could assert his individuality and differentiate from his older sister (Allysha, 3:47#2). Deducing the family practices and values evident in this perspective, it is possible to see the practice of experimenting to find one's interests and passions, as well as the value of individual personality traits in doing so. Trains for Allysha were an expression of her son's unique interests, and show the value for her of Benji being a successful participant in the family by individuating himself through such interests.

Similarly, Fiona suggested her four-year-old daughter (Amy) found her passion for storytelling through play. Fiona made a 15-minute video of her daughter playing with a drawing board, telling stories, drawing them, and asking her mother how to spell significant words from those stories. Fiona's perspective showed the value of Amy discovering her interest in books and drawing, as well as the stories and literate practices associated with them.

She likes making stories. So she does a lot of drawings, and she asks me before to write stories for her, and she will write a bit of it or part of the story. And then she moved onto the story-telling thing with a book, so that's what she loves to do (Fiona, 2:24).

Not only was there a value in literacy and school readiness, but also in finding one's individual passions (i.e., "what she loves to do"). Similarly, the perspective showed the practices carried out in the home: writing (for leisure; based on fiction rather than the outcome-based, rote-learning approach often used in scholastic settings) as well as experimenting with different activities to find one's passions. The play with drawing and telling stories could have also been considered an extension of another activity which Fiona mentioned: storytelling. In one sense, Fiona's perspective demonstrated the practice of reading storybooks and making up stories for children, which is an important insight about the institution of the family. Her literacy practices showed the value of Amy's success in literacy.

Many of these instances were implied from comments on what made their child unique. For example, Hayley discussed how her son Davis (three years old) liked to play the imaginary situation that he was putting on a rock concert for everyone. Part of that imaginary play was that he was in his underwear only, presumably because this was the way he saw that rock concerts were carried out, but also because he was most comfortable in underwear.

[Davis] would basically instigate over summer that everyone [in his class]

would take their clothes off and do concerts in their jocks out the back [of the centre]... he loves taking his clothes off, he always has! As soon as he's home, it doesn't matter what time of year it is, he'll just have undies and a T-shirt on, even in the middle of winter... he got everyone into it here (Hayley, 2:52).

Thus, it was perceived that Davis was able to develop his enjoyment in two senses: first, through his love of being in very little clothing, and secondly via the fun of putting on rock concerts. The practices implied are again the experimentation through play to learn about one's own passions and interests, but also the adult practice of playing music. This demonstrated the value of individual personality traits, tastes, likes and interests, including music tastes, which are important for many as social identity development. It also suggested Hayley's value of Davis's individuation and self-definition in the family through a culturally-valued activity such as creating music. The most frequently-mentioned aspect of the maternal perspective on home-based learning through play was that children learn to find and express their passions and interests.

#### **5.2.1.2 Independence**

The second most frequent sub-type of the intrapersonal learning through play that mothers saw was the learning of independence through play. Independence was seen as individuation from other family members, but also autonomy. For example, Ellie recorded her (five-year-old) daughter's home play. When watching these videos during the VSRD, she commented that outdoor play in nature was important for her daughter (Ariel) to learn to become independent and capable in the outside world. She recounted a story of returning to the Philippines with Ariel to see relatives, who were competent at managing risk.

My grandmother passed away and we had to go back to the Philippines just for ten days... You see how different the kids [in the Philippines] are to her, you know? There's Ariel, and she was so scared and sheltered; it took her a while to just go- and these kids were just so smart! ... In the Philippines, you



grew up a lot faster, you became a lot more independent, you became more street smart a lot faster because you were left [to] your [own] devices... that needs to be encouraged (Ellie, 17:57-19:21).

Here learning through play was framed within the much wider family institution of the extended family (perhaps more culturally relevant in the Philippines), and Ariel's play with more independent and "smart" peers was seen as catalyst for her own intrapersonal development. Even though Ariel was an only child, her independence was still relative to her extended family, and thus independence was framed in the family institution. The practice represented by these comments was that of allowing and providing for play (in this case, by being in a natural and open setting). The practice of play provision, including the segregation of child from adult activities, was echoed by all mothers and shows the value not only of play for itself but also of learning through play as an educational practice. The freedom inherent in this play provision values "street smartness" (c.f., "scared and sheltered"), and implies her "encouragement" that Ariel be successful in the practices of the (extended) family such as playing in the jungle and learning about the world.

Another example of learning independence was a recording of Maggie washing plastic bottles at the kitchen sink (see Figure 5.11) in readiness for her next art project (usually involving taping or gluing them together to make other objects). Pam saw this action of preparation for her own art making in terms of independence. Here independence was her initiative in preparing for her art practices, without relying on Pam.

She's learning- I think she's learning independence because she's getting up and doing it all herself and all that (Pam, 7:16).

What is interesting about this notion of independence is that it shows the practices and values of the family institution. Along with the other mothers, Pam had

provided for her daughter's play by preparing materials to make models out of plastic bottles (paint, glue, sticky tape, paper, pencils, etc.), and she showed her values by encouraging this type of play (widely evident in many mothers' videos). She valued Maggie's imagination and creative pursuits, and has encouraged independent procurement of the materials to pursue these values herself. The way this is procured is also culturally significant, as Pam provided a stool for her daughter to be able to reach the sink and wash dishes just as adults do in the home setting. The connection between the family and child values is thus striking, and shows how Pam values her daughter being a successful participant in family practices by being self-dependent in the cultural practice of building cardboard and plastic artworks. Thus, independence was expressed not so much in relation to siblings, but to her independence from, and ability to replicate, her mother's play provision (see Table 5.2). As will be shown with other mothers' provision for play (e.g., Joan), play was also positioned as a cultural practice sanctioned only for children (with minimal adult input, frequently for the purpose of giving time and space for adults to pursue more functional activities such as "work"). Joan would set up games for her children so she could continue work on her (home-based) printing business:



*Figure 5.11 Maggie washing plastic bottles to add to her art resources*



*Figure 5.12 Benji playing with his stick in the yard*



*Figure 5.13 Jacob playing with the washing machine*

[\*laughing\*] I don't know what she's learning, but I'm learning how to entertain my child for five minutes so that I can get something done! (Joan, 19:32)

The practices of adult work and child's play appeared polarised, and Pam's framing of her child's play as preparation for adult work was seen in her perspective about learning independence and autonomy, which is valued in relation to Maggie's burgeoning success in these practices.

### 5.2.1.3 Security

Allysha made several comments about her son's play as an avenue to regain power that he lost when playing with his older sister. Allysha expressed this perspective in relation to playing with trains and sticks (see Figure 5.12). This was typified in her comments:

[F]or him, everything is power ... all his life is dominated by power; his sister is overpowering him. He's so dependent on her. Playing out those train themes, for him it's very powerful. He drives the scenario, and he jumps in the front carriage and it's, 'Well, I drive that powerful thing [the train]' ... he's in such an uneven relationship [to his sister] (Allysha, 2:28).

He always has a stick. And the stick I think is also a symbol of power ... For [Benji] play is about being his own person, and being able to exercise power. It's a legal power, it's a kind of power which he can [exercise], for him it's legal because any other time he uses the stick and he tries to do this [\*makes hitting gesture\*], he always gets told off. In play he can always do that. (Allysha, 4:42-12:44#2)

What is interesting about this comment is Allysha's allusion to the freedom from adult regulation (in play, he is not told off for things he normally would), and his interests and passions (trains and sticks) are also related to regaining autonomy

from his position as youngest in the family. Thus play is somewhat sanctioned from the realm of rules and control. This practice of “allowing play to be play” values expression of the ego and individuality, outside the norms of society where this power is what Allysha (12:50) called “illegal” (adult-sanctioned).

This perspective on security was also framed in relation to older siblings. Two-year-old Jacob slept with his “precious” pillow and sat on it during mealtimes to be at the same height as his other siblings. Joan saw the value of this tool to facilitate his participation as an equal member in the practice of family meals. To illustrate the security it provided, Joan discussed how he “has to” play washing and drying it, if it got food on it during mealtimes.

He likes to sit on his pillow - this is a pillow that he sleeps with, it's very precious - put it underneath him[self] at the table, so he's raised a little bit, and often that means that it gets wet or dirty....at the table, so he's raised a little bit, and often that means that it gets wet or dirty. ... He knows the idea, he knows exactly what the washing machine does, and what the dryer does, 'wash, wash, wash'. Everything has to be cleaned (Joan, 26:00).

Thus the practice of eating dinner as a family and allowing Jacob to “play” with the washing and drying machines shows the value of his sense of security, despite his smaller size (see Figure 5.13). Through his father’s apprenticing (pictured behind him), Jacob was also seen learning the valued home practices of washing and cleaning up, valuing his participation in the practices of the family.

## **5.2.2 Cognitive learning**

The second most frequent type of learning through play was cognitive learning through play. While learning content such as literacy and numeracy was mentioned, comments categorised in conceptual learning were more generic conceptual tools related to organising experiences and internal schemata, such as exploring new ideas, organising old ideas, and learning about physical properties

of the natural world.

### 5.2.2.1 Exploring ideas

The notion that children explore new ideas in free play was prevalent in the mothers' perspective. For example, Hayley believed that Davis mentally experimented with concepts:

...travelling on the aeroplane, so, role playing where they pack up bags, they get a taxi to the airport. They get on a bus, one of them is the bus driver, they have a name - 'bus driver', 'taxi driver' - I suppose they're lucky to have each other in that regard - Davis will take a lot of that stuff further in that they have their own drawer of cooking utensils, so sometimes he's the chef, sometimes he's the barista. They've got a little coffee machine, so they get into that. And so then he'll take it from that to 'Well, what do we need in the fridge to make that sort of stuff?', do shopping lists, and then when we [the parents] are cooking stuff, he'll want to help us to do that too. So, it sort of comes full circle (Hayley, 1:19).

Learning through play was seen as conceptual roaming, "getting into" different ideas to try them out. Again, the value of freedom from external constraints was salient, yet this time those constraints were of time and purpose; in play, Davis and his younger brother could move to and from different contexts (aeroplane, taxi, airport, bus, restaurant, café, and kitchen) without the constraints of time and space, suggesting the great value attributed to play and the freedom inherent. This similarly appeared to value Davis' exploration of passions, in this case for food. Hayley's play provision was expressed in terms of material resources (his drawer of utensils), suggesting the value she saw in her sons becoming successful in home practices like cooking and cleaning (see Figure 5.14).

Leena, mother of five-year-old James, spoke about imaginary play with plastic

figurines (see Figure 5.15 and Figure 5.16), and the space this provided James to percolate on current issues in his life.

When he's playing the character and having a conversation, sometimes he brings into it what he learned through the day. 'Oh, Mummy said this, so you must do that.' [\*In a different voice for a different character\*] 'Oh, I don't like it.' 'Well, you can't hit people', or something like that (Leena, 30:30)

Leena also believed that learning through play was a process of “getting into” different roles and ideas to experiment with them, and her provision of toys for this purpose was a practice evidenced. This valued similar conceptual roaming to make sense of their world, and shows the value of James becoming successful in interacting with others.



*Figure 5.14 Davis playing "restaurants", making shopping lists*

*Figure 5.15 James playing out a character*

*Figure 5.16 James playing out a character*

### **5.2.2.2 Organisation**

The second sub-type of conceptual learning was learning conceptual organisation of ideas. For Pam, this was Maggie’s organising activities according to why she does them:

I think she likes to look at what she does and why. And I put that down to the

fact that she comes from two different households, and we do things from very different perspectives. So she is learning to negotiate her way through those things too and to join them together. And that's her meshing. Maggie likes to mesh. She likes to bring things together into a story, and that's her story. And in her story, there are things that she does, the television (too little, and too much), there's the play, and so on... (Pam, 8:02).

This organisation was framed within the practice of emotionally and intellectually assimilating the differences between two different households ("meshing") in relation to her experience of living within two households. Leena held a similar perspective in relation to James' drawing, which she saw as a way of organising emotions and ideas:

[Pam, in reference to imaginary role play:] Sort of what we do when we dream. Repeating and working out.

[Leena:] Yeah! That's true! He does that in his drawing too, when he draws, sometimes he draws characters. And there's always gonna be a story. His drawings will most likely be a story, and there's some description or a purpose for that particular presentation. It's just interesting for me to learn sometimes. And sometimes they refer back to a conversation we had maybe like many days ago, and it stays with him, and he'll start drawing it out (Leena, 30:37).

Leena's perspective indicated that playing is often a search for a "description" or "purpose" for what has happened, and both her and Pam's accounts show the value attributed to children being successful at dealing with such experiences. Through material, space, and time provision for play, mothers indicated that learning conceptual organisation through play allows for success in the family context.

### 5.2.2.3 Properties of objects

Another sub-type of cognitive learning through play was learning the physical properties of objects in the natural world. It was mentioned by seven of the eight mothers. Kara, five-year-old Chris' mother, exemplified this when she spoke about Maggie's play blowing bubbles (see Figure 5.17).

I mean a lot of it's just about learning the properties of the liquid; what she can and can't do with it. It's just experimenting. So I guess I see it more in a kind of scientific [way] (Kara, 6:35)

Although aspects of the previous sub-types also emerge, Kara's clear reference to the properties of objects is representative of the perspective that experimental play leads to the learning of physics and chemistry. Pam's comment of the same play episode shows a caring and emotional aspect of the practice of play provision, wherein Pam implied the value of quality toys in this provision:

she spends hours on those [bubble blowers], and they're useless. I should get her one of those expensive ones, which are good. So, she's certainly learning persistence (Pam, 1:55)



Figure 5.17 Maggie blowing bubbles

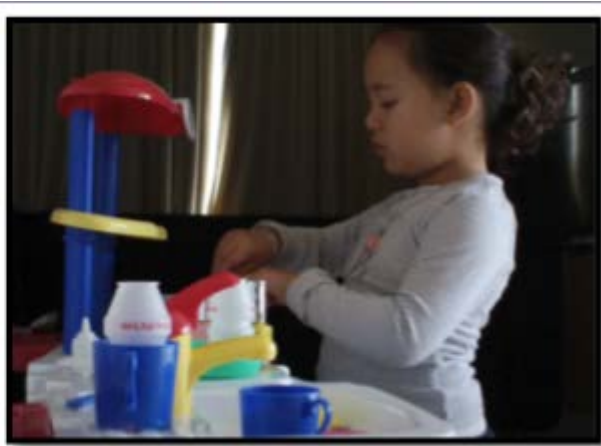


Figure 5.18 Ariel playing cooking in her "home corner" toy set

The comment also shows the value Pam attributed to internal resources such as persistence. Persistence was also alluded to by Fiona in relation to her daughter



Amy's playing *Twenty Questions* in the car as they commuted (for one hour) to work and the ECEC centre.

I think she's learning to be aware of the things around her, yeah, and then descriptive words. I guess she can formulate that on her own without me telling her. And then when I describe words to her and she can actually get it, I think it's really good because that kind of develops her cognition. She uses colour, and movements, and she actually, um, she is distressed when I can't guess it (Fiona, 9:35).

The practice evidenced was commuting from the home to the ECEC centre, and playing verbal games together. Implicit in this was entertaining children to distract them from boredom during adult activities such as driving. The way practices such as Fiona's driving separates children and play from adults and work is meaningful in terms of values. Play is trivialised as "child's play" and is seen as a way in which to get purposeful work accomplished. By attending, with scholastic question,<sup>14</sup> to her daughter's potential boredom, Fiona is apprenticing Amy's participation in abstract reasoning practices that are used in technologically-advanced societies (Rogoff, 2003). Fiona's comment was a reminder of how little the other mothers discussed academic practices, and the value they attributed to family practices. Her comments also showed the practices which value adult work over children's play (unless it is structured by an adult), and the provision of play time for children

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<sup>14</sup> Twenty Questions is a game which was popularised on US TV in the 1940s that asks the answerer 20 yes/no questions about the properties of a chosen object. It is presumed that the deductive reasoning involved encourages lateral thinking along the lines of attributes and traits of the object.

### 5.2.3 Learning social skills

The third most mentioned type of learning through play was social. This was mentioned nearly as often as conceptual learning (above). As depicted in Table 5.2, common themes were learning different social roles and negotiating with siblings for cooperation.

#### 5.2.3.1 Different social roles

The learning of different social roles was the first sub-type of social learning through play. Mothers typically commented on the learning *of* (rather than *from*) social roles. For example, Hayley saw Davis' imitation of waiters in response to *her* imitation of customers. For Hayley, parents initiated the role play, and Davis was merely copying:

He's learning- I suppose taking from us [parents], in that we'll interact with him the same way- so if we're at a restaurant, and he's the waiter, then we'll talk to him like he's the waiter. So in that way he's learning the social side of interacting in those environments as well, and the language - the relevant language - so that he speaks appropriately in cafes and so forth (or just in any service environment, I suppose)...  
(Hayley, 4:46)

Hayley's perspective on Davis' playing out restaurants and cafes was that social learning of roles occurred when she acted out the complementary role first. This was one of the few references to adults playing with children, albeit in a disengaged (rather than sustained) manner. Thus the practice may be seen more as play initiation than involvement. Interacting with others values social cooperation via acting in different ways according to the situation, and Hayley was valuing Davis becoming competent in the roles expected in various contexts. A similar perspective was expressed by Ellie on Ariel's learning to imitate.

... she's learning the role of cooking and providing food. She definitely likes role

playing. She likes playing the mum. And she does play the role of the baby. (Ellie, 9:51)

Here Ellie saw social learning in terms of parenting practices such as cooking, which may relate to the earlier notion of finding one's adult identity through play. The maternal value of children to competently taking on different roles was implied from Ellie and Hayley's comments about the practices of the family such as cooking and cleaning.

### 5.2.3.2 Cooperation/negotiation

This finding often related to the child's place in the family, and was seen to arise naturally in the dynamics of different personalities. For example, Pam commented on a video she made of Maggie and a friend playing out mother and father roles:

These are two little girls that are learning how to *interact* and this little girl's got quite a forceful personality, and very much likes to do what she likes to do and is strong about that. Maggie has her moments of that. They have to learn to negotiate around that. I think that's just priceless for when they go to school next year. They're going to be doing this all the time. This is one of the best things because it's just one-on-one play and I think that's really important for her to have that length of interaction. So that when the other kid says 'No', she's got to learn a way around that. And there's [sic] lots of options that they have, and they usually try all of them. And the other kid is good, because she is- They will actually find a solution (Pam, 11:51).

Although this comment related to the value attributed to negotiation and cooperation, Pam showed her perspective on the importance of social skills for school. These were "priceless" skills that Maggie had "got to learn" for the valued practice of school entrance next year (see "practices" column in Table 5.2). Again, this was achieved through experimentation (hence: "trying" all the "options"), which was a valued practice within play provision.

Joan mirrored the perspective regarding play with all three siblings (see Figure 5.20). She commented that her presence (e.g., when she was behind the video

camera recording them) aided social learning through play.



Figure 5.19 Maggie playing mother and father roles



Figure 5.20 Danielle's "conflict" with her siblings

They learn to resolve some of these [conflicts between themselves in play] without me. You know, often (although Danielle *will* come to me eventually and complain)- but they just got over that [conflict in the video] (Joan, 15:59-16:51).

In this way the practice of free play provision is seen to provide the context for informal, social learning. Here, the family practice of adult mediation is also alluded to (in response to complaints), and suggests the value of social harmony in the family, and apprenticeship in the social skills necessary for success in this endeavour.

### 5.2.1 Conclusion to the mother's perspectives

Three main perspectives on learning through play were indicated by the mothers. These included, intrapersonal development, conceptual, and social learning. Practices and values associated with these three types of learning through play

were mostly family practices and the value of attributed to competent participation in them.

### 5.3 Children’s perspectives on learning through play

Children’s perspectives on learning through play indicated four main types, including physical skills, artistic development, acting skills and “how to play”. The predominant form of analysis for children’s perspectives on learning through play was *deductive*, in terms of practices and values (see right side of Table 5.3, p. 229). This was to more carefully reflect their social membership at the institutional level of the “playground”.

| Inductively coded                             |                                |      |      | Deductively coded   |  |
|---|--------------------------------|------|------|---|--|
| Type of learning                              | Sub-type                       | Freq | Perc | Practices   | Values                                 |
| Physical skills<br>(272 references, 35%)      | Learning how to escape/ catch  | 94   | 12%  | Creating the<br>imaginary situation.  | The imaginary<br>situation of<br>play. |
|   | How to dig                     | 31   | 4%   |   |  |
|   | How to jump                    | 19   | 2%   |   |  |
| Artistic development<br>(211 references, 27%) | Learning how to create         | 191  | 25%  | Declaring<br>publically the rules<br>of the imaginary<br>situation of play. |  |
| Acting skills<br>(90 references, 12%)         | What it’s like                 | 19   | 2%   | Maintaining the<br>imaginary situation.                                     | The act of<br>playing                  |
| How to play<br>(74 references, 10%)           | Learning the rules of the game | 24   | 3%   |   |  |

Table 5.3 Children’s perspectives on learning through play according to inductive and deductive coding.

### 5.3.1 Physical skills

Many of the children's comments related to physical learning through play. Some recurring ideas were learning how to escape from or catch others, to dig, and to jump. Curiously, these usually reflected the type of play that children were commenting on, suggesting that the inductive analysis was not helpful in understanding the children's perspective because it was merely describing the type of play in which they were engaged.

#### 5.3.1.1 Learning how to escape from or catch others

Because much physical play in *Tall Eucalypts* involved running and chasing others, this was the most recurrent category of learning through play. For example, in one "Dog Catcher" game, Bindi (the "dog") was to escape from an enclosed space in corner of the playroom ("the pound") while three boys ("the dog catchers") tried to stop her (see Figure 5.21). When I asked the "dog catchers", Flynn and James, about what they thought the players were learning, they both stated that they were learning how to block the "dog" (Bindi) from getting away. Flynn explained the details of learning that he and his co-players had to strategize a united front against Bindi's attempts to escape.

- [Flynn:] You know what we did? We had a very clever idea. We said, all the boys, one going that way [\*points left\*] and one going that way [\*points right\*] and going in the middle to catch her. And we actually grabbed her.
- [Yeshe:] Yeah right. So that's explaining the game, but what do you think they were learning? And what are the dog catchers learning?
- [James:] Trying to block.
- [Yeshe:] They're learning how to stop a dog getting free, aren't they?
- [Flynn:] We're blocking- We're blocking- We're blocking them. Bindi- There had to be somebody over there [\*indicating the right\*], somebody over there [\*indicating the left\*] and somebody over there [\*indicating the far right\*]. And then we caught Bindi (Flynn, 17#5).

This example shows that children understood their learning to be about blocking Bindi's attempts to escape. However, it is obvious from my comment on Line 4

that I thought Flynn was merely explaining the game. As discussed in Chapter Two, I did not initially understand what the children were saying about their play, and assumed that they did not understand the concept of learning. However, Flynn and James' persistence in explaining they believed the learning was about blocking suggested that they did in fact understand learning, but perhaps in a qualitatively different way to the understanding I held.

Another example of physical learning was stated by James in his comments about the same play.

- [Yeshe:]       What do you think Flynn is learning here [pointing to the video]?
- [James:]       How to get dogs.
- [Yeshe:]       How to get dogs? What else? What about Bindi, what was she learning?
- [James:]       How to get out. (James, 20#12)

This perspective was consistent with other comments by Flynn and James [e.g., learning "how to get out" (James, 6#5); "trying to escape" (Flynn, 3:25#4)], suggesting that the children had a firm idea of what learning was. The practice cited in these comments was playing the game, but the practice of the perspective expression was stating the main rule of the play (see Table 5.3): to "block" the dog from escaping.

### 5.3.1.1 Learning to dig

Another type of learning through play frequently commented on by the children was learning to dig. One example came from Gwen (a three-year-old girl) who watched a video of herself digging in the sandpit and said she was learning:

[t]o dig and to pour something out and to cross dig, and use a spoon and a fork, or pour sand in a bowl (Gwen, 1:45#9925)

This comment did not fit with my initial understanding of learning because I

believed that one could not simultaneously be doing the activity one is learning. To me, this meant the equivalent of saying one learns how to fly an aeroplane by sitting in the cockpit for the first time and flying. From my perspective, if one is carrying out an activity, one already knows how to do that activity. This was the same for Gwen's comment: she could not be learning to dig if she was already doing it. Similarly, when Kaiya, Amy and James watched a video of Anna digging when she was playing "pirates", they all said she was learning "Digging treasure" (James, 1:24#25), "Digging - digging treasure" (Kaiya, 1:26#25) and "Digging!" (Amy, 1:40#25).



Figure 5.21 Kaiya (in purple) "blocks" Bindi's (in pink) escape with his arms

These comments suggested that, in the children's perspective, one could learn something by doing it. An analysis of the practices of the comments suggested Gwen, James, Kaiya and Amy were stating the main objective in the play (see "practices" column of Table 5.3): to shovel sand into a bowl using a spoon and fork or to find treasure. Yet this still did not make any sense to me because I thought learning had to be of something removed from the activity (e.g., in the scholastic learning I was familiar with, learners do not "do" science, English, or



mathematics, but rather, “do” activities such as experiments, reading, or practice sums in order to learn these things).

### **5.3.1.2 Learning to jump**

A final example of the physical learning through play that children saw was that of learning to jump. One example came from Belle, a three year old girl, who watched a video of herself jumping from a platform onto a soft mat and stated that she was “learning to jump” (Belle, 1:41#38). This was a statement of the main activity. Her practice here was stating the main activity of her play. Whereas I had thought of learning as abstract notions that had appeared in the educators’ and mothers’ perspectives [e.g., “cognitive” (Merindah, 15:38) or “social learning” (Tarni, 55)], learning for the children appeared to be the actual activities they were engaged in during that moment of time. From an institutional perspective in which the children are understood as stakeholders participating in the institution of the “playground” the practice involved in perspective expression was reiterating the main activity of play. When Belle said she was learning to jump or Gwen said she was learning to dig with a spoon, they were both stating the main activity of their play.

## **5.3.2 Artistic development**

The third category comprising the children’s perspectives on play was related to what was coded as ‘artistic development’. This was mainly about the children creating and making objects.

### **5.3.2.1 Learning how to create**

The most common comment from children about artistic learning through play was learning how to make certain things. For example, I videoed Amy making a

“dog” out of cardboard, paper, and masking tape. When she watched this video she anticipated my question and stated, “I already know what I learned. I’m learning how to make a dog” (Amy, 39#3).

This comment came as a great surprise at the time, because I assumed one could not learn anything about the world from fantasy or the imaginary. There was a collision between our models of learning. What appeared to be causing the collision between our different understandings of learning were our differing assumptions about whether learning could be of imagined concepts. What does this mean? As an adult, I was quite rigid about the separation of reality from the imaginary situation of play. Particularly for the concept of learning, this is relevant because learning *must* be of something based in this world. For example, Marie’s play “making chocolate” (Marie, 36#9908) out of sand and water might constitute learning about viscosity and other properties, but only of *the sand and water*. As an adult with an acquisition model of learning I did not think Marie was learning about the properties of sugar, cacao butter, and cacao powder – the ingredients of *real* chocolate – if she was using just sand and water in reality. The chocolate aspect was completely imaginary. This is an important distinction because the children’s perspective suggested learning could be of the concepts *in the imaginary situation*, not the real world as I understood it.

The same problem arose from another example of learning how to create things. Maggie and James were playing with a “magic wand”<sup>15</sup> that Maggie had made with an icy-pole stick and some paper (see Figure 5.22). With this, Maggie the

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that, in the interests of distinguishing what belonged to the imaginary situation of play, inverted commas will be used to describe imaginary situations in play. Thus, a popsicle stick with paper cut out in the real world will be described as the imaginary “wand” it represented in the children’s play. All imaginary objects or scenes will be denoted with quotation marks.

“fairy” played turning James into a “pig”. When I asked about learning in this play I had the assumption that this was something that happened outside of the imaginary situation of play. Yet James’ framing of learning through play still appears to sit within the imaginary situation of his and Maggie’s play:

- [Yeshe:] In that game where she's playing with the magic wand, what did we learn?  
[James:] How to turn people into nnn- anything..  
[Yeshe:] But can she do that in real life?  
[James:] Nooo [\*Shakes head\*].  
[Yeshe:] So what's she learning for real life?  
[James:] How to turn people into animals and something else.  
[Yeshe:] Ah. Okay. (James, 3#17).

What this excerpt seemed to demonstrate was the different notions of about whether learning through play can have meaning within the play frame. My use of “but” signified my conception of learning through play to be removed from the content of the play (assuming it could not include imagined content, as this has no relationship to the real world). Similarly, when Maggie herself was asked about this video of her play, her answer repeated the perspective of learning through play as occurring within the play frame.



Figure 5.22 Maggie's "wand"

[Yeshe:] What were you learning when you were making the magic wand? Are you learning how to make things when you were making it?[Maggie nods]

[Maggie:] Yes [nodding]

[Yeshe:] And what about when you were showing me how to use the wand, and you were using your imagination? What are you learning there?

[Maggie:] [2 second pause] I'm learning to turn things into something else.

[Yeshe:] Right. And what are you learning when you turn James into a pig?

[Maggie:] I'm learning to turn things into pigs.

[Yeshe:] [Laughing, thinking Maggie is being silly] Yeah, [in a serious tone now] But are you- But you're not- You don't learn- You can't do that in *real* life...

[Maggie:] [\*Maggie shakes head, losing her smile\*].

[Yeshe:] So what are you learning about real life when you do that? When you're imagining that you're a fairy?

[Maggie:] [After 3 second pause, looks up at Yeshe] Did you know that I'm a princess already?

[Yeshe:] You're a princess already?

[Maggie:] Yeah.

[Yeshe:] Oh, so that's real?

[Maggie:] [Maggie nods head, holding eye contact]

[Yeshe:] [After a pause] Aaaaah.

[Maggie:] 'Cos I've got a tiara at home. And I can put nail polish on all by myself [\*waves arms over head\*] (Maggie, 0:10#58).

Here, Maggie's comment that she was a "princess" (in response to my question about learning "in real life") suggested she did not share my same distinction between the real and imagined. Instead, learning through play was something framed within the imaginary situation of play. In fact, this practice was the statement of the main rule of that imaginary situation. If one wanted to play "fairies" with Maggie and James, one had to "to turn things into pigs". If one wanted to play with Amy, one had to "make a dog" from paper. This suggested that the practice was also to maintain the play situation by stating it, with the potential to invite other players in through public declaration of the main rule (see "practices" in Table 5.3).

### 5.3.3 Acting skills

One other commonly mentioned type of learning was that of acting skills (see left

side of Table 5.3). Many children expressed their perspective that they were learning to be a character [“To play pirates” (Danielle, 3:06#9906), or “acting like a dog” (Ariel, 5:15#4)]. This perspective conflicted with my understanding of learning at the time, as my acquisition model of learning could not understand learning within an imaginary situation unless it had a “real-world” application, which being pirate-like or dog-like could not. The most frequent sub-type of learning related to an experience, and analysing this sub-type in relation to practices (as in Table 5.3) shifted my perspective on learning.

### 5.3.3.1 Learning “what it’s like”

The most common sub-type was learning what something was like in someone else’s shoes, constituting some 19 comments. For example, Saule commented on a video of her playing with a felt diorama of a Goldilocks doll in a bed.

- [Yeshe:] What are you learning there [pointing to the video of the felt diorama]?
- [Saule:] Um.. I’m learning that I could sleep by myself.
- [Yeshe:] Ah, you’re learning how to sleep by yourself! That’s clever.  
[Saule nods]
- [Saule:] I have my own bed [in reference to home]
- [Yeshe:] Do you? Do you always sleep by yourself or sometimes with Mum?
- [Saule:] Um, I always sleep with my mum.
- [Yeshe:] But you’re learning how to sleep by yourself? [Saule nods]
- [Saule:] But my bed is a cot [as opposed to the adult bed in the diorama] (Saule, 1:20#62)

This conversation seemed to imply that the boundaries between the imaginary and real situations were competently crossed by five-year-old Saule, that she was aware of how her learning via her experiences playing with a Goldilocks doll (and the correlating story of an independent girl) allowed her learning to sleep by herself in her own bed or “cot”. The practice Saule is engaging in is stating the main rule of the imaginary situation of her pretend play – to sleep by oneself. This appears to also be creating the imaginary situation as an appropriation of the

Goldilocks narrative.

A second example came from Ariel, another five-year-old girl. She commented on a video of “the Shark Game”, in which the children would run away from a designated “shark”, and the playground was “the sea”, with higher places being safe, as “dry land”. During my time there, I had insisted that the game was no fun if all the children merely stayed on the “land” and did not dare enter the “sea”.

[Yeshe:]       What do you think we're learning when we're playing the Shark Game?

[Ariel:]        Learning how to be in the sea.

[Yeshe:]        You're learning how to be in the sea, like, you mean, how to swim?

[Ariel:]        How to be taken on a boat.

[Yeshe:]        Oh, that's very true, isn't it? (Ariel, 7#21)

Here Ariel’s perspective on learning through play was that she was learning how to be in “the sea” even when there is a “shark” around. Her expression of this perspective can be analysed as a practice, the practice of maintaining a main rule of the play: to stay in the water. In doing so, she also affirmed the new objective that I had suggested. Thus, her practice also appropriated certain rules she wanted to establish as being important. Ariel thus valued her participation in the imaginary situation and her playing. This can also be said of all the children’s comments: they all demonstrated the practice of stating the main rule of the imaginary situation of play (e.g., rules “to jump”, “to turn animals into something else”, or “to make a dog”). The fact that these were stated consistently shows the value of the imaginary situation.

### **5.3.4 How to play**

The final category for the children’s perspective on learning through play was how to play. This was mostly in relation to playing games with established rules. For this reason, the most frequently identified sub-type was learning the rules of the game.

### 5.3.4.1 Learning the rules of the game

When asked about what they were learning when playing board games, many children simply answered, “learning how to play” (Tilly Billy, 1:32#6; Esha, 8#9931). These comments were a clear demonstration of the practice of simply stating the main rule of the game: to play, and all the rules that doing so entails. Another example came from both James and Esha:

[Yeshe:]           The players in that game, what were they learning?  
[James:]           Playing games.  
[Yeshe:]           They were playing games, yes. But what did they *learn*?  
[Esha:]             Playing a game. (Esha, 46#4)

Here, I resisted James’ answer that the players of Trouble™ were learning to play Trouble™. From my perspective, it seemed illogical that players would learn something they were already doing. Yet James and Esha’s answers suggested otherwise. In a later VSRD about the same play with Trouble™, Esha elaborated:

You have to listen. Whatever the rules are, you can't cheat - You know, cheating is- If you do it when it's not your turn, you can't do that. That's cheating (Esha, 1:18#9931).

Her statement shows the practice of establishing what is for her an important rule: not to cheat by rolling when it was not one’s turn. The practice is also stating the importance of the rules, in order to gain compliance from others. The value implied is therefore that of following the rules. Similar values are visible in other comments, such as Flynn’s insistence that his playmates try to “block” Bindi’s escape, or Gwen’s that her playmates use a spoon or fork to move the sand into a bowl. Thus the children’s perspective expression shows the practices of establishing, publically declaring and maintaining the rules of the imaginary situation of play. The value of doing so is for the play situation but also for the act of playing.

Table 5.4 compiles some of the 772 comments children made in expressing their

perspective on learning through play. What the table shows is a description of the play (Column I) and what the main rule or objective of that play is (Column II). This can be compared to the next column along (III), which details some of the transcripts from the findings of the children’s perspectives. What is salient is that III is almost identical to II, showing that the children’s perspective is that they are learning the main rule of the imaginary situation. The practices they therefore demonstrated were creating, publically declaring and maintaining this situation, indicating its value to the children.

| (I). Play description<br>(Outside imaginary situation) | (II). Main rule or objective within imaginary situation    | (III). What children say learning through play is   |
|--|--|---|
| Jumping on trampoline                                  | To jump high   | I'm just learning how to jump. Up, sky! [*raises horizontal palm up as far as possible*] (Marie, 00#51)   |
|  |  | I'm learning how to touch the roof. (Amy, 8#1)  |
|  |  | I'd help him climb up and then we can help him jump. (Amy, 2:05#1)  |
| Making a model “dog” out of paper                      | To make a dog  | I'm learning how to make a dog. (Amy, 39#3)<br>Making a dog (Amy, 15#36)  |
| “Dog” catching   | To escape from the pound                                   | trying to escape (Flynn, 3:25#4)  |
|  |  | Um, well, [Bindi] escaped from the house, and then she went digging out and then we three boys had to stop her. (Flynn, 3:41#4)   |
|  |  | Um, she's acting like a dog and she's doing what dogs doing [sic]. (Ariel, 5:15#4)  |
|  |  | How to get out (James, 6#5; 35#12)  |
|  | To catch the dog trying to escape from the pound           | How to get dogs (James, 19#12)  |
| Trouble™   | To roll the dice and move your marker when it is your turn | You have to listen. Whatever the rules are, you can't cheat- You know, cheating is- If you do it when it's not your turn, you can't do that. That's cheating. (Esha, 1:18#9931) |
|  |  | Playing games (James, 50#4)   |
|  |  | How to play a game (Aisha, 57#4)  |
|  |  | How to count (James, 48#10)   |
| Playing music with music teacher                       | To play instruments  | Learning how to, um, play the instruments (Ariel, 26#7)<br>Um, play the instruments (Flynn, 28#7)   |
|  | To play the ukulele  | Um, songs ... the strumming ... Putting your fingers somewhere, on the chords. (Davis, 1:29#35)   |
| Making “towers” out of wooden blocks                   | To make the tower as high as possible                      | He's learning how to stable [stabilise] them. (James, 49#8)<br>Uh, to build buildings. (Chris, 2:56#99)   |
| Making “green peas” from Playdough™                    | To roll the playdough into green-pea-size balls            | Learning how to make peas (Tilly Billy, 9#13)<br>How to make peas (James, 11#13)  |
| Playing out roles of a “zoo” with wooden toys          | Make a life-like rendition of the activities of the zoo    | [He’s learning how to make] A zoo (James, 13#15)  |
| Playing “fairies”                                      | Turning things into other things with a magic              | How to turn people into nnn- anything.... How to turn people into animals and something else. (James, 3#17)   |



|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
|  | wand   | I'm learning to turn things into pigs. [Maggie, 10#38)<br>Learning to turn things into pigs (Maggie, 52#58)   |
| Playing with plastic shovels as “guns”                                 | Shooting “baddies”   | We’re learning shooting, aiming. (Kaiya, 8#31)  |
|  |  | I was shooting. Shooting guns ... Yeah, so we can shoot things (Ross, 23#27)  |
|  |  | Trying to kill (Davis, 40#44)   |
| Scooping sand into a muffin tray                                       | Pretending to make coffee with enough chili in it to kill Captain Hook (from Peter Pan™) | I'm learning to kill Captain Hook because he's evil ... we're just killing him. We're pretending he's here ... I'm learning how to cook big adult things. (Belle, 12-56#37) |
| Playing out the story of Goldilocks with felt diorama dolls and scenes | Playing out Goldilocks   | I was learning that I can eat everything. (Saule, 1:28#61)  |
| Hide ‘n’ Seek  | One person counts and everyone else hides  | Well, somebody counts, and the rest of them hide. (Anna, 2:46#63)   |
| Pirates  | To act the role of a pirate, do pirate activities  | To play pirates.(Danielle, 3:06#9906)<br>Pirates (2#49; 45#25)  |
| Looking after a toy called Mouse                                       | Look after the mouse   | Learning how to look after Mouse (Ariel, 4#39)  |
| Making a cardboard model house for her soft toy                        | Make a house for “Mr Murphy”   | I'm learning that I can make a shade. Shade. And I make the shade for Mister Murphy. (Saule, 4:41#62)   |
| Playing with broken cameras  | To fix the camera  | How to fix cameras. (Flynn, 5:54#6)   |
| the Shark Game   | To not get eaten by sharks when in the water   | Learning how to be in the sea (Ariel, 7#21)   |
|  |  | How to run away from sharks. (James, 1#19)  |
| Playing with trucks  | Roll trucks under the platform and over the mat, crashing trucks into one another        | We're learning how to do stuff which is really dangerous, which only adults can do. (Chris, 1:36#9902)  |
| Fighting   | To win fighting  | We're learning not to cry, we don't want to cry. (Flynn, 21#9913)   |
| Gymnastics   | To try to do tricks  | I have to learn how to do hoola hoops and cartwheels. But I can do star-jumps . (Belle, 1:42#38)  |
| Digging in sandpit   | To dig a deep hole   | Um, how to dig bigger holes. (Belle, 2:09#96)   |
|  |  | To dig and pour something out [*raises hands up above head and makes tipping gesture*] (Gwen, 1:30#9925)  |

Table 5.4 Children’s comments on learning through play (III) compared to the main rule of the play  
(II)

### 5.3.5 Conclusion to the children’s perspectives

Children’s perspectives on play were categorised according four types of learning

through play: physical, artistic, acting, and rule learning. These each comprised several subcategories. An important finding for the children's perspectives on learning through play was derived from the deductive analysis of practices and values. This analysis showed that children were establishing, publically declaring and maintaining the main rule of the imaginary situation during play. These practices reveal the value of playing and of the imaginary situation in and of itself, which appears to be a vital aspect of children's meaning-making.

## **CHAPTER 6 - DISCUSSION**

This chapter will discuss the findings from Chapter Five in relation to the literature outlined in Chapter Two using the theoretical ideas identified in Chapter Three. It will do so in order to answer the two research questions posed by this thesis:

1. What are the perspectives of insider stakeholders, including children, mothers, and educators on learning through play?
2. What are the similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play?

The first question is addressed in the first four sections of this chapter (see 6.1 – 6.4), which discuss the findings from the children, the mothers, and the educators. The second question is addressed in the fifth and sixth sections (see 6.5 and 6.6), which discuss the similarities and differences between stakeholder group perspectives. The final sections discuss the implications of these interactions for approaches to play-based learning in ECEC (see 6.7), the limitations of the research (see 6.8) and directions for future research (see 6.9).

### **6.1 Children's perspectives**

The findings indicated that children talked about learning through play according to physical, artistic, acting and rule learning (see inductive analysis side of Table 5.3, p. 229). These inductive categories, however, were more reflective of the type of play the children were engaged in (i.e., physical, craft, role and game play, respectively). As result, deductive analysis was carried out (see 4.10.3, p. 187) revealing the children's practices of creating, publically declaring and maintaining

the imaginary situation of play via its main rule. This suggested the children's values of playing and imagining (see Table 5.3, p. 229). This section of the Discussion (6.1) locates these two main findings in the context of the existing literature on children's learning, Vygotsky's theory on play, and sociocultural understandings of learning through play. It also identifies the lessons learned from the children's findings.

### **6.1.1 Children's learning**

The findings showed that the children's answers to my question ("What were you learning?") exemplified a different perspective on learning through play to my own, in which I considered imagination to have little relevance to learning. The Literature Review (see 2.2.2.2, p. 71) suggested that talking about learning should be a metacognitive process (Larkin, 2010; Whitebread, 2010). While some researchers have found that children of three to five years are capable of this metacognition (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Flavell, 1979; Premack & Woodruff, 1978; Richards, 2011; Robson, 2011; Rubio-Fernandez & Geurts, 2013; Whitebread, Bingham, Grau, Pino Pasternak, & Sangster, 2007), others suggests they are not (Morgan, 2007; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). The focus on metacognition in these studies is relevant because Piaget believed that young children confuse reality and the imaginary (see 2.2.2.2, specifically p.75), an idea which has been strongly influential on the ECEC field (Sharon & Wolley, 2004). From a Piagetian perspective, the ability to think about learning through play outside of the imaginary situation would indicate that children are growing less egocentric and thus developing cognitively. This maturationist lens implies that the view [what view?] that learning should be framed in terms of reality rather than imagination is one that the immature child grows towards. In this view, the immature perspective in which learning is framed in terms of the imaginary situation valued less. The findings of this thesis, however, showed that the children's perspectives were framed in terms of the imaginary situation and were a valid interpretation in

their own right.

As I explained in the Theory (see 3.1.1, p. 104), the model of learning that assumes a learner can think about what was learned *after* the experience that led to learning (i.e., play) (see Figure 2.4, p. 76) is acquisition-based: it assumes that the knowledge remains with the learner even after this knowledge has been utilised (Lave, 2009) and reflects a “storage model of the mind” in which knowledge is accumulated for later use (Rogoff, 1995, p. 155). This storage is shown in the dotted line between the past and present in Figure 2.4 (see p. 76). Therefore, being able to think and talk about this knowledge at a later time when the knowledge is not in use – or, in this case, when the learner is not playing – assumes an acquisition model of learning because it assumes the knowledge still exists in the learner’s head. Discussions of learning in metacognitive terms are therefore only suitable within acquisition models of learning (Whitebread, 2010), meaning that the children’s perspectives as they were shown in this thesis are excluded in these traditional discussions. This exclusion will be discussed in below as an area that needs to be redressed in the research literature.

Participatory models of learning, on the other hand, suggest that the learner uses knowledge to participate in cultural practices. It would appear from the findings of this thesis that, children have a participation model of learning and therefore do not evidence metacognition of learning through play. The knowledge is not in use *after* a learning experience (such as play), but rather *during* that experience. It is possible that it was for this reason that the children’s findings did not evidence metacognition. Future research would need to verify this (see 6.9, p. 326), but for the purposes of the current investigation it is sufficient to say that the models of learning in the children’s and my (initial) perspectives were significantly different.

The assumption that knowledge stays on in the learner’s mind after a learning experience characterises the models of learning that are currently used in the

discipline of Psychology (de Houwer et al., 2013 and ), consistent with an acquisition model of learning. From this perspective, talking about the imaginative world of play does not demonstrate metacognition (because one has not demonstrated perspective outside of the imaginary world), and therefore would not be considered learning (see Figure 2.4, p. 76). That is, from the acquisition model of learning, the children's findings did not evidence a metacognitive perspective on learning. This is apparent when the children talked about the main rule of the imaginary situation of play as learning through play. A contemporary Psychology framing of the data analysis would probably have concluded from this that the children did not understand learning. However Sfard (1998) showed that while an acquisition model of learning has dominated the history of learning theory for some time, more recent approaches to education frame learning in terms of "activity" and "practice", within a participation model of learning (p. 6). Participatory approaches to learning also have particular relevance in the field of ECEC. Further discussion of the findings in relation to play and learning follow.

My first point regarding the findings is that the children's understanding of learning through play focussed on what they identified as the *main rule* in their play - or the aim of play. This aim of the play appears to represent a participation model of learning through play. In other words, play was always the cultural activity in which the children were engaged. This finding is shown in Table 6.1, which summarises the 46 comments that children made about learning through play. In order to answer the *first* research question - What are children's perspectives on learning through play? - I re-present this table here to show the similarity between the children's comments about learning through play (*Column III*) and what they identified as the aim of the play activity (*Column II*). These findings indicate that, for children, learning through play is whatever the rule of the given imaginary situation is at the moment in time. In other words, learning through play was whatever the aim of the play was for them: "the aim of the

game”.

The two columns appear different only in terms of the words used and this is because the children’s speech is generally more abbreviated than adults (Weiten, 2007, p. 302): For example, Ariel’s (7#21) comment “how to be in the sea” seemed to be an abbreviation of “I’m learning what it means to be in the sea and how one would act in the sea”. The similarity across 46 comments in Table 6.1 shows that the children’s perspective was consistent with the sociocultural theorisation of learning as participatory, social, and ongoing. In the words of Lave and Wenger (1991), two famous sociocultural theorists, “the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice” (p. 29). For the children, the meaning of learning through play was configured through their full participation in the sociocultural practices of the playground (i.e., play).

From the perspective of the children in this thesis, sociocultural practices were not something held by the individual as knowledge as in acquisition models of learning. The children’s perspective that they were learning the main rule of the imaginary situation through play appears to be evident through their discussion of their activities. These activities (e.g. “shooting guns”, “touching the roof”, “playing pirates”) were generally shared rather than individual activities and not or solitary play. The activities also usually had a historical component, in that they were activities that children had seen before, were often introduced by one child and taken up by many and so had been appropriated into their own games: such games were often played repeatedly over a number of days.

| <b>(I). Play description<br/>(Outside imaginary<br/>situation)</b> | <b>(II). Main rule or<br/>objective within<br/>imaginary situation</b>                   | <b>(III). What children say learning through play is</b>  |
|--|--|---|
| Jumping on trampoline  | To jump high   | I'm just learning how to jump. Up, sky! [*raises horizontal palm up as far as possible*] (Marie, 00#51)   |
|  |  | I'm learning how to touch the roof. (Amy, 8#1)  |
|  |  | I'd help him climb up and then we can help him jump. (Amy, 2:05#1)  |
| Making a model "dog" out of paper                                  | To make a dog  | I'm learning how to make a dog. (Amy, 39#3)<br>Making a dog (Amy, 15#36)  |
| "Dog" catching   | To escape from the pound   | trying to escape (Flynn, 3:25#4)  |
|  |  | Um, well, [Bindi] escaped from the house, and then she went digging out and then we three boys had to stop her. (Flynn, 3:41#4)   |
|  |  | Um, she's acting like a dog and she's doing what dogs doing [sic]. (Ariel, 5:15#4)  |
|  |  | How to get out. (James, 6#5; 35#12)   |
|  | To catch the dog trying to escape from the pound   | How to get dogs. (James, 19#12)   |
| Trouble™   | To roll the dice and move your marker when it is your turn                               | You have to listen. Whatever the rules are, you can't cheat- You know, cheating is- If you do it when it's not your turn, you can't do that. That's cheating. (Esha, 1:18#9931) |
|  |  | Playing games (James, 50#4)   |
|  |  | How to play a game (Aisha, 57#4)  |
|  |  | How to count (James, 48#10)   |
| Playing music with music teacher                                   | To play instruments  | Learning how to, um, play the instruments (Ariel, 26#7)<br>Um, play the instruments (Flynn, 28#7)   |
|  | To play the ukulele  | Um, songs ... the strumming ... Putting your fingers somewhere, on the chords. (Davis, 1:29#35)   |
| Making "towers" out of wooden blocks                               | To make the tower as high as possible  | He's learning how to stable [stabilise] them. (James, 49#8)<br>Uh, to build buildings. (Chris, 2:56#99)   |
| Making "green peas" from Playdough™                                | To roll the playdough into green-pea-size balls  | Learning how to make peas (Tilly Billy, 9#13)<br>How to make peas (James, 11#13)  |
| Playing out roles of a "zoo" with wooden toys                      | Make a life-like rendition of the activities of the zoo                                  | [He's learning how to make] A zoo (James, 13#15)  |
| Playing "fairies"  | Turning things into other things with a magic wand                                       | How to turn people into nnn- anything.... How to turn people into animals and something else. (James, 3#17)   |
|  |  | I'm learning to turn things into pigs. [Maggie, 10#38]<br>Learning to turn things into pigs (Maggie, 52#58)   |
| Playing with plastic shovels as "guns"                             | Shooting "baddies"   | We're learning shooting, aiming. (Kaiya, 8#31)  |
|  |  | I was shooting. Shooting guns ... Yeah, so we can shoot things (Ross, 23#27)  |
|  |  | Trying to kill (Davis, 40#44)   |
| Scooping sand into a muffin tray                                   | Pretending to make coffee with enough chili in it to kill Captain Hook (from Peter Pan™) | I'm learning to kill Captain Hook because he's evil ... we're just killing him. We're pretending he's here ... I'm learning how to cook big adult things. (Belle, 12-56#37)     |



|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| Playing out the story of Goldilocks with felt diorama dolls and scenes | Playing out Goldilocks  | I was learning that I can eat everything. (Saule, 1:28#61)   |
| Hide 'n' Seek  | One person counts and everyone else hides   | Well, somebody counts, and the rest of them hide. (Anna, 2:46#63)  |
| Pirates  | To act the role of a pirate, do pirate activities                                 | To play pirates.(Danielle, 3:06#9906)<br>Pirates (2#49; 45#25)   |
| Looking after a toy called Mouse                                       | Look after the mouse  | Learning how to look after Mouse (Ariel, 4#39)   |
| Making a cardboard model house for her soft toy                        | Make a house for "Mr Murphy"  | I'm learning that I can make a shade. Shade. And I make the shade for Mister Murphy. (Saule, 4:41#62)    |
| Playing with broken cameras  | To fix the camera   | How to fix cameras. (Flynn, 5:54#6)  |
| the Shark Game   | To not get eaten by sharks when in the water                                      | Learning how to be in the sea (Ariel, 7#21)  |
|  |   | How to run away from sharks. (James, 1#19)   |
| Playing with trucks  | Roll trucks under the platform and over the mat, crashing trucks into one another | We're learning how to do stuff which is really dangerous, which only adults can do. (Chris, 1:36#9902)   |
| Fighting   | To win fighting   | We're learning not to cry, we don't want to cry. (Flynn, 21#9913)  |
| Gymnastics   | To try to do tricks   | I have to learn how to do hoola hoops and cartwheels. But I can do star-jumps . (Belle, 1:42#38)         |
| Digging in sandpit   | To dig a deep hole  | Um, how to dig bigger holes. (Belle, 2:09#96)  |
|  |   | To dig and pour something out [*raises hands up above head and makes tipping gesture*] (Gwen, 1:30#9925) |

Table 6.1 Children's comments on learning through play (III) compared to the main rule of the play (II)

When I think about these aspects of the children's data, I am reminded of Rogoff's (2003) observation that learners engage in cultural practices that "involve them mutually with their companions in cultural traditions that precede them and that they contribute to, modifying as they play with routines and games" (p. 292). Rogoff's work insists that learning is participatory in communities where "children are part of mature community services" (Rogoff et al., 2003, p. 175). For example, the practices of children in traditional hunting and gathering communities has been shown to contribute to those hunting and gathering

practices which are important for that community (Lancy, 2007). In post-industrial countries, where there is “[c]ompulsory extensive schooling and routine segregation of children from many mature settings” (Rogoff et al., 2003, p. 176) learning is often more formally understood and defined. For instance, scholastic processes have little value outside of the learning to which they are designed to foster; they are “isolated as a separate social function” (Elkonin, 2005, p. 59). Hedges and Cullen (2012) argue that this is true for Australian ECEC pedagogy, with particular relevance to play-based curricula:

Australasian and UK early childhood education settings often separate children from the genuine activities of their culture through their very institutional nature and emphasis on play, often apart from real-life participation in genuine activities (p. 935).

In contrast to the abstract learning through play that mothers and educators identified, such as “cognitive” or “social” learning, the learning that the children recognized as their perspective on learning through play appeared to be grounded in the play practices of the playground, representing community and cultural traditions within that “institution” of the playground. Participatory learning has been shown to be the norm in many diverse cultural communities such as Senegalese, Aka (central African), Gusii and Kokwet (Kenya), Efe (Democratic Republic of Congo), Polynesian, Maori, Marien, Guatemalan, tribal Indian, Navajo, Athabaskan (Canada), and Inuit contexts (Rogoff et al., 2003). Moreover, the global prevalence of the participatory model is arguably due to the historical need for children to contribute to the productivity of the community. For example, in traditional Ladahki culture, children’s participation in shepherding practices of their community was vital to the community’s food production (Norberg-Hodge, 2000). The validity of participatory learning (in their shepherding practices) was evidenced by the damaging effect on each family’s food production when children were obliged to attend long school hours under Indian government rule (or “segregation” of children from mature practices such as shepherding).

My own understanding of learning shifted over the course of the thesis from an acquisition to a participatory model, and this represented an opportunity for me to deconstruct my own assumptions that reflect a western-heritage conception of learning. Considering the prevalence of the participatory understanding of learning across the world, the children's perspective on learning (which appeared to be participatory) is possibly more universal, longstanding, and grounded in the meaning of cultural practices than acquisition models. This implies the legitimacy of a participatory model of learning as of equal or even greater value for thinking about outcomes in ECEC than the dominant acquisition model, as argued by other authors such as Hedges and Cullen (2012).

This legitimacy of the participatory model of learning suggests its usefulness for educators and researchers. The findings suggest the relevance of the participatory model when investigating play and learning in ECEC settings. Because play is the "dominant activity" of children in Western ECEC settings such as Tall Eucalypts (Hedegaard, 2008a, p. 17), the fact that the children demonstrated a participatory model of learning in relation to play implies that the children may have held this model for of learning in relation to other classroom activities also. The findings of the current investigation suggest that educators or other adults who want to meaningfully discuss learning with young children should frame learning in terms of participation in a given activity.

Although many educators believe that an acquisition model of learning is appropriate for discussing learning with young children, the findings here suggest that this may not result in fruitful conversations. The potential for adults and children to be talking at cross purposes about learning through play is evidenced by my own discussions with the children in this research, which demonstrate my (earlier) preference for an acquisition-based model of learning through play. My adoption of this model was initially subconscious and, because this model was so

different from the children's, I found it difficult to accept their responses to my questions during my interactions with them.

Hedges and Cullen argue for a "participation plus" model of pedagogy, involving co-construction, dialogue, and sociocultural practices that engage funds of knowledge, dispositions and attitudinal components (p. 934). Such ideas may help to broaden how learning outcomes are conceptualised in the ECEC field and allow educators to be more sensitively aligned with children's perspectives of learning through play. This is particularly so given that the children appeared to be learning the play practices of the playground through others. In the findings of this thesis, knowledge of how to play or be in the "aim of the game" was shared and co-created with children and passed onto new players. The prevalence of this kind of shared learning in the peer cultures of the playground has long been documented by other researchers (Corsaro, 1992; 1993; 1997; 2012; Jirata, 2012; King, 1987; Löfdahl, 2006; 2010; Opie & Opie, 1977; Skånfors, Löfdahl, & Hägglund, 2009). Much of this work has shown how certain themes and types of play appear to be common to children's play across a variety of contexts and generations (Aries, 1996; Corsaro, 2012; Factor, 2009; Botvin & Sutton-Smith, 1977). Awareness that peer cultures are maintained via a process of "interpretive reproduction" (Corsaro, 2012, p. 488) suggests the value of pedagogies which emphasise peer scaffolding practices, such as those in multi-age classes used in the Golden Key school (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2011). Maintenance of the imaginary situation of play may be seen as one way in which more experienced players apprentice less experienced players into established peer cultural traditions of play as well. This speaks to the validity of thinking about children's maintenance of the imaginary situation as a form of cultural institution: the institution of the playground. The practices and values of the children's perspectives in this investigation stand as strong evidence to support considering the playground as an institution as valid as any other organically-formed institution such as families or friendship circles.

### 6.1.2 Vygotsky's theory on play

My question ("What were you learning?") yielded answers from the children that demonstrated a different perspective on learning through play to my own, in which I considered imagination to have little relevance to learning. Specifically, several examples (see Table 6.1) showed that the children saw no such distinction between learning and the imagination: learning was seen as *whatever the main rule of their play activity was*. For example, when the rule of the play was to shoot "baddies", children commented they were "learning shooting, aiming" (Kaiya, 8#31), "shooting guns" (Ross, 23#27), or "to kill" (Davis, 40#44). Learning was whatever the main objective of the imaginary situation was at that time (see Table 6.1).

As explored in the Theory Chapter (see 3.4.1, p. 135), Vygotsky (1978) proposed that children are compelled to play to satisfy ungratified desires. This is because there is an imaginary situation which can gratify these desires symbolically. For example, when a child really wants to shoot spaceships (as observed in a cartoon), she can create a play situation in which she shoots spaceships. In this sense, play is liberating because it provides an outlet for such desires. Yet, in acting out the imaginary situation, Vygotsky (1978) also states that the child constrains herself -- by confining her potential behaviours to those ones which are prescribed by the imaginary situation (van Oers, 2013). For example, in the play she may not be able to open her spaceship door unless she has on an oxygen helmet, yet the spaceship may be represented by a cardboard box in the material world, and a cardboard box has no real properties which would prevent her from stepping out of it. Other rules of the situation may be numerous and subtle, such as how one should speak and move in the play (e.g., in the manner in which the characters in the cartoon speak and move) and what one's motives in the play might be (e.g., to shoot "baddies", to avoid being shot and to be injured if shot). As Vygotsky (1978) theorised, these rules are the structure that make the imaginary situation exist.

The findings from the children's perspectives on learning through play showed that the most salient rule for most of the children was that the main motive in the play was "the aim of the game." In the children's perspectives, the main rule of the imaginary situation appeared to be the main motive and aim., the principal *reason* they were playing. The main motive of the imaginary situation was usually what the player was aiming to do, as seen in *Column II* in *Table 6.1*. For example, when Flynn and Bindi played the "dog pound" game, the main aim was "trying to escape" (Flynn, 3:25#4) for Bindi, and "to stop her" (Flynn, 3:41#4) for the three boys. Similarly, when James and Chris were building a tower from Jenga™ blocks, they were aiming "to stable [stabilise] them" (James, 49#8). For the children, the rule or motive of the play (the aim of the game) is generally what they believed they were learning through play. Other examples, such as "learning not to cry" (Flynn, 21#9913), were still rules of the imaginary situation, but perhaps not the main aim of the play, which in this case was probably to win over one's opponent. For children learning through play means staying committed to the main objective of the game - and this main objective is that the rule of the imaginary situation is sustained. This finding means that Vygotsky's ideas about children's play and the imaginary situation can be used to theorise learning through play.

### **6.1.3 Sociocultural understandings of learning through play**

Vygotsky dedicated some writing (1987; 2004a) to debunking the common belief that imagination is fantasy or the opposite of reality. Although other theories of play attributed fantasy and imagination as one of the characteristics of play (e.g., Monighan-Nourot et al., 1987; Rubin et al., 1983), Vygotsky's theorisation differs in that imagination was not viewed as the opposite of reality. Vygotsky argued that imagination is in fact linked to reality in four ways, and the first of these is that imagination is composed of concepts and relationships from the real world. van Oers (2013) agrees with this definition, making the argument that "it is obvious that children can only create imaginations of activities they are somehow

familiar with" (p. 190). Vygotsky (2004a) stated, "The operation of imagination depends on experience" (p. 29). This relates to the children's perspectives on learning through play because their play was very often about things which were important to them according to their experiences - swimming lessons, pirates, fairies and builders.

This idea can be illustrated through a sociocultural interpretation of my concept of a gun. Through my education in primary and high school and my learning from movies and life in general, I believe that I have a fairly mature concept of what a gun is: the mechanics of its function, what it can do, its defining characteristics compared to other devices such as cannons or cap guns, and what it may mean in a few different cultural contexts. Even with my elaborate conception of what a gun is, I have never touched a gun. My conception is always limited by my own understanding and the representation of that metal object in my culture. It will never be "whole" or completely true to that material object because it is merely a mental representation which attempts to explain my experience (Arievitch, 2003; Galperin, 1992a; 1992b). Yet when adults hear children use this same word ("gun"), we often think those children's conception of the object as "innocent", naive or limited (Blaise, 2009, p. 457), even though our own conception is equally limited (Galperin, 1992a). If I accept that all perspectives are of equal value (Corsaro, 2011; James & Prout, 1997), logically I must accept that the children's mental representations are also of equal value, and that playing with these representations may be one way in which children refine and extend them.

Sociocultural theory would suggest that, when they are "playing pirates", children are acting out what they currently and collectively know pirates to be. In the process they are adding to the communal pool of cultural practices that constitute being a pirate. This pool is sustained by other players and is probably, for the children, mostly limited to the ECEC centre. The raw material for playing

pirates has been drawn from the real world (Corsaro, 1993) and what is “culturally given” to children (van Oers, 2013, p. 190), most probably via mass media such as movies and books. In his exhaustive review of literature examining play across the world, Roopnarine (2011) observes that “play is culturally situated in the familial and social experiences of young children, often reflecting what is valued within cultural communities” (p. 20). Thus the social and cultural aspects of the children’s experiences of constructs (such as pirates) may be reflected.



*Figure 6.1 Belle learning to kill Captain Hook “because he is evil”*

But how much do they “understand” of such constructs? It is hard to fathom that any of the two- to five-year-olds at Tall Eucalypts would have ever seen or know



much at all about pirates in the real (certainly contemporary<sup>16</sup>) sense. Yet Vygotsky (2004) argued that imagination occurs as a process of the “accumulation” of experiences, “reworking” of these by dissociating certain attributes and associating others, “exaggeration” of some of these, and finally “their unification into a system, the construction of a complex picture” (p. 25 – 28). The process is something like *decoupage*. Imagination’s *decoupage of reality* relates to the learning through play that occurs when children “actively communicate and interpret their individual and collective social realities through the play frame” (Meckley, 1996, cited in Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 21). For example, when Belle (12#37) said she was “learning to kill Captain Hook because he's evil”, putting “chilli” (sand) in his “coffee” (basket), it is easy to envisage the way in which different elements (e.g., of Peter Pan™, serving coffee, and being careful cooking with chilli) have been dissociated from their respective contexts (a movie, serving breakfast coffee to her father, cooking food with her mother), exaggerated (chilli being so hot it actually kills someone), and reassembled into one imaginary situation (see Figure 6.2). Corsaro (2012) has shown that children as young as two appropriate information from external reality into their play. Mindy Blaise and Sharon Ryan (e.g., Blaise, 2005; Ryan, 2005), among others, showed that nuanced knowledge about gender is learned through the play of three and four year olds, and Corsaro’s (1993) work showed that children as young as three to five play out sophisticated, adult notions of class.

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<sup>16</sup> There are many current examples of this in news bulletins. See, for example, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2000/06/piracy-in-asia-a-growing-barrier-to-maritime-trade?renderforprint=1> and <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/60266/gal-luft-and-anne-korin/terrorism-goes-to-sea>

Further evidence of cognitive learning through play comes from how sociocultural theory sees concepts existing in the first place. Galperin's view on "material object-related activity as the starting point of mental activity formation" (Arievitch, 2008, p. 50) is consistent with the process Vygotsky described of how imagination is related to reality. Given that all mental formations - what Vygotsky (1997) called "psychological tools" (p. 72) - are formed based on objects and relationships in external,<sup>17</sup> material reality, Galperin showed through experimentation that new concepts are first understood "at the material level" (Arievitch, 2008, p. 50). As learners separate "the key attributes" of the material activity from the "attendant attributes" (inconsequential characteristics) of the material realm, their understanding of these becomes "sharply abridged, to the point of immediate recognition" (Galperin, 1992a, p. 62). As they become more familiar with the process, and the important attributes are isolated, learners can understand the concept less materially (e.g., they may have a word labelling it), until it is converted to "pure meaning", which for Galperin was thought or mental representation (Arievitch, 2008, p. 50). This understanding can be superimposed onto Vygotsky's writing about imagination and reality to show that mental formation is like imagination, as a representation and understanding of material reality.

Galperin (1992a; 1992b) also explained that learners often need to make concepts more material in order to understand them better if the level they are operating at is too abstract. For example, Belle's play with coffee was possibly to experience it at a more material level (playing it out in the sandpit), and learn from this

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<sup>17</sup> The use of the term "external" and "internal" here is made with caution as the two terms denote a separation which many sociocultural theorists disagree with (see Rogoff, 1995, and Arievitch, 2008, pp. 48 - 49).

experience. She may indeed have been “learning to kill Captain Hook” at a conceptual level, just as she said (12#37).

Galperin’s idea that all mental constructs are constituted by reality suggests learning through play might be referenced within imagination, which is a composite of reality. This relates to the children’s perspective on learning through play because their play was very often of things which were important in their lives. Many of these concepts were probably new and salient for the children, and their reconstruction of the concepts in play suggests their need to experiment with them at a material level, through imagination. When Danielle said she was “learning pirates” (2#49; 45#25), she may well have been reconfiguring salient aspects of “piratehood” to learn more about it at a material level in the same way adults self-talk themselves through procedures that are novel to them. Thus Vygotsky’s and Galperin’s theories about the material and abstract (the real and the imagined) suggest that the children were indeed learning what they thought they were learning: they believed they were learning the main rule which supported the imaginary situation.

As I explained in the Theory Chapter (see 3.4.1, p. 135), there is a second way in which the children’s perspective on learning through play may be a reflection of real learning. Vygotsky (1987) said that we experience others’ experiences through imagination: “No accurate cognition of reality is possible without a certain element of imagination” (p. 349). Some people may have never lived the French Revolution or seen the Dead Sea, but they can use their imagination to approximate the experience. Via this connection, there is a similar function of learning through play because imagination:

becomes the means by which a person’s experience is broadened, because [s]he can imagine what [s]he has not seen, can conceptualise something from another person’s narration and description of what [s]he him[her]self has

never directly experienced" (Vygotsky, 2004a, p. 17).

Children do not just experiment with combinations of concepts, but can use play to experience a different perspective. Ariel (1:45#39) spoke of her learning through play in the *Shark Game*: "You feel like that it happens in real life". This comment is perhaps an expression of a similar conception of her learning through play, as imagination broadened her experience of "how to be in the sea" (7#21). Multiple scholars have argued that play allows children to "raise their heads up out of the context of daily existence" (Henricks, 2009 , p. 15). It "effectively stops time" as children can contemplate the past and create the future, a capacity that animals do not evince (p. 15). This is affirmed by Elbers' (2004) interpretations of observations of six- to nine-year-olds' pretend play as:

reflection-in-action, exercised by children who are not yet able to reflect on their lives in an explicit verbal way. If young children want to reflect on a situation, one way to do so is to enact that situation [in pretend play] (p. 211).

Galperin's account of the evolutionary value of play argues that mental constructions have allowed humans to mentally "play with" hypothetical scenarios that might pose a risk to our safety if we were to test them out in reality (e.g., creating sea vessels, camouflaging from predators, etc.) (Arievitch, 2008, pp. 48 -9). In fact, he argues that this process is a significant component of problem solving, yet we are not usually conscious of it happening when we solve problems:

What is correct is established mainly on the basis of the final result, without the subjects' becoming aware of the process itself, and with considerable expenditure of time, effort, and materials (Galperin, 1992a, pp. 69 - 70).

Galperin (1992) argues that mental adaptation allows us to imagine "ideal" scenarios that are not risky because they are imagined. Further, Vygotsky (1976) argues "play is invented at the point when unrealizable tendencies appear in development", when a child cannot have what s/he wants (p. 538). Thus

children's desires are often realised in play, which moves them closer to working out how to satisfy them in real life. Of course, play is not the only way we can explore hypothetical scenarios, but it is the leading activity during the preschool years (Daniels, 2001; Fler, 2010). Curiously, false belief understanding develops at this same age (Rubio-Fernandez & Geurts, 2013; see 2.2.2.2, p. 72), as does counterfactual reasoning and speech, which is the ability to infer consequences from hypothetical scenarios (Riggs & Peterson, 2000). This suggests Vygotsky's notion that play is the leading activity of the preschool years, and Galperin's notion that imagination allows us to evolve without genes, might be correct.

Galperin (1992a; 1992b) thus shows that play allows us to gain perspective so that we can make decisions informed by our imaginings. Patrick Bateson (2011) agrees, adding that these imaginings, in addition to being risk-free, can also be hypothesised an infinite number of times and combinations, speeding the process of evolution exponentially. When one of these combinations achieves the desired outcome, the mind creates an association between the combination and the outcome (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 351). This association may be considered learning: making random combinations of reality in the imaginary situation leading to problem solving and satiating the learner's desire. Imagination is "how non-rational activity becomes rational" (p. 352). New perspective is gained and the learner can understand situations with this.

New perspective on situations gives children a greater capacity to understand others also (Vygotsky, 1978). Other scholars argue play allows children to create narratives together and "intertwine their own stories and life experiences", and in the creation of shared meanings, gain perspective on them (Wood & Hall, 2011, pp. 270-271). The second way that imagination is linked to reality is using the imagination to understand others' realities; seeing stories through the eyes of others (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008, p. 627). Pretend play has been shown to

support the development of “mental representation, theory of mind, the ability to communicate, and language acquisition” (Rogers & Evans, 2008, p. 24), which are a product of collective, and evidence of individual, learning through play. In play, “the world is rearranged”, learning what can and cannot be done with others and the environment, a way to gain perspective on the concepts being imagined (Bateson, 2011, p. 43).



Figure 6.2 Building a high tower despite wanting to knock it over

Figure 6.3 Being pinned down by several boys despite wanting to run away on two legs

This correlation between the children’s perspectives on learning through play and Vygotsky’s theorisation regarding play and imagination has explanatory power for the findings. For example, Ariel’s (4#39) “learning how to look after Mouse” may be an experiential learning of the concept of caring for someone. Many play experiences were unique to the children’s imaginary situations. Only in the imaginary world could James (3#17) know what it is like “to turn people into animals and something else”; and could Tilly Billy (9#13) contemplate what it means “to make peas”. These ideas cannot be explored in reality. Thus Vygotsky’s writings offer much explanation of the children’s perspective on learning through play, suggesting that there are two ways in which the children’s perspective might be understood: (1) playing with mental representations of the real world in their

imagination, in order to understand them; and (2) playing out observed experiences of others in order to understand them from a first-hand perspective.

Vygotsky (1987; 2004a) also wrote that imagination is linked to reality in a third way – in the evocation of real emotions. He clearly states that “both imagination and realistic thinking are often characterized by high levels of affect or emotion” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 348). Psychological studies have also implied this effect (e.g., Cools, Schotte, & McNally, 1992, p. 348). It is possible that play can lead to emotional learning. Vygotsky (1978) referred to play as the child’s outlet for “unsatisfied desires” (p. 93). When we consider the play videos recorded for this thesis, such as the Shark Game, gun play, and the Dog Catcher game, it is possible to see the range of emotions, power and control that such play evokes in children. For example, it is arguable that children derived a sense of achievement from successful attempts “to build buildings” (Chris, 2:56#99), “to make a dog” (Amy, 15#36), or “to jump up sky” (Marie, 00#51). Likewise, it is arguable that children derived a sense of power from “shooting guns” (Ross, 23#27), “learning not to cry, we don't want to cry” (Flynn, 21#9913), and “learning how to do stuff which is really dangerous, which only adults can do” (Chris, 1:36#9902). As Corsaro (2012, p. 495) found in observing children play, “children relish taking on and expressing power ... It is fun” (p. 495). In sociocultural theory, the emotional value of play for children is significant (Fleer & Hammer, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978; 1987). It is consistent with the current interpretation of the child’s perspective therefore to attest to the emotional learning through play that is apparent in the findings.

The fourth way that Vygotsky (2004a) argued imagination can be understood in terms of reality is that the products of imagination, such as fiction and art can influence what is available in reality for people to draw on for the purpose of informing Vygotsky’s first way imagination is related to reality. This is true for children’s imaginary play: Adults (such as educators and family members)

making decisions about children's lives are often affected by the products of children's imaginary play. For example, the imaginary play of children frequently affects parents' consumer choices of products such as toys (Edwards, Skouteris, Rutherford, & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013), and parents general attitude to pretend play (Gleason, 2005). Children's play is often analysed to understand their thoughts and feelings (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010; Walker, 2009) - another example of how the products of imagination impact on the real world. Another way in which they impact real-life learning may be found in the literature on imaginary companions. Studies have found that, for example:

Imaginary companions functioned as inner mentors, assisting the children in their identity formation work. Imaginary companions were experienced by the children as giving comfort and company, bolstering self-regulation and motivation, enhancing their selves, expanding their personality potential, and finally, enriching their lives (Hoff, 2004, p. 151).

Thus, the influence of reality on imagination Vygotsky describes in the first two ways come full circle and imagination influences reality. Such research findings suggest the imaginary situation may scaffold children's learning of a number of things that may be otherwise impeded by lack of confidence or self-restraint. Saule's (1:20#62) "learning that I could sleep by myself" is a possible example of how the world of imagination (Goldilocks and Saule's playing with a felt diorama of the story) led to learning in the real world (having the confidence to sleep by herself). Other studies have found children with imaginary companions out-perform their peers on theory of mind scores (Taylor & Carlson, 1997), as well as emotional intelligence scores three years later (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, & Charley, 2004). Such findings suggest that imagination affects real-life learning.

Vygotsky (1978) saw a link between children's imagination and their own realities. He observed children abiding by the rule(s) of the imaginary situation rather than their own needs. I could see the same in the children's findings, for example, when James, Chris, and Anna, were building a tower from blocks, all



children expressed their desire to “knock down [the] castles” (Anna, 2:46#63), yet they did not because of the rules of the play [“trying to make it up to the ceiling” (43#63)], as in Figure 6.2 (p. 262). Other examples included running away from “sharks” even when exhausted, “having to listen” even though one might have wanted to “cheat ... [moving one’s Trouble™ piece] it when it [wasn’t one’s] turn” (Esha, 1:18#9931), or “acting like a dog” even if it meant being pinned down by many boys larger than you<sup>18</sup> (Ariel, 5:15#4), as in Figure 6.3 (see, p. 262). As Rogers and Evans (2008) contend, “the child at play is ... positioned in a force-field between his/her desire to act spontaneously and by the inherent need to subordinate those desires to the rules of the game” (p. 31). It is in this way Vygotsky (1978) saw the child becoming “a head taller than himself” or herself in play, making it “a major source of development” (p. 102). Many other scholars have concurred with this learning of self-regulation through play in accordance with the social context (e.g., Bodrova, 2008; Holzman & Newman, 1993; Robson, 2010).

Vygotsky’s four ways that imagination is related to reality suggest learning is happening in play. The first way implies that children are playing with ideas conceptually when they play. The second implies that children can learn experientially through play, playing out a scenario from a new standpoint and

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<sup>18</sup> The gendered nature of this interaction (Blaise, 2010; Blaise & Andrew, 2005; Danby, 1998; MacNaughton, 2004; Wood & Cook, 2006), as well as the peer power constellations, were salient in this particular play episode. As Löfdahl & Hägglund (2006) contend, “pre-school children within the context of play communicate and act in relation to social participation and power” (p. 179). Such considerations were nonetheless beyond the scope of this thesis.

potentially understanding new ideas in a much more material manner as they play with those ideas. The third entails emotional learning by experiencing real emotion from the imaginary situation. The fourth implies that children learn self-regulation of impulses when they play because they must adhere to the rules of the imaginary situation and subordinate their own immediate desires to these rules. These ways of relating imagination and reality were evident in the findings of this thesis when the children expressed their understandings of learning through play as:

- 1) Belle's (12-56#37) "learning to kill Captain Hook because he's evil", as it demonstrated her possible learning about Peter Pan™, coffee, chilli, and poisoning;
- 2) Ariel's (7#21) "learning how to be in the sea" because it implied her experiential learning first-hand what she may have only read about or seen;
- 3) Ross' (23#27) "shooting guns" because it showed him learning to create emotions he may not have felt as easily in reality, such as power; and
- 4) Saule's (1:20#62) "learning that [she] could sleep by [her]self" because it suggested she was using her imaginary play with the brave and independent Goldilocks as a way to learn to sleep by herself in her own bed.

Applying a sociocultural reading of the children's data, it can be argued that there was evidence that there was indeed learning occurring through their play. While Piaget saw play leading to only one of two processes necessary for learning (assimilation, see 3.3.1.3, p. 126), Vygotsky's emphasis on the inevitably social aspects of learning (see 4.1.1, p. 145) suggests the importance of adults such as educators engaging with and extending children's play to foster learning (Bodrova, 2008; Fleer, 2010). This active role is critical in light of the context of this thesis (see 1.1, p. 19), as will be discussed later (see 6.7, p. 300). In addition, children's perspectives appeared to offer an insight into what they might be learning, suggesting that there is value in asking children about their learning,

even if their responses do not evidence metacognition.

The types of learning that children spoke about appear to be in many ways what Fler (2011) terms “conceptual play”, which may or may not correspond with “conceptual intersubjectivity” that she insists educators must understand in order to garner “contextual intersubjectivity” mentioned in the Introduction (see 1.1, specifically p. 33). This implication will be elaborated later (see 6.7.5, specifically p. 320).

#### **6.1.4 A lesson from the children’s perspectives**

There is a lesson in the children’s perspectives on learning through play. Their perspectives appear to align with a sociocultural perspective on learning. This lesson was personally significant for me because the reading I had done in the psychological research on children’s perspectives suggested that the children over four years of age should have been able to discuss their learning in a metacognitive way. I expected, as Richards’ (2011) research suggested, that children would discuss their learning through play outside of the imaginary situation, abandoning their “in play persona... for one judged appropriate to being interviewed, somewhat serious, commonsensical and dispassionate” (p. 316). However, what actually happened was that the children talked about the play in terms of the “main aim of the game”, the principal rule of the imaginary situation. This meant the children were far from “dispassionate”, but utilised the research process as an exciting opportunity to reinstate the main rule of the play. Yet the assumptions I took into the research about learning and the children’s capacities meant that I disrupted much of the narrative of the children’s play, and at times even discredited what they said. As Valentine (1999) says, “adultist assumptions have underpinned much academic research on children within the social sciences” (p. 142). Such assumptions were evident in the way that the

educators, mothers and I discussed learning of abstract concepts such as cognitive and social learning. This connects with the “pedagogisation of play” according to its extrinsic value (Rogers, 2013, p.160; Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 279), where “a whole language has been created” to justify play in terms of learning (Ailwood, 2003, p. 295). It is possible that such adultist views are applied to children when they are participating in play-based learning experiences provided for them in their ECEC settings.

My experience and the consequent theorisation of the findings from a sociocultural perspective on learning and Vygotskian conceptualisation of play suggest the importance of listening respectfully and with the open mind to what children bring to research (Corsaro, 2011; James & Prout, 1997; Richards, 2011). This implication stands as testimony to the value of conceptualising children “from an additive rather than deficit perspective” (Boström, 2006, p. 228). An “additive perspective” on children’s experiences and knowledge base can be used to challenge our own assumptions and world views about children’s lives. If children are the most central stakeholder (i.e., the stakeholder with the most “at stake”), and are to contribute to the debate on learning through play, researchers and their research designs must take account for differing understandings of learning through play (Morgan, 2007). Otherwise, it will remain difficult to understand children’s perspectives on learning through play as “the aim of game”.

As ECEC research has dramatically increased over the last two decades, there is a call for greater input from “our youngest” (Johansson & White, 2011, p. 2). Pat Thomson’s sentiment is particularly true if our youngest are to be heard in the frame of their unique perspectives:

the perspectives of children and young people are of interest to contemporary social scientists precisely because they offer specific and unique insights – about their everyday lives at home and school and their view and hopes for their futures – which can easily slip below the horizons of older inquirers

(Thomson, 2008, p. 1).

This section has shown that the answer to the first research question for this thesis, “What are the perspectives of children on learning through play?” is that children believe they are learning to maintain the main rule of the imaginary situation. This is a contribution to our understanding of “children’s perspectives” (see 2.2.2.3, p. 77) as well as a lesson in how to discuss learning with them. The implications of the finding related to the main rule of the imaginary situation are explored in greater depth later (see 6.7, p. 300).

## **6.2 Mother’s perspectives on learning through play**

The findings from the investigation of mothers’ perspectives showed that they believed learning through play in the home to be principally intrapersonal, cognitive, and social. The cognitive and social types can be seen as largely developmental, and all three types assume the adult’s role to be largely facilitating and non-interventionist. The practices and values in their perspectives revealed mothers were principally oriented towards their children’s success.

### **6.2.1 Mothers’ perspectives on intrapersonal learning through play**

The sub-types of intrapersonal development mentioned by the mothers all reflect the practice of becoming an equally-participating, individuated and valued member of that family. For example, for Allysha, Benji’s play with trains demonstrated him finding his passion (Allysha, 1:26#2). Davis’ taking his clothes off to play a rock concert was, for Hayley (2:52), him finding what he loved to do. Similarly, Ellie (19:21) saw play as an opportunity for Ariel to learn to become

“street smart”, and so to become individual and independent from her mother, and become successful as an individuated member of the family. Pam’s (7:16) perspective that Maggie was learning “independence” when preparing materials for art projects by herself demonstrated the values self-reliance and self-sufficiency, and of Maggie becoming a more competent participant in the family. Even Fiona’s (2:24) perspective that Amy’s story-telling and -writing demonstrated Amy’s learning about her personal passions also showed the practices of becoming in individuated and self-sufficient – in participating in the family practice of story-reading, like her mother. All these perspectives value the child’s individuated and autonomous learning of how to be an individual through play. The practices also involved minimal intervention by the mothers, who instead preferred to provide the resources for children’s agentic learning through play.

Likewise, Allysha’s (12:44#2) comments that Benji had a stick to compensate for his “uneven relationship” with his older sister showed her perspective that he was learning intrapersonal skills like finding security, but they also showed the practice of Benji individuating from other siblings and assuming a more contributing role as a member of the family. The notion of the child’s “becoming” was here a salient theme because mother’s perspectives were framed in the context of the children’s burgeoning successful participation in the family (White, 2002). Like the others, this comment showed the value mothers attributed to their child’s autonomous learning about power and individuation through play. Unlike previous research on mothers’ perspectives on learning through play, which have mostly considered learning through play in the ECEC setting, this finding is a new contribution to our understanding of mothers perspectives because it shows how mothers expect learning through play to occur in the home (or family institution). Previous literature (Christmas, 2005; Monteflor, et al., 2006; Opper, 1994; O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Rescorla et al., 1990) has shown that mothers expect more of educators than themselves (see 2.2.3.2, p. 87), but this finding suggests

they may not expect intrapersonal learning through play in the ECEC centre. However, if educators were able to engage with this type of learning through play, there would be more continuity between ECEC and home (or family) settings and greater opportunities to fulfil Area Six of the NQS, “Collaborative partnerships with families and communities” (DEECD, 2012, para. 14). This will be discussed in detail in the Implications section (see 6.7, p. 300).

### **6.2.2 Mothers’ perspectives on cognitive learning through play**

The mothers mentioned cognitive learning the second-most frequently (see Table 5.2, p. 212). These comments also showed the mother’s perspective being oriented towards their child’s success in family practices. Additionally, most of these practices were framed as in relation to the future, as if children were “becoming” adults, reflecting a maturationist interpretation of childhood (White, 2002). As in developmental understandings of the cognitive domain of learning through play (see 3.3.1.3, p. 126), mothers spoke about how they supported (rather than modelled or extended) what to them appeared to be an innate learning process. For example, Hayley’s (1:19) perspective that Davis was learning about concepts like “transportation” or restaurant-related topics were framed within his successful participation in practices such as going on vacations (e.g., Hayley commented on a recent trip to Bali) and the related bus, taxi, and aeroplane transportation, and practices such as restaurant and café-going that the family did together. For Hayley, Davis was learning how to participate fully in these practices, and Hayley did not appear to enter this play or guide it.

Another interesting way that the mothers’ perspectives were oriented towards successful participation in the practices of the family was Leena’s (30:30) perspective that James was cognitively learning about ideas through play by

exploring “what he learned through the day”. This perspective demonstrated her orientation to his successful participation in the practices of the family because James’ playing out what he learned was supported through his parents’ provision of toys and time for play. Parents’ provision of time and resources for play (including whole “rumpus rooms”) is a common practice in Western-heritage affluent societies, representing the division of adult work and child’s play (and “work”, as in Isaacs (1929) popular idea of “play as the child’s work”). Critically for this thesis, this practice separates adults from the imaginary worlds of children and any intervention in it other than providing resources. Thus, James’ play represented his success in family practices for children because he was doing what Leena deemed appropriate activity for children.

These practices reveal the notion of “work” not only because play was framed as the child’s way of developing and progressing (thus doing the “work” that is deemed natural for their becoming mature members of the family). They also reveal the practices of vocational and house work. The latter practices, which were salient in, for example, Joan’s (19:32) comedic comment, “I don't know what she's learning, but I'm learning how to entertain my child for five minutes so that I can get something done!” This showed the practice of adult work both to bring in money to the family (consistent with Dahlberg et al., 2007; Stuart, 2013) but also to continue the functioning of the family institution via “housework” or other associated tasks. For example, Fiona’s perspective that she was entertaining Amy by instigating the play of Twenty Questions in their commute to Tall Eucalypts also showed the practices of work associated with family functioning: Fiona sent Amy to Tall Eucalypts so that Fiona could go to work. This relationship between using ECEC services so that parents can go to work has been mentioned in the research literature investigating mothers’ perspectives (Einarsdottir, 2008; O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). Many of the comments in the mothers’ data relating to intrapersonal learning were also framed in terms of the children’s growing independence from the mothers so that work could be completed. Some examples



include: Fiona's (1:56) perspective on Amy's learning to create and draw stories by herself, as well as make her own "interpretation" of storybooks; Pam's (6:20) perspective on Maggie's preparation of materials for her own art projects; Hayley's (4:50) perspective on Davis' shopping-list-writing for his "restaurant"; and Ellie's (19:21) perspective on Ariel's learning "street smartness" and "being left to her own devices" away from the parents' activities. Therefore, child as well as adult practices of "work" are evident in the mothers' perspective. The separation of adult work and child's play, a theme in the literature on childhood (Cannella, 1997), is consistent with the notion that adults do not enter or intervene in play.

### **6.2.3 Mothers' perspectives on social learning through play**

Finally, the mothers commented widely on social learning. These comments also demonstrated the role of play in children's successful participation in family practices, as well as the value of children's independent learning through play. For example, Ellie's (9:51) remarks about Ariel "learning the role of cooking and providing food" refer to social roles that also happen to be practices within the family. Precisely because Ellie was orienting her perspective towards her daughter's participation in the family, she also saw Ariel as rehearsing such practices by initiating role play. Similarly, Joan's (15:59) comments about Danielle "getting over" conflicts with her siblings represented the practices of successful participation of all siblings in the family because the children resolved tensions by themselves (see 5.2.3.2, p. 227). The practice of "getting over" conflicts alluded to the common adult practice of "conflict resolution" for such ends (Degotardi et al., 2013, p. 7; Roberts, 2008), and in many ways a harmonious, happy family is widely considered the image of social success (Lane et al., 2007). Thus Joan's comments about social learning may be seen in relation to successful participation in the practice of resolving family conflicts, and this success is achieved through

children's independent learning through play.

#### **6.2.4 Implications of mothers' perspectives**

In summation, mothers' perspectives on learning through play showed intrapersonal, cognitive, and social learning as prominent. An analysis of practices and values showed that all three types of learning (intrapersonal, cognitive, and social) demonstrated the mothers' orientation towards the children's independent learning of participation in the practices of the family. This is an interesting finding because the literature showed mothers mostly valued cognitive (Christmas, 2005; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Pierola, 1995; Kable, 2001; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012; Opper, 1994; West, Hausken, & Collins, 1993;) and social learning (Cooney, 2004; Haight, Parke, & Black, 1997; McLean, Edwards, Schaper, & Colliver, 2013; Needham & Jackson, 2012; Plowman, 2003; Rescorla et al., 1990) for their children in the ECEC centre. There is an apparent contrast between the standards mothers apply to the home and ECEC settings considering the literature showing that mothers want structured activities, presumably guided by the educator, in order to foster cognitive learning of content such as literacy and numeracy in the ECEC setting (Fisher et al., 2008; Haight et al., 1997; McLean et al., 2014, forthcoming), whereas the findings in this thesis demonstrated that, in the home, they value their child's independent learning. This may mean that while mothers appear to endorse developmental psychological perspectives that expect children to learn through play autonomously and without guidance from adults in the home, they demand for greater input and guidance from educators in the ECEC centre.

In addition, the fact that they did not expect cognitive and social as much as intrapersonal learning through play in the family setting is perhaps telling of the higher expectations they place on educators in comparison to those they place on than themselves, but may also indicate that they see the ECEC centre as a place of school preparation (Cohen, 1981; Holloway et al., 1995; Lane et al., 2007;

O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012) whereas the home as one for broader skills such as intrapersonal learning. These different expectations may explain why mothers do not intervene in play in the home but expect educator intervention in ECEC settings. Further, it is possible to understand both the current findings (where mothers were oriented towards their child's successful participation in the family) and the research literature (where mothers appear to be oriented towards their child's ability to do well scholastically) in relation to the *success* of their children. While mothers were oriented towards successful participation in *family* practices in the current findings, the extensive literature showing they expect cognitive (literacy and numeracy) and social learning through play in the ECEC centre (as outlined in the Literature Review, see 2.2.3.2, p. 84) suggests that it is possible to also understand their perspectives in relation to success in *academic* practices. For example, studies in relation to transition to school have identified social adjustment and a positive disposition to learning as being most important (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Other studies have confirmed that self-control and cooperation are widely deemed necessary skills for "success" in school (Lane, Givner, & Pierson, 2004), suggesting that the mothers' perspectives may be understood in terms of wanting success for their child. This valuing of success may go some way in explaining why mothers express a desire for more structure from educators, particularly in learning through play. This demand is consistent with directives of the recent curriculum reforms, which in Australia demand that educators actively "extend and enrich" children's learning through play (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). Such findings have implications which will be explored later (see 6.7, p. 300).

In answer to the first research question for this thesis, "What are the perspectives of mothers on learning through play?", it can be said that mothers see intrapersonal, cognitive and social learning through play in the home as the most significant. An analysis of practices and values suggest that mothers' perspectives

are oriented towards their children's successful participation in the practices of the family.

### **6.3 Educators' perspectives on learning through play**

The findings from the investigation of educators' perspectives showed that they believed cognitive, social and physical learning through play occurred in the ECEC centre. These types are consistent with developmental understandings of the cognitive, social and physical domains of play (see 3.3.1.1 – 3.3.1.3, pp. 123 – 126). Although the emphasis on such domains appeared to value children learning content (which may in some approaches be associated with more intentional teaching practices), the deductive analysis of the practices showed primarily facilitating rather than intentional teaching practices in relation to learning through play. Accordingly, values represented were principally aligned with the EYLF and VEYLDF curricula (as shown in the centre of the red circle in the Venn diagram, Figure 6.4, see p. 292), but not with the corresponding emphases on intentional teaching and sustained shared thinking.

#### **6.3.1 Educators' perspectives on cognitive learning through play**

In the educators' perspective, cognitive learning through play – which included learning the properties of objects, literacy and facts about the world – was strongly oriented to their practices of drawing on the curriculum. For example, Kirra's (5) comment about "learning the secondary colours" (referring to when Ross was mixing colours) not only demonstrated the cognitive learning which educators perceived, but also Kirra's practice of citing predetermined curriculum content, as shown by her use of the definite article "the", that suggesting there were a

predetermined number of secondary colours to be learned. This aligned her pedagogy with child- as well as content-centred approaches to curriculum. Yet the practices she cited did not extend her role in the learning through play beyond just providing resources (in this case, paint in each of the three primary colours). This meant that it was purely coincidental that the children's interest in paints led to their learning curricular content related to primary and secondary colours: not as a result of Kirra guiding their play to learning about secondary colours. In fact, without this guidance, it becomes less plausible that children were in fact learning about secondary and primary colours, as Kirra believed.

Similarly, when Lowanna (20) commented on learning "literacy", a cognitive type of learning through play, she was also referencing curricular stipulation that literacy be taught (DEEWR, 2009, p. 38), and verifying its achievement objectively through the "actual" skill of reading a book. This aligned with the curricular demands of measurable literacy "outcomes" (such as those in the EYLF) that are expected in Western societies (Hedges & Cullen, 2012, p. 931). Simultaneously, Lowanna made several references to child-centred ideals such as child engagement (appreciating a story because it had "all the elements that will appeal" to children, such as "humour"). There were also references to musical learning through "rhyme", part of "holistic" learning the child-centred practice aims for (Hunter & Walsh, 2014, p. 25) through the expressive arts (Rusher, McGrevin, & Lambiotte, 1992, p. 277). Yet her own intervention in this play experience to extend the learning is not apparent, meaning that it was mere chance that the children's interest in the book led to content learning (literacy).

The same was the case for Merindah's provision for language learning (26:50) through "having ... different types of text," and for learning mathematical concepts through sand play (21:56), where practices were non-interventionist and simply involved providing materials for children's independent learning. Such an

approach to play is consistent with DAP, of which “child-initiated, teacher-supported play is an essential component” (Fein & Rivkin 1986, p. 14). Critically, without intentional educator practices, it is less plausible that just providing text will lead to children learning how to read. The passive, facilitating role demonstrated by the educators’ practices (see “practices” in Table 5.1, p. 195) indicates that, as the literature suggests (Anning, 2010; Rogers, 2010; Wood, 2007), educators may struggle to know how to implement a more intentional role such as the one expected of them in the EYLF (Grieshaber, 2010; Leggett & Ford, 2013) and VEYLDF (Garvis et al., 2012) and other curricular reforms across the globe (Bennet, 2005). Their orientation towards the curriculum (see the red circle in Figure 6.4, p. 292) is represented through educators’ use of child- and content-centred approaches, but not in making child-centred interests (i.e., play) lead to content-centred interests (i.e., subject content). This represents a problem that will be address in the Implications (see 6.7, p. 300).

The one exception appeared to be Tarni’s (19:17) engagement with the child’s interest in ants, using open-ended questioning to extend the infant’s thinking while playing in the sandpit (see 5.1.1.3, p. 199). This practice demonstrated Tarni’s “shared thinking and problem solving to extend children’s thinking and learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15).

However, the majority of the educators’ practices demonstrated an alignment with content- and child-centred approaches of the EYLF and VEYLDF curricula, but not the “integration of child-directed play and learning; guided play and learning; and adult-led learning”, as these curricula demand (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 12).

### **6.3.2 Educators’ perspectives on social learning through play**

Educators’ perspectives on social learning through play also evidenced the practices of both child- and content-centred approaches but not educator

engagement in play to extend learning. For example, Teresa (18:21) showed the child-centred approach in her practices of facilitating children's "work[ing] out a game and [persisting] with the game without anybody giving them the rules or the length of time". This approach was consistent with her non-intervention, which the Literature Review (see 2.1.3, specifically p. 58) showed was a key tenet of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). Equally, Lowanna (11:45) focused on children "expressing" themselves, which fitted well with the right to play and express themselves (UN, 1989). Similarly, Kirra (15:41) commented on children "sticking up for each other", without any mention of educators' practices in play to enrich the learning in the play. Further, Kirra's surprise that the children were doing so at "that age range" suggests linear notions of development with predetermined phases reminiscent of Parten's (1932) stages of social participation in play that have dominated the field (Lillard et al., 2013; Xu, 2010) and portrayed children only in terms of their internal drives to be autonomous and learn (Garvey, 1974; Salamon, 2011). These practices were consistent with a solely facilitating role in learning through play rather than an active and intentional teaching role.

Tarni's (21:19) comments about children learning "to *listen*" (see p. 205), on the other hand, demonstrated a more traditional, didactic educator role fostering "basic learning" that extended learning "about space, and cooperating, and listening". Merindah (15:38) spoke about her role initiating Group Time and "extending the play bigger and bigger" also. As such there was some evidence (mostly from Tarni) that educators do guide play towards learning. However, playing Musical Chairs with the children (as Tarni did) is not the same as entering as an equal co-player with the children. As such, it seems that the educators in this study overall would have benefitted from knowledge and training about how to enter play as co-players in a way that would enable so that learning can be extended.

### 6.3.3 Educators' perspectives on physical learning through play

Finally, the educators spoke about physical learning, including and gross- and fine-motor skills. Teresa's (12:39) posing questions ("Now, is it a time to stop?") was a more active educator practice than just facilitation, where her prompting appeared to be extending the children's learning through play about gross motor skills such as endurance. Her attempts to extend the learning by "open questioning, speculating, explaining, engaging in shared thinking" are in line with the practices expected in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). They also appear to attend to the children's "emerging skills" rather than what the children were already capable of by themselves (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a, p. 79). This is a potential engagement with the NQF reforms that capitalise on Siraj-Blatchford's (2009a) findings about "sustained shared thinking" (DEECD & VCAA, 2011; DEEWR, 2009), and import a more engaged educator role than traditional developmental paradigms have done (Legget & Ford, 2013; Tayler, 2012; Walsh et al., 2011).

In contrast, Tarni (15:38) spoke about "subconscious learning" (of how bodies work and what their limits are) that left little scope for the educator's active practices in play. Moreover, the subconscious learning Tarni mentioned was reminiscent of the developmental understandings of the physical domain of play (see 3.3.1.2, p. 124). Such understandings see children's learning of "locomotor movements in the context of play" (*exercise play*) without any account for the role of others in this learning (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998, p. 578), ruling out the possibility for intentional educator practices that extend children's learning beyond what they learn by themselves.

Thus, there appeared to be some engagement from educators in physical learning through play but the predominant paradigm underpinning their perspectives appeared to be developmental, and one which assumed the adult should not interfere or take an intentional role in learning through play (Walsh et al., 2011).



### **6.3.4 Implications of educators' perspectives**

The fact that educators mentioned cognitive, social and physical learning through play the most frequently implies that these types of learning through play were most significant in their perspective. Firstly, in and of itself, according significance to these types is reminiscent of the latest DAP guidelines, which state clearly that the first "principle of child development" is:

All the domains of development and learning - physical, social and emotional, and cognitive - are important, and they are closely interrelated. Children's development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 11).

The core, definitive "domains" of learning in the DAP are listed in an almost identical way to the way educators expressed their perspective in terms of cognitive, social and physical learning through play. Secondly, this is particularly true in contrast to the mothers, who saw learning through play first and foremost in terms of intrapersonal learning: enjoyment, independence and a sense of security. This suggests, like other research, that the educator perspective is strongly influenced by DAP (Fleer, 1995; Fleer et al., 2009; Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005).

The educators' balancing of child- and content-centred approaches to learning through play showed the value they placed on curriculum, which in Australia has recently shifted its focus from solely child-centred practices to including an emphasis on content (Hedges & Cullen, 2012). In this thesis, educators appeared to respond to this shift in emphasis because they valued both child- and content-centred approaches. This showed their orientation toward the curriculum. However, the educator's practices demonstrated very little engagement with play, particularly as a co-player would, extending and enriching learning. Educator

practices did not overall account for what recent curricular reforms have mandated (Grieshaber, 2010; Leggett & Ford, 2013; Tayler, 2012). This reform is at odds with the developmental understanding of different domains because developmental approaches have traditionally limited the amount that adults can enter in play (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014; Gibbons, 2007; Walsh et al., 2011). As such, the educators' predominantly developmental practices and values represent a barrier to the implementation of learning through play as it is conceived in the EYLF and NQF in general. What educators need to know, it would seem, is how to intervene in play without disrupting it, so that intervention can enable learning to be enriched. Further, as it was shown that mothers wanted more structure in play in the ECEC centre, the educators' perspectives appeared to be a barrier to aligning the practices of the ECEC and home settings. These issues will be addressed in the coming sections.

In answer to the first research question for this thesis, "What are the perspectives of educators on learning through play?", it can be said that cognitive, social and physical learning through play were most significant. Educators' practices were either child- or content-centred, and were oriented towards the curriculum.

## **6.4 Research Question One**

In the Literature Review (see 2.2, p. 63), I proposed that insider stakeholder perspectives offer a unique contribution to the literature on learning through play because the topic has been viewed mostly from the perspectives of more peripheral stakeholders such as philosophers, psychologists and policy-makers (Brooker, 2011; Soto & Swadener, 2002; Wood et al., 2010). Insider stakeholder perspectives are expected to provide a unique understanding of the culture of the ECEC setting as practice takes place. With the discussions of the three stakeholder groups in mind, it is now possible to propose the answers to the first research

question: “What are the perspectives of insider stakeholders, including children, mothers and educators, on learning through play?” I will briefly discuss each before returning to how these perspectives as a whole may represent an “insider” culture (Stephen & Brown, 2004). I begin with educators because they are expected to serve as a conduit between outsider and insider perspectives.

#### **6.4.1 Educators’ perspectives**

Educators spoke most about the domains of learning through play that also happen to be familiar within developmental discourse: cognitive, social and physical learning through play. This perspective represented a common framework in which children’s learning is understood: in terms of the processes leading to this learning (Gibbons, 2007). It is interesting to note that cognitive and social learning through play were most frequently mentioned, and by inference appeared to be most valued, just as the literature on mothers’ expectations for learning through play appeared to show (see 2.2.3.2, p. 84).

The fact that physical learning through play was significant, however, may be best understood in relation to the realisation of theory about learning through play. As was shown in the children’s perspective, the types of learning through play they identified were indicative of the types that were recorded (see 0, specifically p. 229). That is, physical, artistic, acting and rule-based play were most likely the common types of play that took place in *Tall Eucalypts*, with physical play dominating at over one-third of all types of play (see Table 5.3, p. 229). The fact that educators *saw* more physical play in the playground may have meant they commented more on physical *learning through play* than mothers. In other words, it is possible that educators’ perspectives represented how play was enacted because it accounted for children’s actual play type preferences.

After an inductive analysis (see 4.10.2, p. 183), the analysis of practices and values

revealed that educators were most focused on children's autonomous learning practices in relation to what they were interested in (a child-centred emphasis) as well as curriculum content (a content-centred approach). The absence of intentional practices that might have connected the children's interests to the learning of curriculum content suggested educators were relying on a developmental perspective related to holistic learning through play that had been hybridised to suit the curricular demands for content. The practices of balancing the child-and content-centred approaches did not appear to amount to educators demonstrating an engagement with the NQF emphasis on the educators' intentionality. The value educators attributed to both approaches appeared to reflect the traditional, developmental perspective rather than greater intentionality.

#### **6.4.2 Mothers' perspectives**

Mothers' perspectives, which in this thesis were expected to partially represent the perspective of family members, mentioned intrapersonal, cognitive and social learning through play most frequently, suggesting they were the most significant types to mothers. While the emphases on cognitive and social learning through play are relatively consistent with previous literature showing mothers want literacy and numeracy, as well as social skills, to be learned in ECEC settings, that intrapersonal learning through play was more significant is a new finding. It suggested that, from the perspective of mothers, the family is a place where children can learn who they are, how to be individuated, and how to be independent from older family members. The analysis of practices and values was consistent with this idea, as mothers appeared to see children learning how to successfully participate in the practices of the family. The mothers' perspective on learning through play in the home and ECEC settings seemed to thus converge on the idea that mothers care most about their child's success in the institution in question: in the ECEC setting, learning through play might focus on academic

success (in relation to school practices); in the home setting, learning through play might focus on success in family practices. This is a unique angle on children's learning through play when compared with, for example, the philosophical perspective that play always leads to the learning most appropriate to the child's development (see 2.1.1, p. 51) or the policy-maker perspective that pedagogical provision for play increases the "quality" and "effectiveness" of ECEC centres (see 2.1.4, p. 59). Perhaps the mothers' perspectives show that motives are dependent on context, suggesting that mothers agree with the natural learning of developmentalism for home-based learning through play, but, in relation to scholastic learning, their motives are more oriented towards academic success.

### **6.4.3 Children's perspectives**

Children's perspectives did not appear to focus on types of learning through play. Instead, their perspectives were best understood at the institutional level, where the group's practices and values showed the importance of the rules of the imaginary situation of play. In particular, the main rule of the imaginary situation was what they saw themselves learning. This intense focus contrasted the trisected focus of the adult stakeholders, emphasising the value of the imaginary situation for children. Their practices, which included creating, publically declaring and maintaining the imaginary situation of play via one main rule, showed the centrality of the imaginary world in ECEC settings. Their focus on the ephemeral world of imagination, and on learning as being whatever they were participating in, shows the stark temporal differences in the adults' and children's perspectives. That is, adults such as educators and mothers appeared to be focused on future outcomes such as literacy and numeracy, whereas children were focused on learning on the immediate – that is, how the imaginary is played out (e.g., "how to kill Captain Hook"). That the children believed they were learning the main rule of the imaginary situation shows exactly how committed they were

to performing their best according to the rules of the imaginary situation.

Having roughly canvassed each of the insider stakeholder groups, it is possible to describe their perspectives as oriented towards their own activities. For educators, this meant implementing learning through play as it was conceived within curriculum. For mothers, this was related to the workings of the family unit. For children, this meant keeping an imaginary world alive and evolving.

Having broadly described insider perspectives, it is now possible to consider more deeply how they were different from and similar to each other. This is done with a view to seeing how learning through play is implemented by each of the three groups so that related policy and curriculum may be more effective.

## **6.5 Similarities and differences in perspectives**

The main value of the investigation in this thesis is related to the implementation of learning through play. If Australia's aspirations as a nation are to improve the educational outcomes of children, then policy and curriculum need to be realised effectively. In the Introduction to this thesis, I argued that insider stakeholders would have a unique perspective on how they policy and curriculum are realised. I argued that, because insider stakeholders implement this policy together, their interactions needed to be understood. In order to understand how their perspectives interacted, I proposed that the best way to operationalise such an investigation was to look at similarities and differences between their perspectives. Thus the second research question was: "What are the similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play?" I will now consider each in the next two subsections (see 6.5.1, p. 287 and 6.5.2, p. 289), showing that the main similarities existed between the two adult stakeholder groups' perspectives and the main differences between their and the

children's perspectives.

### **6.5.1 Similarities**

Overall, there appeared to be a good level of agreement between the educators and mothers about what was being learned through play and thus by extension what was important to them. There was a sense that adults do not differ dramatically in their perspectives related to cognitive and social learning. This would appear at the surface to show that educators are also responsive to mothers' demands on them. As will be discussed in the Implications later, there is little need to align the two adult perspectives (although I will argue that alignment can be increased through engagement with children). I now discuss the similarities between the educators' and mothers' perspectives on cognitive and social learning through play.

#### **6.5.1.1 Mothers' and educators' perspectives on cognitive learning through play**

As seen in the Literature Review, mothers seem to want educators to prepare their children for the academic challenges of school (see 2.2.3.2, especially p. 86). In addition, such desires have made their way into curriculum, including in Australia (Hedges & Cullen, 2012). These maternal and curricular demands appear to be reflected in the way that educators in this investigation expressed their perspectives. In particular, educators' practices were oriented towards their curriculum, which may explain why educators picked up on the demand for cognitive learning outcomes such as literacy and numeracy. Educators appeared to highlight learning about the properties of objects (physics and science principles), literacy and making sense of the world in terms of how aspects of their world fit together. Similarly, mothers spoke about exploring ideas, learning

how things are organised, and the properties of objects. This alignment between educators' and mothers' perspectives suggests that the adult insiders see learning through play occurring in similar ways, and by inference, are working towards similar goals.

Further, if mothers are oriented towards their children's success in entering school, and educators towards delivering what the curriculum prescribes, then there appears only to be the requirement that the curriculum outcomes prepare children for school. Grieshaber and Shearer (2013) recently analysed the ECEC and primary national curricula in terms of continuity, and found literacy and numeracy to be one significant way the two aligned (p. 16). These similarities bode well for the implementation of learning through play, and are represented in the orange area of Figure 6.4 (see p. 292).

#### **6.5.1.2 Mothers' and educators' perspectives on social learning through play**

Mothers' and educators' perspectives on social learning through play were relatively similar. Several other studies have suggested the similarities between their perspectives (Degotardi et al., 2013; Lane et al, 2004; 2007), with suggestions that interpersonal skills such as assertiveness and self-regulation were demanded more from parents than educators (Lane et al., 2007), which in the current investigation appear to align better with intrapersonal than social learning through play. Thus, the findings relating to intrapersonal learning through play appear to explain the types of social skills that mothers want. The subtypes of learning through play for mothers appeared to relate to learning roles for life and negotiation with peers, and for educators this was generally the same, with the addition of verbal communication with peers in particular (see Table 5.1, p. 195). In contrast to a recent study of the two groups' perspectives (Degotardi et al., 2013), the findings of this investigation showed greater maternal emphasis on peer-peer relationships than child-educator ones. One qualitative difference in



their perspectives in relation to this aspect is that mothers focused on their children the learning *of* (rather than *through*) social roles, which is explained by the mothers' orientation towards family practices that they saw learned through play. This difference highlights the different angles mothers and educators took on social learning through play in relation to success or curriculum.

Overall, the emphases on social learning through play are similar and bode well for the effective implementation of social learning through play. The similarities are represented in the orange area of Figure 6.4 (see p. 292).

## **6.5.2 Differences**

Despite the above similarities, there were some significant differences between the three groups' perspectives. The main differences were: (i) the importance of intrapersonal learning through play to mothers; (ii) the importance of physical learning to educators; and (iii) the value of the imaginary situation of play to children.

### **6.5.2.1 The importance of intrapersonal learning through play**

As mentioned earlier (see 6.2.1, p. 269), a unique finding of this thesis was that mothers expected intrapersonal learning through play to occur in the family setting that they appear not to expect in the ECEC setting (according to the research literature on this: see 2.2.3.2, from p. 84). This suggests that mothers may see the home setting as having a unique intrapersonal development role that is only possible in the privacy and more intimate context of the home (see the yellow area of Figure 6.4, p. 292). Such a role is consistent with, for example, Allysha's comments (12:44#2) about the home being a context for Benji to regain power that is lost with his "uneven relationship" with his older sister, or Hayley's (13:39) perspective that Davis was gaining confidence and familiarity with certain

situations where he may feel disempowered (such as in more didactic classes such as swimming classes) through his play by “set[ting] up all his toys and make them all practice to do all the different activities that he's done in his swimming class ... giving him a certain level of confidence.” What is interesting about these and other examples of intrapersonal learning through play was that the mothers spoke consistently about the *imaginative content* of the play when interpreting what aspects of intrapersonal learning were occurring for the individual child. This was in contrast to educators’ perspectives, which gave more general accounts of the types of play they provided for in the ECEC centre and the domains of learning that corresponded with those play types. For example, (the educator) Merindah (22:47) spoke about learning the properties of sand, tanbark and playdough because of the type of play afforded, whereas (the mother) Allysha (4:42-12:44#2) saw the intrapersonal learning related to Benji accessing his passions in his train play (see Figure 5.9, p. 214). Mothers saw learning through play predominantly in relation not to the real-world actions children undertook (e.g., lining up baskets), but to the imaginary content and activities of their play (e.g., enjoying train driving). What this suggests is that because the mothers were much more focused on the imaginative content of the play, they could therefore assess where children were at (in an intrapersonal, emotional way). In contrast, educators’ perspectives on learning through play appeared to be much more generic and related to curriculum. This has implications for pedagogy and the practices of the educator if there is an expectation in the NQS that educators make “collaborative partnerships with families and communities” (DEECD, 2012, para. 14), in the EYLF to “engage with each child’s family and community” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 19), and research showing continuity between the home and ECEC settings lead to improved outcomes for children (e.g., Melhuish, 2010). These implications will be explored later (see 6.7, p. 300).

### **6.5.2.2 The importance of physical learning through play**

As discussed above (see p. 283), it was plausible that the educators saw physical learning through play as more significant than the mothers did because children seemed to engage in physical play the most out of all types of play in the ECEC centre (constituting over one-third of all play types, as evidenced by Table 5.3, see p. 229). It may also be the case that mothers recorded less physical play in the home because this was more convenient, meaning they commented on physical learning through play less, or that simply the pragmatic aspects of recording play indoors was more convenient and posed less risk of damage to the video cameras I lent them than if they had ventured outdoors with cameras. In other words, mothers' less frequent comments on physical learning may have reflected logistics rather than the significance they attributed to it. Both of these options suggest that educators' perspectives were responsive to the play tendencies of children and thus represent a possible avenue for even greater alignment between their perspectives. My proposal for how this might be achieved is outlined in the Implications below (see 6.7, p. 300).

### **6.5.2.1 The value of the main rule of the imaginary situation**

The finding that the main rule of the imaginary situation was what children believed they were learning through play is the single biggest discrepancy between the perspectives of each of the stakeholders investigated in this thesis (see blue area of Figure 6.4, p. 292). Identifying this difference therefore offers the biggest scope for improving the alignment of their perspectives. The way that children used the opportunity to express their perspectives as a reinterpretation of the main rule of the imaginary situation of play also provides an idea of how much scope there is for educators to guide play towards the learning of curriculum content outcomes.

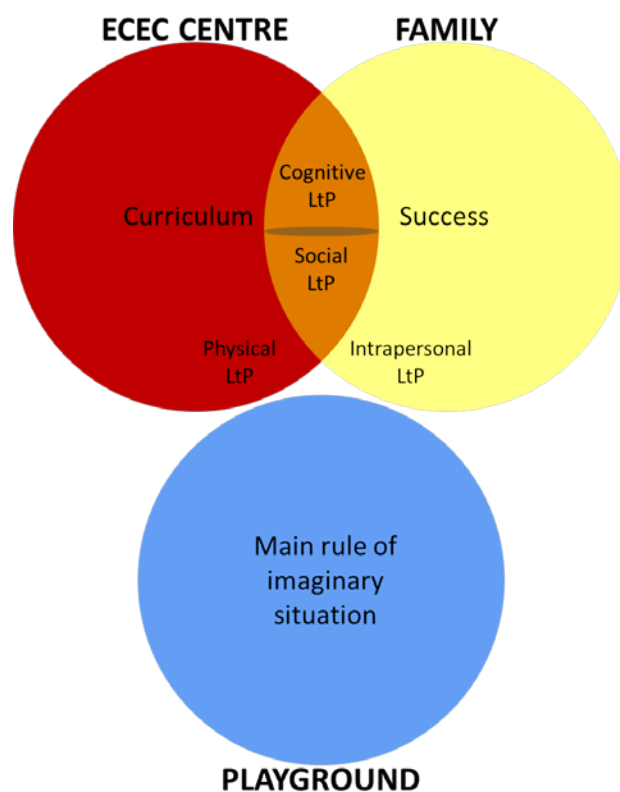


Figure 6.4 Model of the similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play (LtP)

As elaborated in Table 6.1, *Children's comments on learning through play (III) compared to the main rule of the play (II)* (see p. 249), Columns II and III resembled each other significantly, showing that whatever "the aim of the game" in their play was exactly what they believed they were learning. In shared play, there was a good level of consistency in the responses from each of the participating children about the main rule of the imaginary situation (as seen in the similarity of comments from different participants in Column III).

I argued in 6.1 (see p. 243) that this meant that the children's perspectives were consistently oriented towards creating, publically declaring and maintaining the imaginary play situation. The high value that children afforded the imaginary

situation of play was thus apparent. As I will argue in the Implications, the value of the imaginary situation for children is very important to the main contribution this thesis proposes to make to knowledge and to the ECEC field. What I elaborate here is how the children's perspective is fundamentally different to the adults' perspectives.

As I discussed in 6.1.2 (see p. 253), Vygotsky (1976; 1978) theorised that the distinguishing characteristic of play was the existence of an imaginary situation. In the *Dog Catcher* play described by Flynn and James, for example, there was an imaginary situation of an impounded dog trying to escape. Vygotsky also theorised that what structured and delimited the imaginary situation were the rules of behaviour, what van Oers (2013) called the "action potentials", or what actions are possible and impossible within the hypothetical scenario (p. 190). In the *Dog Catcher* example, this would be that the "dog" must walk on all fours, must not speak, must try to escape, must lick and bark at others, and otherwise behave as a dog would. What is not emphasised in Vygotsky's (or other sociocultural) theorisations of these rules is that there is *one predominating* rule (the "aim of the game"). This is the principal motive in the play, usually represented by what each role is trying to do. What the children described as the main rule was a direct insight into the meaning they afforded the play. For example, Esha (1:18#9931) stated that, in playing *Trouble*<sup>TM</sup>, the main rule was to not cheat ("whatever the rules are, you can't chea- You know, cheating is- If you do it when it's not your turn, you can't do that"). In Chris' (1:36#9902) perspective, driving toy trucks off a mat meant that they were "learning how to do stuff which is really dangerous, which only adults can do" suggesting that for him, the "aim of the game" was not to drive fast or along a course, but rather to drive dangerously, in ways that he believed only adults were allowed. Comments such as these provided great insight into the meaning that children attributed their play. For Esha, this was around the importance of abiding by the rules of the board game

(such as only moving one's piece six places when one rolls a six). It also implied that there was a need for her to publically restate and emphasise this rule, presumably because other players were sometimes cheating. Doing so allowed her to "interpretively reproduce" this aim (of not cheating) as the main aim of the game (Corsaro, 2012), and to guide the play towards a goal she had individually determined to be important. In this way, Esha demonstrated the practice of publically declaring the main rule of the imaginary situation, which is an important finding for the Implications of this thesis (see 6.7, p. 300). For Chris, the meaning of the truck play episode appeared to be related to the enjoyment of doing something powerful and prohibited in the real world (Vygotsky's third way imagination is related to reality, as I argued earlier, see p. 263), and of exploring what it means to be "dangerous". Thus the findings of this thesis suggest that the main way that children made meaning of the play was through the main rule of the imaginary situation.

This significantly contrasted with the way that the adult stakeholders depicted learning through play. For example, in playing the role of mothers and fathers, which the children would have believed was affording learning about mothers, was seen by the mothers to foster social learning such as negotiation, problem-solving, interacting skills (Pam, 11:51; see p. 227). As another example, playing *Tag*, which children would have seen as learning how to escape, was seen by educators to foster learning of gross motor skills and endurance (Tarni, 15:38; Teresa, 12:39; see 5.1.3.1, p. 209). It appeared to generally be the real-world activities that adults focused on (e.g. interacting with others, using their bodies), whereas children focused on the main rule of the *imaginary situation*. For adults, learning through play was related to the activities in the real world and, for children, it was related to activities of the imaginary world. The only notable exceptions to this rule appeared to be the way that mothers spoke about intrapersonal learning through play, which took the *imaginary situation* content as a source of children's learning about themselves, their interests and passions. The

differences are tabulated below.

| <b>Perspective</b> | <b>Types of LtP</b>         | <b>Based on activities in the</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Children's         | Based on main rule          | Imaginary world                   |
| Mothers'           | Intrapersonal <sup>19</sup> | Imaginary world                   |
|                    | Cognitive, social           | "Real" world                      |
| Educators'         | Cognitive, social, physical | "Real" world                      |

*Table 6.2 Comparison of types of activities upon which stakeholders base their perspectives on learning through play (LtP)*

As another difference, intrapersonal learning through play is one aspect of the mothers' perspectives that will be addressed in the Implications and recommendations sections below. Overall, though, the critical difference between the children's and adults' perspectives is the cornerstone of the recommendations and implications to arise from this thesis.

There is one final point to make relating to the importance that children placed on the main rule of the imaginary situation of play. This point reveals how much scope for influence there may be in adults such as educators entering play. When

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<sup>19</sup> This was the one exception to the basic difference between adult' and children's perspectives that learning through play was determined by real- or imaginary-world activities.

Esha (1:18#9931) publically restated the main rule of the imaginary situation of Trouble™ as something she saw she needed to redress (the fact that other players were cheating), she was using the opportunity of me asking her what her perspective was (and recording it on a video camera for later viewing by others) to influence the imaginary situation. That is, her perspective expression was a way for her to guide and influence the play towards her own personal interests (to make sure players were not cheating). She did so by publically declaring the main rule. In short, Esha's perspective expression about play was a way for it to be guided.

This opportunism was also seen when Flynn (21#9913) publically declared that he and his playmates playing wrestling and "fighting" were "learning not to cry, we don't want to cry." In being asked his opinion, Flynn appeared to use the opportunity to publically state the principal meaning of the fighting play as to not cry. This was what he expected from himself and other players, presumably because crying was one key signal for *Tall Eucalypts* educators to intervene in the play, usually with an autocratic decision to terminate it if it was "violent" or power imbalanced (e.g., see Holland, 2003, for an account of how often violent play is sanctioned by adults). I personally witnessed many times such educator intervention in response to crying in play, which functioned like a siren for educators to intervene in play. Thus, Flynn's stating the main rule of the imaginary situation was arguably a way for him to avoid this educator intervention and termination of the play. The findings that suggested that the imaginary situation of play was highly valued by children may explain why Flynn used the opportunity to prevent this termination. Flynn appeared to use the main rule of the imaginary situation as a reinterpretation of the sanctioned play which allowed its continuation. This scope to influence play that both Esha and Flynn demonstrated in the above examples of publically declaring the main rule of the imaginary situation provide a model for how adults such as educators might influence play to lead it towards curriculum content. They also show how wide



this scope is, demonstrating that adults will have as much as another other player would.

There is other research suggesting that the imaginary situation in children's play is publically stated and maintained by "building a common understanding of the imaginary situation amongst all the play partners ... stating the storyline to each other" (Fleer, 2011, p. 230; Corsaro, 1992). This research is consistent with the current finding that children were creating, publically stating and maintaining the imaginary situation of play through its main rule (see the "deductively coded" column on the right of Table 5.3, p. 229).

These findings also imply the *social nature* of their perspective expression, thus showing the value of the play and others playing with them. When I asked for the children's perspectives, children appeared to take the opportunity to reinterpret and guide the imaginary situation in the direction *they individually wanted* it to go. In this way, the act of stating their perspectives was one way in which their individual motives could be realised. Reinterpreting the meaning of the main rule was, of course, only possible in the context of previous interpretations, just as cultures slowly change and evolve over time. Flynn's reinterpretation was only possible because previous play episodes were significantly similar. Moreover, the individual's influence was of course equivalent to the influence of any other individual engaged in the play. In sharing a common pool of practices related to the collectively created imaginary situation, each individual had scope for a certain, flexible amount of influence on what was collectively being played out. Individuals had the possibility of influencing others to also reinterpret the imaginary situation in a particular way. Thus when Esha stated that the main rule was to not cheat, this statement may have affected other players, present or future. When Flynn stated that the main rule of the fighting play was to not cry, this would have had an impact on the way others played with him, at the time and in

the future. The scope that any one player has to influence the imaginary situation of play will be discussed in the Implications of this thesis in relation educators guiding play towards the learning of specific curriculum content.

In summation, the critical difference between the children's and adults' perspectives appeared to be whether learning was seen as a result of real-world activities by adult stakeholders or seen as a result of imaginary situation activities by the children. Further, the children's perspective expression can be seen as a way in which they influenced the direction of the play as players with individual motives. How this expression can be used by educators will be explored in the section after next.

The main similarities and differences between the three insider stakeholders' perspectives are depicted as a Venn diagram in Figure 6.4.

## **6.6 Research Question Two**

The second research question posed for this thesis was, "What are the similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play?" Overall, this thesis found two main similarities between insider stakeholder perspectives: mothers' and educators' emphasis on cognitive and social learning through play.

The maternal demand for literacy and numeracy that was seen in the literature appeared to be reflected in both the mothers' and educators' perspectives in the findings. For example, both spoke about learning the properties of objects through play, a core of science content. For educators, this appeared to be expressed via their orientation towards content- and child-centred approaches to the curriculum. Likewise, the maternal demand for social skills that was found in the literature and verified by the findings of this thesis appeared to be mirrored in the

educators' perspectives. For mothers, it would seem that this demand was expressed via the orientation they had towards success, which in the ECEC setting was expressed as readiness for school.

There were also three core differences between the insider stakeholder perspectives: intrapersonal learning through play was significant for mothers; the main rule of the imaginary play situation was significant for children; and physical learning through play was mentioned only by educators.

Intrapersonal was the most significant type of learning through play for mothers, and typically cited the content of the imaginary situation as the way this type of learning occurred. In all other adult comments, learning through play was related to the real-world activities in which the children were engaged in their play.

In contrast, the children's comments about learning through play were all related to the activities of the imaginary situation of play. For children, the main rule of the imaginary situation of play was their way of understanding learning through play. It was also a representation of the meaning that the imaginary situation had for them. Further the act of stating the main rule of the imaginary play situation appeared to be a social move to adjust or restate the main aim of the play for the other players. In other words, the rule of the imaginary situation was a way to direct and narrate the play, to guide it in a particular way that suited the individual child. This finding about the children's perspectives provides the basis for the implications and significance of the thesis as a whole, providing a unique and simple way in which to engage with play to guide it towards learning curricular outcomes, as well as align the perspectives of insider stakeholders' perspectives more than they currently appear to be.

## 6.7 Implications

The results of this thesis showed inductively that adult stakeholders believed cognitive and social learning through play were important, yet mothers believed the intrapersonal learning through play of their children was most important. It also showed deductively that educators were oriented towards the curriculum, mothers towards their child's success, and children towards the main rule of the imaginary situation of play (See Figure 6.4). These findings answered the two research questions posed by this thesis. The significance of the results of this thesis may be now understood in relation to the context and dilemmas established in the Introduction and Literature Review. In addition, there is some scope to redress the main differences between perspectives that were found in this thesis. Aligning the three perspectives is expected to make curriculum and policy more effective.

A quick glance at the Venn diagrams reveals some significant differences between the adult and children stakeholders which may pose problems for the implementation of learning through play. If educators and mothers think that learning through play is about cognitive and social learning but children believe it is about learning the main rule of the imaginary situation, it is less plausible that educators and mothers are "in touch" with children's learning. The results of this thesis appear to be suggesting that the policy-maker perspective that learning of curriculum content can occur through play is largely consistent with the educators' perspectives but not with the children's "on the ground". As the stakeholders who actually engage in the learning through play, it seems reasonable to assume that children understand their own learning well. Yet in very few of the play episodes considered by this thesis did the rule of the imaginary situation coincide with or resemble curriculum content outcomes such as literacy, numeracy or science (see Table 6.1, p. 249). Two exceptions might include James' (49#8) comment that "[h]e's learning how to stab[ilise] them" or that he was learning "[h]ow to count" (James, 48#10).

It is thus possible that the learning adults thought was occurring was not reflected in the experiences of children. The differences in perspectives, then, present a problem for the notion of learning through play as it is instantiated in policy and adult's perspectives.

Further, educators who know about and understand Fleer's (2010) "contextual intersubjectivity" (i.e. the idea that there is a need for children to understand what the educator wants them to learn; see 1.1, specifically p. 33) may have difficulty implementing learning through play if indeed children do not understand learning through play as cognitive and social learning, as this thesis' findings suggest.

In order to remedy this difference in perspectives, it would be unrealistic to expect children to change their perspectives about learning through play as the solution to this difference in perspectives. As ECEC is the responsibility of educators and other professionals working in the field, it would also be unreasonable to demand that mothers change their perspectives either. The key recommendations of this thesis are tailored for educators and policy-makers because they are charged with the responsibility of turning play-based experiences into learning specific outcomes. Educators receive training relating to learning through play and are entrusted to deliver it. Hence, out of the three insider stakeholder groups, educators are most able to make the changes necessary for perspectives to become better aligned.

To this end, the remainder of this chapter describes a way in which the red circle of the Venn diagram might be able to shift so as to straddle the yellow and blue circles the as much as possible. As I discuss below, the principal way that this can occur is for educators to engage effectively with the imaginary content in play.

### 6.7.1 Guiding play to learning

In the Literature Review of children's perspectives on play (see 2.2.2.1, p. 67), I showed that children value play most highly out of all activities they engage in. Play is their preferred activity, the one they are most motivated towards and psychologically engaged in. The implication was hence that play is the most engaging activity for educators to provide for children's learning. As Wood (2008) suggests, play is "ideologically seductive to early childhood practitioners" because it seems to be the easiest way to engage children in learning (p. 8). The problem appears to arise when educators must use play to achieve the outcomes required by the curriculum. For example, research suggests that if children believe there to be too much educator intervention in play, it ceases to be considered as play (see 2.2.2.1, p. 67). Einarsdottir (2005) found that children in child care considered educator-planned activities dreary. This suggests that if educators guide play too much, it will no longer be as engaging and enjoyable for children – and therefore no longer be available as an effective and easy way to engage children in learning.

The fundamental dilemma for educators in play-based settings, then, is how to engage in play activities in a way so as to be able to direct them toward curriculum outcomes but not in such a way that children feel it is no longer play. The findings of the children's perspectives in this thesis offer one simple and unique way to understand how to balance the demand to enter play with the imperative to not control play to such an extent that children no longer consider it play. Because the children's perspective on learning through play was that they were learning the main rule of the imaginary situation demonstrates that it was the way that children ascribed meaning to play. As I showed when I argued that the children were using the main rule of the imaginary play situation to publically reinstate how they and others should play (p. 252), the main rule was the entrance point for other players. It seemed to be the single most crucial aspect of playing with others, the aspect which was noted the most, and the aspect that had the

most potential to change the face of the play. It was also consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) theory that play is based on rules of the imaginary situation. For example, James might have changed other, incidental aspects of the Dog Catchers play situation (e.g., how many dog catchers were allowed), but his and other players' participation was contingent on following the main rule of the imaginary situation: "to get dogs" (James, 19#12), or to try to catch dogs and for the dog to try to escape. Without this main rule, the fundamental *why* of the play is removed and the players cannot agree to what they are playing. On the other hand, by stating the main rule, children create and negotiate the common narrative of the play so that all players can share the main meaning of the play.

Thus the findings of what is important to children in their play provides a simple and accessible way for adults to access play with other players. If able to understand the main rule of the imaginary situation of play, educators and other adults are equipped to enter the play, and understand the other rules of the imaginary situation, and thus contribute to the play as any other player. The main rule of the imaginary situation of play is the way adults can enter and then contribute to the play established *by children*, so that contributions are without controlling the play to such an extent that the activity ceases to be considered play by the children.

The findings of this thesis suggest that entering play with other players provides access to the imaginary situation of play. Once a player has entered play by abiding by the main and other rules of the imaginary situation, one is able to contribute to the play as a player. Further, just as Esha or Flynn restated the rule in a way that reflected their own individual motives (e.g., to stop others from cheating or from crying), any other players also have opportunities to renegotiate and adjust the imaginary situation to some degree. It is reasonable to expect that this renegotiation cannot result in rules that are too different from the existing and

agreed rules, as the statement of very different rules runs the risk of not being accepted by other players. Many educators or other readers who have observed children in the process of collectively narrating an imaginary situation will have seen some children who propose playing in a certain way that other children do not like. When this happens, the child is either ejected from the play or the idea is ignored. The understanding of what is an acceptable imaginary situation comes from an understanding of the play interests and personalities of the children playing. Arguably this comes from understanding the main rule of the imaginary situation, and from experience playing, from entering children's imaginary situations.

Thus, the scope for influencing children's play is increased through by having some knowledge of the individual players and how they play together. For example, very often a child who plays well in one way with certain children will play in a very different way with other children, suggesting that the play types may depend on the children s/he is playing with, and not just the personality of the individual child. If an educator can capitalise on the play preferences of certain constellations of groups of children (through experience of entering play via the main rule), then there will be greater engagement of the players, resulting in greater scope for influencing the rules of the imaginary situation of play because the players are more committed. However, for play to be as engaging as it is with child-chosen co-players, educators need to become proficient at making their adjustments to the rules as similar to the play normally chosen by that group of players. If this scope for influence is overstretched, the activity is likely to become considered adult-directed and otherwise "boring" (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011, p. 18). Leggett and Ford (2013) argue:

Situations where adults help children learning something that the adult considers valuable or important for the child to know or learn creates a direction that is vertical and hierarchical with the one who knows and the one who doesn't know (p. 44)



In vertical, hierarchical situations, children are less likely to be motivated and interested. It will no longer be play for the children (Cooney & Sha, 1999; Howard, 2002; King, 1979), impairing the premise of play-based curricula (Wood, 2014). Thus the balance between not entering play, on the one hand, and controlling play, on the other, is indeed “delicate”, as Leggett and Ford (2013) contend (p. 44). With the limits understood, however, educators have the opportunity to guide and contribute to play whilst also maintaining the focus on the child’s interest, as Romantic philosophers advised. The child-centred curriculum, with such Romantic heritage, may thus also engage with modern day content-centred demands.

Entering and guiding the play through the main rule will also bring the red circle on the Venn diagram closer to the yellow and blue (see Figure 6.5, p. 306).

The ability to enter the imaginary situation of play is thus in keeping with the EYLF, which specifies that educators are required to “reinforce in their daily practice the principles laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [which] recognises children’s right to play” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). Educators’ ability to enter play maintains the established curriculum and the current international trends towards intentional teaching through play and provides a simple and accessible way to achieve this.

Further, as recommended in 6.1.1 (see specifically p. 251), educators may understand children’s perspectives on learning better if they understand the participation model of learning. If educators engage with what the children are creating in their imaginary worlds by understanding its main rule, then they can appreciate what the children are doing internally, meaning educators will be able to understand the children’s participatory model better. It is now possible to understand another, richer way that educators can understand children, more than just in terms of their models of learning.

Understanding the main rule of the imaginary situation of play is to understand the children’s imaginative worlds intimately, and likely to bring the red circle of the Venn diagram into much greater alignment with the children’s yellow circle (see Figure 6.5, p. 306). For example, for an educator to gain insight into Belle’s main rule “to kill Captain Hook because he is evil” (Belle, 12#37) would bring an understanding much deeper than the real-world activities (such as digging in the sandpit and learning about the properties of sand or how to fill cups) in her play. It would allow the educator to see how, for example, concepts such as chilli being too spicy for some people, poisoning “baddies” and hiding poison surreptitiously in people’s cups, among other concepts, were significant aspects for Belle’s meaning-making.

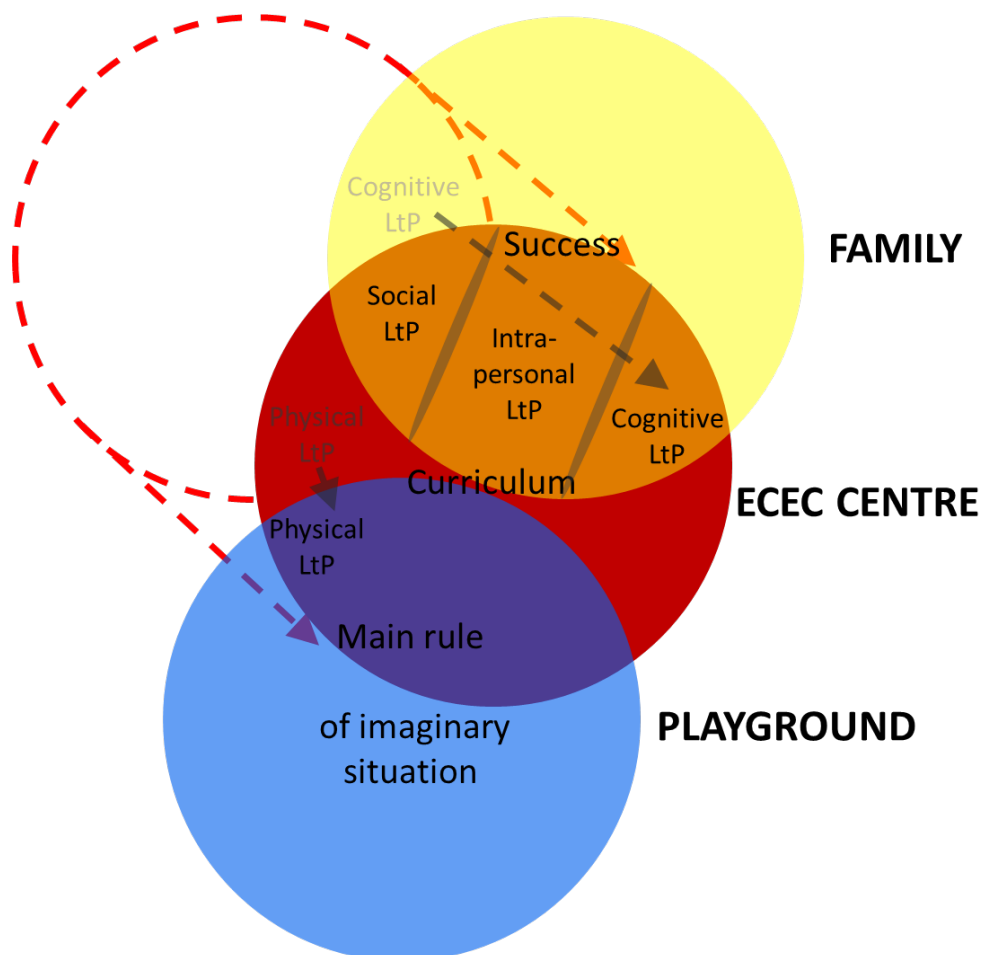


Figure 6.5 Model of suggested changes to perspectives if educators accessed the imaginary situation in children’s play via its main rule

A noteworthy implication of educators being able to understand and use the main rule of the imaginary situation is that they are more likely to intimately understand the imaginary content of children's play. Having an understanding of each individual child's meaning-making is likely to provide the insight into what the mothers saw as intrapersonal learning through play. For example, understanding Davis' (1:29#35) learning of "songs ... the strumming ... Putting your fingers somewhere, on the chords" would connect to the intrapersonal learning to enjoy himself that Hayley (2:52) saw in him performing "concerts in [his] jocks" and being a musician. In this way, there is great capacity for aligning the perspectives of educators and mothers better because intrapersonal learning was the most significant type that mothers saw. Thus, understanding the main rule of the imaginary situation of play is the way that educators can also align better with mothers (see the orange area of Figure 6.5).

This connection to the imaginary worlds of individual children is important because it appears to be the principal conduit for the children between the ECEC and home settings. If children bring their interests and understandings of the world into their play, as many theorists such as Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1976) believed, then educators can engage with this meaning-making that straddles both institutions (VCAA, 2008). In other words, they become the purple and orange overlap that can bring greater understanding between the otherwise separate yellow and blue circles (see Figure 6.5, p. 306). Further, by engaging with the main rule, educators may see that the physical learning through play they saw may in fact be better explained by what the children themselves believed they were learning: the activities related to the imaginary, such as "learning how to touch the roof" (Amy, 8#1), "how to do hoola hoops and cartwheels" (Belle, 1:42#38), or "[h]ow to run away from sharks" (James, 1#19). That is, educators may be able to see physical learning through play (in the red section) in terms of the main rule of the imaginary situation (in purple). This may help to reorient the educators'

perspectives towards the ways that play is meaningful for children and thus align their perspectives (as indicated by the arrow from physical learning through play). Thus the educators can use the main rule to align their perspectives better with: (a) mothers, through understanding their perspectives on intrapersonal learning through play (adding to the orange overlap); and (b) with children, by reinterpreting physical learning through play as learning the main rule of the imaginary situation (making more of the red area purple).

In doing so, there is a capacity for educators to fulfil the EYLF demand that all Learning Outcomes be reached “in collaboration with children and families” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 8), which will strengthen their relationships with them, as stipulated by *Area Six* of the NQS (DEECD, 2012, para. 14). There is a strong emphasis on connecting with families in the EYLF (Sumsion & Wong, 2011) and NQF generally (Tayler, 2012), yet the findings of this thesis (see Figure 6.4, p. 292) suggest there is much to be improved, particularly in relation to intrapersonal learning through play. If educators can understand the imaginary situation of play better, which the children’s findings imply can be done through its main rule, then one of the key differences between mothers and educators can be reconciled (see Figure 6.5, p. 306).

### **6.7.2 Guiding play towards learning curriculum outcomes**

The discussion until now has suggested that the main rule of the imaginary situation of play can help educators engage with play to lead it to learning generally. However, as I mentioned in 2.1.3 (see p. 57), Krieg (2011) and others have argued that it is not sufficient anymore to say that play leads to learning: there is now consensus that *what* is learned is crucial (Hedges & Cullen, 2005). The literature (specifically, subsections 2.2.3.2, see p. 84, and 2.2.4, see p. 91) depicted the tensions between educators, who were trained to “facilitate” learning through play rather than “interfere” with it (Krieg, 2011; Walsh et al., 2010), and mothers, who wanted greater educator involvement to foster the learning of content such as

literacy and numeracy (Fung & Cheng, 2012; O'Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). The recommendation I propose here addresses this tension by arguing that, in fact, educators need to enter play in order to foster learning content outcomes through play.

As discussed in the Introduction and Literature Review (see 1.1 and 2.2.4), there is substantial evidence that educators struggle to enter and guide play meaningfully towards learning outcomes. The Findings Chapter depicted educators artfully balancing child- and content-centred approaches but also with little evidence of the capacity to enter in play to guide it towards learning. Even in the examples of where Tarni, Lowanna and Merindah went beyond the traditional “facilitating” role of educators (Cullen, 1999; Fler et al., 2009; Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Krieg, 2011) and guided children, the learning was rarely related to the interests the children had in their play or the main way in which they made meaning from the play.

Two exceptions may have been Lowanna’s following children’s interests in bees with some didactic teaching of “facts” and Tarni’s prompts to inquire about where ants live. However, in both these cases, the learning was expected as a result of educators’ open-ended questioning rather than as the result of creating an imaginary situation. The problem with questioning is that it is limited to verbal language and explaining what may be complex concepts. Vygotsky’s second way imagination is connected to reality implies that adults imagining *with* children would instead allow children to explore their interests in tandem with adults, drawing on the adults’ wealth of experience. Language may limit how much learning is possible, and imagination and observation may be more flexible, experiential and engaging for the children. Another problem with open-ended questioning without understanding the main rule of the imaginary situation of play is that there is no “anchor” into the children’s interest, and as a result the

play, once engaged in through questioning] may quickly become non-play if the questions deviate from this interest. Having an understanding of the main rule may allow educators to carry out the various “roles” expected by the EYLF (modelling, demonstrating, speculating, explaining, shared thinking and problem solving; DEEWR, 2009, p. 15) in a way that is more sensitive to what has sustained the children’s interest in the first place (the imaginary situation). Otherwise, educators may merely use these roles required by curriculum without any understanding of *why* children are engaged and what can sustain the interest.

There is the possibility that educators may be able to understand and enter in the imaginary situation for the purposes of aligning its rules with curriculum outcomes. Some previous work which is similar to this is Michael Cole’s computer-mediated game “The Fifth Dimension”, where a fantastical narrative creates an imaginary situation that involves a maze and specific curricular tasks to navigate the maze (Hakkarainen, 2004). The overall narrative is an imaginary situation and new rules are introduced throughout that match with learning outcomes such as literacy. Similarly, accounts of the Golden Key schools show that pedagogues utilise post- Vygotskian theories to engage whole classes in problem-based meta-narratives of an imaginary situation. These also appear to use additional rules that align with outcomes so that children are learning predetermined content in a rich context.

However, the above examples use adult-chosen play. The findings of this thesis suggest that using a child-initiated imaginary situation would engage children more than an adult narrative because child-chosen activities are considered play by children. Because the children engage with imaginary situations between themselves, educators may be able to align curricular objectives (such as learning letters, counting or understanding evaporation) with the main rule of an imaginary situation. As stated earlier (see p. 295), adults who enter the play as co-players only have a similar range of scope for influencing the play as other co-players; they are not able to didactically mandate what the rules are, but must

instead abide by the rules agreed on by the group. Instead of a hierarchical and vertical educator-child relationship, educators foster learning in play using a more horizontal configuration in the interests of respecting their being granted access to the institution of the playground by the children.

### **6.7.3 How educators can foster learning outcomes through child-initiated play**

It is common that attempting to explain new pedagogical tools to educators such as the main rule of the imaginary situation can be difficult because new ideas seem abstract and overly theoretical. It is perhaps best to explain the use of the main rule of the imaginary situation using an example. I take the Dog Catcher play episode as an example which is probably familiar to the reader by now. I chose this example also because it was a group play episode and because it was initiated by Bindi's solitary play of a dog but evolved as boys (Dural, Flynn, Kai and James) joined and changed the main rule from being a dog to catching the dog (and its complementary: to escape from dog catchers). An educator could first enter the play with the children by simply asking what they are learning or trying to do, and then follow that rule in the same way as the children. For example, this may be to try to catch the "dog", Bindi. In the first place, entering in the play with a richer base of experience to inform the imagination will expand the group's conceptual learning (Fleer, 2011; Vygotsky, 2004a). Having an adult engagement in the imaginary situation is also likely to increase the self-regulation children will exercise to maintain the imaginary situation (see 3.4.1, p. 135).

Once the educator has entered and is co-constructing the imaginary situation, s/he may introduce science content related to dogs (e.g., barking or urinating to mark their territory). The educator may feel that the "dog catchers'" job is too easy and the "dog's" too hard. The educator may suggest that the main rule should not

be to escape from the dog catchers but to stop dog catchers from entering in on its territory (by “marking its territory” using a yellow card to mark where this is). On top of learning and utilising scientific facts about dogs, doing so would shift the main rule of the imaginary play situation away from being purely a physical feat to also then strategizing, which is a more cognitive challenge. The educator could introduce the concept of cleaning the area with a mop to remove the smell of urine and erase the boundary of the dog’s territory, but make the rule that the mopping requires two dog catchers (one to hold the mop and the other to hold the bucket). While two dog catchers are erasing one boundary (turning the yellow card upside down), the dog would have the opportunity to mark boundaries further on the opposite side (in this episode, there was a block of tables, making Bindi’s exit points on either end; right and left; see Figure 5.21, p. 232).

Such a pattern, where the educator enters play, abides by the main rule of the imaginary play situation to gain access to all rules, and plays as any other player would is the pattern of play that children appeared to use. The addition of more complex rules is one way that educators can extend and enrich the learning available, by adding their own experience and knowledge (e.g., about dogs’ territory-marking) and increasing the complexity of the rules (e.g., having the mop and bucket as extra features of the play). The process of addition could continue if the children continued to be as engaged as in the initial play. Educators could join in the play but leave at certain intervals when the new rules are established but the learning is still occurring.<sup>20</sup>

The finding that educators can have access to, and scope to guide, children’s play

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<sup>20</sup> Other studies such as Bodrova’s (2008) have shown that adults entering in play improves “not only the quantity and quality of play ... but so do many other competencies – language, cognitive, social and emotional” (p. 367).



can be considered in relation to other curriculum outcomes. For example, educators may also introduce rules about the dog marking exits from A to M in the alphabet to escape, but, similar to the idea of the mop, dog catchers could close those exits in alphabetical order, which would scaffold children's letter recognition and writing and other pre-literacy learning outcomes. Bodrova's (2008) work has found that "specific literacy skills" such as writing are improved through adult extension of play (p. 367). The example of using letters may match the EYLF's Outcome Five (communication) that stipulates educators "engage children in discussions about symbol systems, for example, letters, numbers, time, money and musical notation" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 43). Introducing concepts such as a timer, where dogs can bark at the catchers and stun them for 20 second, would align with the outcomes related to counting to 20 and other pre-numeracy learning.

Similar, to project-based approaches (e.g., Helm & Katz, 2011), educators could incorporate children's imaginary content into other play activities. For example, educators could introduce the rule that the dogs and catchers need masks, and could provide photos to use as models to draw from and craft materials to make the masks for their play. Interest in dogs could lead to games where children measure the height of different dogs at home and compare numbers in the centre, introducing scientific thinking such as measuring and pre-literacy and -numeracy by reading numbers off a measuring tape. Educators could align their perspectives more with families by sending a newsletter home asking that family members help the children find a measuring tape in the house and a friendly neighbourhood dog to measure. Educators could support the project by having a poster on the wall that family members and children contribute to in collaboration (fulfilling NQS *Area Six*).

Many examples exist of how knowing the main rule of the imaginary play

situation allows educators to enter and guide play to learning. Belle's play with chilli could be extended into cooking activities where a (mild and safe) chilli powder could be mixed into lunch with a very small measuring spoon in gradual amounts, seeing how many teaspoons of the (diluted) chilli powder before it is too hot (and if indeed this then kills the taster, as Belle seemed to believe). Such extension of the play would lead to the learning of scientific principles of measurement and experimentation with observational recording, as well as pre-numeracy through reading, both of which are Outcomes of the EYLF. Amy and Marie's play "learning how to jump. Up [high]" (Marie, 00#51), or "to touch the roof" (Amy, 8#1) could be easily accessed by educators and the learning extended by imagining each player was an animal. This interest could lead to "sustained shared conversations" about how high each animal they know can jump, looking for information about this in books (with educators "modelling" literacy behaviour and piquing children's interests in books (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15), a learning "disposition" of "curiosity" which the EYLF demands (Hedges & Cullen, 2012, p. 933). James and Maggie's fairy play, "learning to turn things into pigs" (Maggie, 10#38), could be extended through a slight modification of the main rule to limit the number of people they could turn into one type of animal to seven people (i.e., the eighth, ninth and tenth people would need to be turned into a different animal). This would guide play towards practicing counting (numeracy), and extending their repertoire of known animals which could be "demonstrated" by the educator through participation in play.

Of course, there are many more examples and ideas that would come from knowing the imaginary content of children's play well, which would dramatically improve once educators can access it via the main rule of the imaginary play situation. The above examples demonstrate some preliminary ways in which the main rule of the imaginary situation could be utilised by educators to engage with and extend children's learning through play.

In addition to a greater alignment of insider stakeholder perspectives, the main

rule of the imaginary situation also offers a way for educators to attend to the repositioning of their role in the various components of the NQF such as the EYLF and NQS. Specifically, the emphasis that the EYLF and VEYLDF have on intentional teaching (Epstein, 2007) can be taken up by educators using the main rule of the imaginary situation (see Figure 6.5).

#### **6.7.4 Engaging with the NQF's repositioning of the educator's role in play**

The findings of this thesis about educators' perspectives showed that educators rarely "engaged with" (or in) children's play to lead it to learning of curriculum learning outcomes (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 12). This represents a failure to respond to the NQF demands for intentional teaching. The findings about children's perspective suggested that the main rule of the imaginary situation provides a gateway for educators to enter in play and direct it towards the learning of curriculum outcomes. Doing so is a critical way that intentional teaching can be realised in play-based curricula where play is the major provision for children's learning (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008, p. 624; Wood, 2014), as in Australia (DEEWR, 2009). It is now possible to return to the VEYLDF directive that, more than just facilitating play, educators "guide play and learning" (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 12), and the EYLF directive that educators "provide a balance between child-led, child initiated and educator supported learning" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15). Both *Learning through Play* sections of these curriculum frameworks reposition the educator as active in guiding children's play, but do not mention adult-led play, implying that play must only be child-initiated (see Figure 1.1, p. 29, here reproduced as Figure 6.6). This means that it is critical for educators to use the main rule of the imaginary play situation because it is one simple and accessible way to engage with *child-initiated* play. This is a new contribution to practice in a context where educators appeared to only engage in

adult-initiated play [e.g., Tarni’s Musical Chair play (see p. 205), Merindah’s Group Time activities (see p. 208)] or did not engage in the play at all. Tarni and Lowanna’s open-ended questions related to children’s demonstrated interest in ants (see p. 200) or bees (see p. 201) engaged *with* the play but not *in* it. Tarni and Lowanna’s approach would sustain thinking about ants and possibly cultivate the disposition of curiosity towards insects, but miss the opportunity to cultivate the other dispositions demanded in the EYLF such as creativity, imagination, confidence and cooperation (DEEWR, 2009, p. 34) that engaging *in* play would capitalise on. The meaning that children derive from their play appeared to be represented by the main rule of the imaginary situation also, so failure of educators to engage with the rule runs the risk of losing the children’s engagement because they miss the point of the play – or the “aim of the game” – for children.



Figure 6.6 Integrated teaching and learning approaches (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 12)

The findings about the main rule of the imaginary play situation provide a tool for educators to intentionally use sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a) in child-initiated play because using the main rule gets to the heart of the meaning of play for children. Understanding the main rule to access the imaginary situation and its other associated rules then provides educators with a starting point from which to extend children’s thinking and the challenges available. It provides a simple access key to directly enter into the shared meaning created by

children so that educators can quickly enter into, extend, and exit children's play (the green line in Figure 6.6) so that children can continue to be extended and challenged by the play (the orange line).

Instances where educators use their understanding of the children's imaginary content (such as their interest in dog pounds and dog catchers) to initiate different activities without imaginary situations (such as making masks of dogs and dog catchers; the blue line above) can boost children's investment in the original imaginary situation which, according to Vygotsky (1978), will in turn boost self-regulation when returning to that play (see 3.4, specifically p. 135). Further, if educators can enter into play with children, they bring their wealth of experience with them (Vygotsky, 2004a). Through creating the imaginary situation with children, educators and other adults draw on their wealth of experience and knowledge about the imaginary content (e.g., dog behaviour, the dangers of chilli, etc.) and add to the collective pool of knowledge that children use to imagine. This thus extends the children's knowledge about the imaginary content, which is what the children are interested in. In this way also, educators use sustained shared thinking.

For these reasons, the curriculum remains completely play-based (as the EYLF stipulates; DEEWR, 2009, p. 5), but allows the educator to move from being a facilitator to an intentional teacher that capitalises on children's interests through sustained shared thinking. Doing so may allow educators to take greater control of play but in a less vertical, hierarchical way, reducing power imbalances between adult and child (Leggett & Ford, 2013). Greater equality is likely to allow children to feel safer and potentially more relaxed and able to be imaginative (see Bateson, 2011, and Dolhinow, 1987, for discussions of how animals only play in safe environments), and in turn allow children to play more. The main rule of the imaginary situation as the central idea for educators to use when engaging with

learning through play is a way to give autonomy to children but also re-empower educators to take on a more active, teaching role in the ECEC centre. Understanding the children's perspectives more clearly is possible through the main rule of the imaginary situation in terms of the meaning children attribute to their play and in terms of the participatory model with which they understood learning. Thus the findings may be understood as a contribution from the sociology of childhood perspective as well because they depict what is unique and important to children's perspectives (Sommer et al., 2010).

### **6.7.5 The unique contribution of this thesis**

In summary, this thesis set up four main tensions in relation to learning through play, three in the Literature Review (see 2.1, p. 49), and the third in the Introduction (see 1.1, p. 19).

- a) Play has been espoused by philosophers and psychologists on the premise that it represents what the child is most interested in and that is what is most stimulating for her/his learning (Chung & Walsh, 2000; see 2.1.1, p. 51), yet it has been found that there was no empirical foundation for this assertion (Lillard et al., 2013; Smith, 1988; see 2.1.3, specifically p. 56);
- b) Even if play could be shown to lead to learning (as in (a) above), many questioned if children were learning desired subject content, as set out in curricula, or less measurable, holistic learning (Cullen, 1999; Fleer, 2010; Wood, 2007; see 2.1.3, specifically p. 55);
- c) Perhaps as a reaction to (a) and (b), policy-makers have recently instigated curricular reforms across the globe that have repositioned educators to be more active and intentional than in traditional child-centred approaches where they were facilitators of children's play by providing resources (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 57; Bennet, 2005; Fleer, 2010; see 1.1, 29).

- d) The perspectives of “insiders” who must implement learning through play, such as educators, family members and children, are missing from the debates related to (a), (b) and (c), yet their experienced implementing it are likely to provide insight as to how to navigate such dilemmas (Brooker, 2011; Soto & Swadener, 2000; Stephen & Brown, 2004).

The thesis found many differences between the insider stakeholder perspectives, with the biggest difference being that the children did not see learning through play in terms of its types (see p. 229), but rather in terms of their learning whatever the main rule of the imaginary situation of play was. This suggested that the main rule of the imaginary situation was the principal meaning of play for children, implying its usefulness for educators who need to engage with play to foster learning of curricular outcomes. Using the main rule to guide play to learning of content fits with contemporary demands from curriculum reforms for more educator engagement with play (Leggett & Ford, 2013; Tayler, 2012), as well as contemporary demands from parents that educators focus on teaching content such as literacy, numeracy and social skills (see 2.2.3.3, p. 90). It simultaneously aligns educators’ perspectives more with those of children, in seeing (particularly physical) learning through play as principally understood through the main rule of the imaginary situation (see Figure 6.7). It also aligns their perspectives with those of mothers by bringing the imaginary content of children’s play to the fore because individual children’s intrapersonal learning through play can be understood, and this type of learning was most significant for mothers (see 5.2.1, p. 228).

In terms of the tension depicted in (c) above, the main rule of the imaginary situation provides a simple access point for educators to enter and participate in play with scope to reinterpret the shared rules of play in relation to curriculum learning outcomes. The simplicity of the notion of the main rule suggests the

utility as a tool for educators to become more active and intentional in children’s play to guide it towards learning curriculum outcomes.

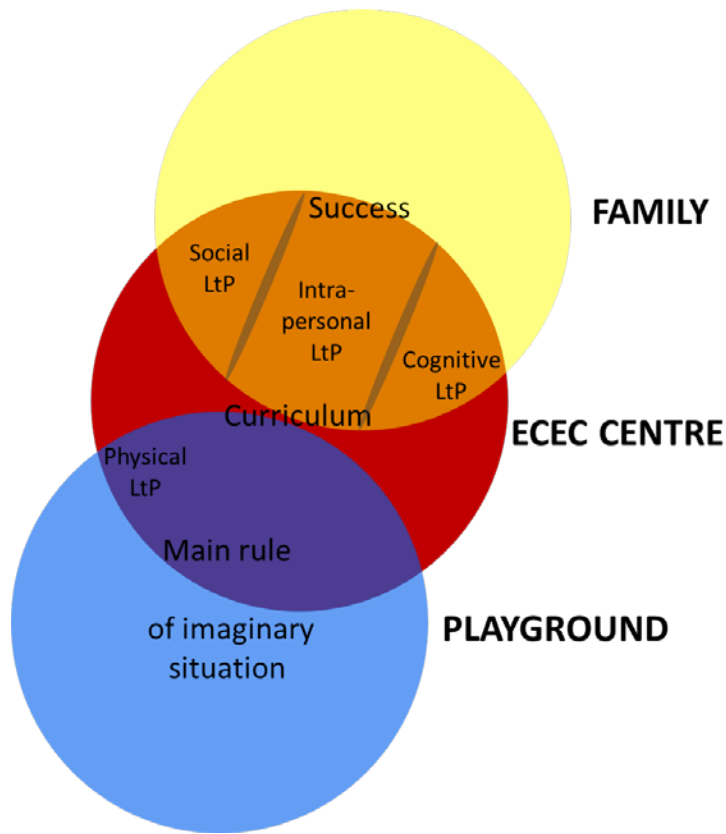


Figure 6.7 Model of perspective alignment through educator engagement with the main rule

The main rule of the imaginary situation may in fact be more direct than Fleer’s (2010) tool of contextual intersubjectivity (see p. 33) because it does not require educators to make children understand what curriculum content educators want them to learn. Instead, educators can use the main rule of the imaginary situation and the resultant understanding of children’s imaginary worlds to capitalise on potential learning. Fleer’s tool also requires an understanding of the differences between empirical and everyday knowledge, general and particular theoretical knowledge, relational and isolated knowledge (Fleer, 2010, p .86) and “double moves” (p. 17): all quite complex concepts requiring in-depth training. Many of



these concepts are also particular to the cultural-historical framework, and Fleer (2010) comments that, according to studies she conducted (Fleer & Richardson, 2009, cited in text), it took “12 months of active professional learning and reconceptualization” for educators to understand how the framework affected their practices (p. 207). In contrast, understanding the main rule of the imaginary situation does not require much more theoretical understanding than it being the key reason children play and a simple question to understand what the rule is. Educators can simply ask children what they are learning or trying to do, and in seeing similarities between their answer and curriculum content, educators can adapt the main rule to suit the learning of content.

What also distinguishes the main rule of the imaginary situation as a tool from Fleer’s (2010) “contextual intersubjectivity” is the ability to enter in play. While Fleer insists that “clearly, [educators] need to be able to enter into the children’s imaginative world and connect conceptually with them” in order to make play lead to content learning (p. 148), she does not provide any one simple way to do so.

Similarly, Fleer (2010) also proposes understanding children’s interests through observation of play (p. 209). The findings of the children’s perspective in this thesis showed that the main rule of the imaginary situation is the best means to understand the play, which is arguably a more nuanced and detailed way to understand what the play means for the child in question. For example, in Fleer’s (2010) book, collecting insects was a sign that the child was interested in insects, drawing a “bull ant-sucking machine” was a sign that he was interested in bull ants. Alternatively, in this thesis the main rule of the imaginary situation provided a unique insight into the meaning of the play for the children that went beyond the superficial aspects. For example, while Belle’s play with a basket in the sandpit may have initially seemed to me to be a sign of an interest in sand or material

manipulation, asking about what she was learning revealed her interest was in fact in concepts such as chilli, poisoning surreptitiously, coffee, and Peter Pan™. If an educator is able to gain insight into these core elements of interest (through the main rule), they are much better equipped to understand the child's areas of interest that penetrate right to the heart of what was meaningful for that child. In this way educators can use the main rule for planning rather than speculate on the interests of children based on superficial characteristics.

Another example of previous research on how learning can be maximised through play is Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie's work (2013a; 2013b; 2013c). They identified some categories of play that may be considered in terms of their value for learning: open-ended play, modelled play, and purposefully-framed play (2013b, p. 199). Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2013c, p. 333) suggest the latter – purposefully-framed play – might aid learning of specific subject content. This work suggests adult-initiated and -framed play may be the most direct way to maximise the learning of specified content. However, this approach takes the curriculum content rather than the children's interests as its starting point, which may not be as engaging for children. On the other hand, thinking about the main rule of the imaginary situation is a simple point of access to what is meaningful and engaging for children and takes the children's interests as its starting point, meaning it is more likely that children will be much more motivated and interested to learn and explore, and in this way capitalise fully on the child's agentic learning capabilities (as argued by Leggett & Ford, 2013).

Therefore, this thesis contributes to knowledge in four ways (the right-hand column below corresponds to (a) – (d) above):

| Tensions related to learning through play identified in the thesis   | Corresponding contribution  |
|--|---|
| (a) Play has been espoused by philosophers and psychologists on the premise that it represents what the child is most interested in and that is what is most stimulating for her/his learning (Chung & Walsh, 2000; see 2.1.1, p. 51), yet it has been found that there was no empirical foundation for this assertion (Lillard et al., 2013; Smith, 1988; see 2.1.3, specifically p. 56); | I. By providing insight into how play might lead to the holistic learning that Romantic philosophers and some psychologists believed it does (see the sociocultural account in 6.1, pp. 231 –255).                                  |
| (b) Even if play could be shown to lead to learning (as in (a) above), many questioned if children were learning desired subject content, as set out in curricula, or less measurable, holistic learning (Cullen, 1999; Flear, 2010; Wood, 2007; see 2.1.3, specifically p. 55);   | II. By showing that children believed they were learning the main rule of the imaginary situation, which differed significantly from curriculum content.  |
| (c) Perhaps as a reaction to (a) and (b), policy-makers have recently instigated curricular reforms across the globe that have repositioned educators to be more active and intentional than in traditional child-centred approaches where they were facilitators of children’s play by providing resources (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 57; Bennet, 2005; Flear, 2010; see 1.1, 29).         | III. By describing a simple way that educators can engage with, understand and enter play, with a view to channeling it towards learning outcomes   |
| (d) The perspectives of “insiders” who must implement learning through play, such as educators, family members and children, are missing from the debates related to (a), (b) and (c), yet their experienced implementing it are likely to provide insight as to how to navigate such dilemmas (Brooker, 2011; Soto & Swadener, 2000; Stephen & Brown, 2004).                              | IV. By illustrating what educators’, mothers’ and children’s perspectives on learning through play are, as well as showing how they differ with respect to one another, and a way that they might be brought into closer alignment. |

*Table 6.3 Contributions addressing tensions related to learning through play*

This thesis has proposed to make the above four contributions in light of the

changed role educators are expected to adopt in implementing learning through play in line with the NQF and other international reforms. The thesis has proposed a new way of thinking about learning through play that also aligns insider stakeholder perspectives more closely, which research suggests will improve children's educational outcomes.

## **6.8 Limitations**

In seeking to make the above contributions, this thesis has been limited several ways. Three of these are my simplistic understanding of how children would use video cameras, my deficit model of children's understanding of learning, and my personal orientation to the research topic (see 1.4, p. 44).

The first of these I explored in a recent paper with colleagues (Bird et al., 2014). We explored the notion of how we had each entered into our respective research projects with video cameras and had assumed that children would use them in a way that would give the researcher direct insight into their worlds. Because I considered video to be the richest medium for recording data, I assumed that the medium would allow children to capture their own and other children's play easily and effectively. I had not interrogated my assumption about how children would construct and transmit knowledge through the camera and had no empirical or theoretical basis for this assumption. When it came to data generation, even after a familiarisation stage with the cameras, there were numerous pragmatic issues. For example: children attempted to record play episodes but apparently forgot about the camera as the play unfolded; children wanted to hold the camera just because it was a novel object, resulting in little interest in recording play; children apparently did not know how to direct the camera at a play episode; and children apparently forgot that the camera was recording, recording inconsequential events. This meant that I ended up recording

many of the play instances myself in order to get recordings of a variety of play episodes that would be relevant to the research.

The second limitation to the investigation has been explained throughout the Findings (see 5.3, p. 229) and Discussion (see 6.1.4, p. 267): my deficit model of the children's capacity to understand the concept of learning. The literature on metacognition and theory of mind (see 2.2.2.2, p. 71) had informed my model of children's capacities, which saw children as growing from less to more capable in terms of understanding their own learning. This meant that when the children responded to my questions about learning, describing their learning in terms of the rule of the imaginary situation, I assumed this to be evidence that children simply did not understand learning. This occurred throughout data generation, to the extent that I changed the wording of the questions I used (see Table 4.3, p. 178), trying to omit the word "learning" because I saw their lack of understanding of it as a possible barrier. It was not until I applied Hedegaard's (2008a) deductive analysis of practices and values that the children's perspective became apparent, and I was able to appreciate that they had a different, quite possibly more universal, understanding of learning than I did. This inverted the deficit model I had of the child. However, the result of my assumptions was that I was not able to pursue children's perspectives on learning through play to a deeper level because in the data generation phase (see 4.8.3, p. 175), only asked what they were learning rather than asking for details about their learning as participation in the imaginary situation. For example, had I understood the participation model of learning, I would have been more cognisant of James' perspective and been able to ask him more about "[h]ow to turn people into animals and something else", rather than inanely responding "Ah, okay" (James, 3#17). With an alignment of our understandings of learning, I would have been able to ask him about what it was like when he "learned" how to turn people into other things, and what else he could do in that imaginary situation. The findings of this thesis were about the

main rule of the imaginary situation but uncovered potential ground for future research that could probe more deeply and reveal whether in fact children believed they were learning others things as well. Asking follow-up questions about what they were learning (within a participatory model) may have generated more detailed information about children's perspectives.

A third limitation of the research was the initial perspective I myself held in relation to learning through play, which derived from a Romantic perspective in which play represents exactly what the child needs to understand for that juncture in their cognitive development, according to their innate drive to learn. This meant that I began the research with the perspective that adults need not intervene in play to foster learning (see 1.4, p. 44). Since understanding that the children's interest can be collectively harnessed through the main rule of the imaginary situation of play, my perspective has changed to appreciate the value of educators guiding children's play towards learning specific content. I am certain that my Romantic perspective on learning through play has made certain interpretations of sociocultural theory more appealing than others and led me to understand learning through play in a biased way. This thesis represents my most diligent attempt to understand the topic as deeply as I could.

## **6.9 Future research**

One of the findings of this thesis identified that thinking about the main rule of the imaginary situation is a simple and accessible tool for educators to maximise the learning of curriculum outcomes through play. The recommendations could be strengthened through future research which investigates the opportunities this tool affords educators in different ECEC centres.

Another recommendation of the thesis was that educators use a participatory

model when discussing learning with children. Future research could also chart the experiences of educators using a participatory model in discussions with children, offering the opportunities for further insight about how differently learning is perceived by children in comparison to adults and what impacts doing so might have on the way educators think about learning.

Finally, future research should investigate further what appears to be a relatively new area of research: how adults can extend children's learning of specific content through play. Research mentioned above, such as Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie's (2013a; 2013b; 2013c), Fleer's (2010; 2011), and Walsh and colleagues' (2011) all offer unique and useful insights about how educators can maximise learning through play, and represent a young and very relevant area of investigation. In particular, future research which is accessible and not overly complicated is important for time-poor educators because they have varying levels of education and qualifications (Ortlipp et al., 2011) and therefore varying capacity to engage with theoretically complex frameworks. Research which can address the new demands and challenges of educators who are expected to update their skills relevant to the curriculum reforms (Tayler, 2012) must also be sensitive to the time and resource constraints of educators and ECEC centres. In other words, research findings need to be simple and direct in order to reach educators through professional development materials (Tayler, 2012).





## CHAPTER 7 - CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the thesis by describing its aims and rationale (7.1), How the investigation was carried out, its Principal claims of this thesis, and the Significance and contribution of these claims to the field of ECEC. The last sections of the chapter describe some of the Limitations of the research, as well as directions for Future research directions arising from the claims. The chapter finishes with some Final reflections: The Aim of the Game on the meaning of the title in relation to the contribution it strives to make to the field.

### 7.1 Aims and rationale of the thesis

The Introduction (see 1.1, p. 19) and Literature Review (see 2.1, p. 49 and 2.2.4, p. 91) explored some of the tensions faced by educators in implementing learning through play. The thesis was justified as a contribution to knowledge about these tensions in order to help resolve some of them.

First, the Introduction showed that educators, as a result of recent curriculum reforms (see 1.1, p. 29), have been repositioned from a traditionally non-interventionist, facilitating role to a more “active” and intentional role that “engages with” (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 12) and “extends” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5) the learning that can occur through play. This repositioning created a tension with the philosophical premises of learning through play because the dominant child-centred approach saw play as what the child would learn the most from. It was a tension because, in the modern instantiation of the child-centred approach, the educator had been framed as a “facilitator” of the child’s autonomous learning through play (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b, p. 147), someone who only “sets up developmentally appropriate experiences and provides children with choices and

the opportunity to take some authority over their learning” (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 57) rather than “interfering” with learning processes of the child (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010, p. 502; Walsh, 2005). This “non-directive approach” has dominated the ECEC field for decades (Laevers, 2005, p. 21; Pramling Samuelsson & Fler, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009b, p. 147; Wood, 2013), and is reflected in the practices (Ailwood, 2003, p. 296; Ryan & Goffin, 2008), training (Edwards, 2009; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Stephen, 2012; Warash et al., 2008) and beliefs of educators (Fler et al., 2009). Thus, there has been a tension because play-based pedagogy was popularised on the premise that the children’s choices drove the curriculum, and yet the current policy climate has undermined this premise. In recent curricular reforms across the globe (such as Australia’s NQF), educators are expected to understand and engage in “sustained shared thinking” (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a) to guide play to learning *chosen by adults* (Leggett & Ford, 2013). Along with pushes for “intentional teaching” (Epstein, 2007), a trend spreading from the US (Leggett & Ford, 2013), sustained shared thinking is expected to foster the intentional teaching of curriculum content through play by educators who can anticipate children’s next level of learning and work with them “in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative” (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a, pp. 78 – 79). The fact that these activities are expected to be carried out *with the child* suggests a more active role for the educator, and sits in contrast to the facilitating role that the Romantic philosophers and child-centred reforms of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century espoused (Grieshaber, 2010; Irvine, 2013; Leggett & Ford, 2013).

However there is evidence to suggest educators are not equipped for such changes to their role (Fler et al., 2009; Tayler, 2012). For example Victorian educators report that they find their framework, the VEYLDF, “difficult to comprehend” (Garvis et al., 2012, p. 25) and want greater guidance (p. 8). This experience appears to be consistent with other countries such as the UK (e.g., Anning, 2010). The new expected role of educators and their capacity to assume it

are especially critical given increased scrutiny and the transparent rating system that ACECQA has recently adopted. For example, the quality of any given ECEC centre and its attractiveness to family members who might be considering their child's enrolment will be directly affected by educators' capacity to "respond to children's ideas and play and use intentional teaching to scaffold and extend each child's learning" (ACECQA, 2012, Element 1.2.2, para. 10). Thus, educators' ability to reposition their roles is highly significant.

In this context, it has become critical to understand how learning through play is implemented in the ECEC centre. In order to understand this implementation, this thesis proposed to investigate insider stakeholder perspectives with an analysis of their respective institutions (the ECEC, family and playground settings). Doing so was expected to give a comprehensive examination of how learning through play is implemented at a practical level, with a view to seeing how it might be implemented more effectively. In addition, research showing that better alignment between the home and ECEC settings' perspectives boosts children's outcomes (see 1.1, p. 35) justified this investigation of the similarities and differences between their perspectives.

The Literature Review showed that little was known about insider stakeholder perspectives. In order to address the tension between the Romantic and new curricular conceptions of learning through play, this thesis sought to redress the dearth of research into insider (educator, family members' and children's) experiences of implementing learning through play. It did so by posing two research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of insider stakeholders, including children, mothers, and educators on learning through play?
2. What are the similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play?

These questions were posed not just to understand insider stakeholder perspectives but also to understand how they interacted: because it is this interaction which may provide holistic insight into how educators can engage with and extend children's learning through play.

## **7.2 How the investigation was carried out**

In order to answer the above research questions, learning, perspectives, play and learning through play needed to be theorised and defined (see Chapter 3 - p. 103). For instance, Sfard (1998) identified two major metaphors which have pervaded theories of learning: acquisition and participation. While acquisition metaphors have dominated historically, recent theories of learning have emphasised how learning is evidenced by participation in cultural practices (rather than the acquisition of knowledge). A participatory model of learning is used in sociocultural theory, which was the theoretical framework that this thesis aligned with. The notion of practices was important for this thesis not just because practices evidence learning in a participatory model (Rogoff et al., 2003; 2007), but also because they are theorised to represent perspectives (Hedegaard, 2008a; 2009).

Hedegaard's model of perspectives showed that each one of three tiers of analysis must be used in order to form a holistic view: individual, institutional and societal. Because the insider stakeholders are united within their stakeholder groups by their belonging to an institution (i.e., the playground, the family and the ECEC centre), this thesis only considered the institutional tier, keeping the other tiers "in the background" (Matusov, 2007, p. 324). To do so, applying Hedegaard's (2008a) framework required that the institutional "practices" and "values" be analysed (p. 17). For Hedegaard, practices are the activity of the institution, which is the unit of analysis for sociocultural researchers (see 4.1.3,

specifically p. 148). Institutional values reveal the motives behind those actions (Hedegaard, 2008a), and sociocultural research sees motive as the most incisive explanation of actions because motives explain why those actions were made (Chaiklin, 2012, p. 209; Vygotsky, 1987, p. 282; 1988, p. 253).

Play also needed to be theorised for this thesis. Play has a long history of being theorised, but the most dominant conception of play is Piaget's (Lillard et al., 2013; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Piaget theorised that play was any activity repeated purely for the pleasure of doing so, rather than for the purpose of discovering something new. Academics have not agreed on a definition of play (Burghardt, 2011; Sutton-Smith, 1997), however, and it is often defined by placing activities on a continuum of more or less playful (Pelligrini & Boyd, 1999). Vygotsky also theorised play, stating that what defined it was the presence of an imaginary situation and a set of rules by which that situation is bound. This was the only theory of play that I found which the children's perspectives in my data. It was also theoretically consistent with choosing sociocultural theory, which developed out of Vygotsky's theories (Daniels, 2008; Stetsenko, 1999).

Having theorised what it was investigating, this thesis was able to outline a plan for how this the investigation was to be carried out. It was argued that a methodology which understood each stakeholder group as an example of their institution was consistent with sociocultural research, because such research aims to take one unit as a representative of the whole (Vygotsky, 2004b). For this reason, an instrumental case study methodology was chosen to investigate perspectives (Stake, 2000). The thesis used video-stimulated recall dialogues (VSRD; Morgan, 2007), principally because video data was able to record the rich information pertaining to the whole context (Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2013; Fler, 2008a), and would overcome multiple issues of other methods used with young children (Aubrey & Dahl, 2005).

The investigation obtained informed consent from 26 young children, 13 family members and eight educators from an inner-city early childhood centre, *Tall Eucalypts*. Data generated was analysed inductively and then deductively. Deductive analysis was necessary to understand the children's perspectives, in keeping with Hedegaard's (2008a) framework that showed that activity can only be examined at the institutional level (i.e., the playground, the home, and the ECEC centre) via practices. Practices in turn reveal values. Therefore, after I inductively coded data from children's, mothers' and educators' interviews, I applied a deductive analysis of their practices and values.

### **7.3 Principal claims of this thesis**

The above process generated two types of findings: first, from the inductive analysis; and second, from the deductive analysis.

The inductive analysis showed children most frequently discussed physical, artistic, and acting learning through play; mothers intrapersonal, cognitive and social learning through play; and educators cognitive, social and physical learning through play. The types of learning through play that the children mentioned appeared to be representative of the types of play that they were engaged in at Tall Eucalypts rather than what they *thought* about it. This finding suggested that the inductive analysis did not get to the core of their perspectives, but only identified the types of play they engaged in.

The inductive analyses of the adults' perspectives, however, were more useful. The cognitive and social learning through play that mothers identified was consistent with the research literature, which showed that mothers want their children to learn cognitive content such as literacy and numeracy as well as social skills. However, the most significant type of learning through play for mothers –

intrapersonal – was a unique finding that most probably related to the home setting (or family institution), as was shown in the subsequent deductive analysis of the mothers' data. In contrast, educators saw cognitive and social types of learning through play as most significant, followed by physical learning through play. The importance of cognitive and social learning through play seemed to be consistent with the parental and curricular demands for literacy and numeracy (cognitive) and social skills that were found in the Literature Review. Educators' emphasis on physical learning through play may have been in response to the amount that children engaged in physical play, as the children's inductive findings suggested that physical play was most common type of play at Tall Eucalypts. All these inductive findings (except the children's which seemed to have little meaning for their perspectives) were placed into a Venn diagram which demonstrated the general similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives (see Figure 6.4, p. 292).

The deductive analysis identified the children's practices of creating, publically declaring and maintaining the imaginary situation through its main rule. When asked their perspective, children appeared to represent one or all three of these practices, showing the value of the imaginary situation of play. In particular, the practice of publically declaring was a significant finding for this thesis because it revealed the scope that educators have to direct play towards learning outcomes once they have entered into the children's play. The value of the main rule of the imaginary situation of play was placed into the Venn diagram also (see Figure 6.4, p. 292). The children's orientation towards maintaining the main rule of the imaginary situation resembled a participatory model of learning that contrasted with my and the adult stakeholders' acquisition model. This implied that educators would be able to discuss learning with children much more coherently if they used a participation rather than an acquisition model. The implications of the value children attributed to the main rule of the imaginary situation were

discussed later in relation to the repositioning of educators' roles in the NQF and other curriculum reforms across the world (see 6.7, p. 300).

The deductive analysis of the mothers' data revealed their perspectives had an orientation towards family practices such as working and providing for play. All practices evidenced in the mothers' perspectives, when considered together, showed the value of their child becoming a successful family member. This was also placed in the Venn diagram.

The deductive analysis of the educators' data revealed their perspectives oriented towards the practices of content- and child-centred approaches of providing for learning through play. Very few practices went beyond the facilitating role educators have held traditionally, and those that did were either not engaged with the children's own play or were limited to verbal prompting and open-ended questioning. This showed the educator value of both content- and child-centred approaches in curriculum, but did not match the curricular repositioning of the educator's role.

### **7.3.1.1 In answer to Research Question One**

*What are the perspectives of insider stakeholders, including children, mothers and educators, on learning through play?*

The first research question for this thesis related to *what* each stakeholder's perspectives were. Results suggested that in the children's perspective, they were learning through play whatever the main rule of the imaginary situation was (or, in one sense of the title, they were learning "the aim of the game"). Second, results showed that in the mothers' perspective, children were engaging in intrapersonal, cognitive and social learning through play. This perspective revealed the practices of the family and showed the value mothers attributed to their child's successful participation in them. Third, results showed that in educators' perspective, children were engaging in cognitive, social and physical learning through play.



This perspective revealed the educator practice of balancing content- and child-centred approaches and the value of the curriculum.

### **7.3.2 Similarities and differences in perspectives**

As mentioned earlier (see p. 332), this thesis sought to compare insider stakeholder perspectives in order to provide a more holistic view on how learning through play was being implemented on the ground, particularly in light of the changes to how and what learning educators can foster through play. The Venn diagram on page 292 was developed as a simple depiction of the main similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives, and showed that educators and mothers shared the perspective that cognitive and social learning through play were important. Critical differences between the stakeholders' perspectives included the importance children placed on learning the main rule of the imaginary situation, the importance mothers placed on intrapersonal learning, and the importance educators placed on physical learning through play. The children's and adults' perspectives also varied in that children saw learning deriving from activities in the imaginary situation whereas adults saw learning deriving from the real-world activities (with the exception of mothers' perspectives on intrapersonal learning through play).

#### **7.3.2.1 In answer to Research Question Two**

*What are the similarities and differences between insider stakeholder perspectives on learning through play?*

The second research question for this thesis related to *how* each of the stakeholders' perspectives compared and interacted. The main similarity identified was between the two adult stakeholder groups, who saw cognitive and social learning through play as significant. The main difference was between the

adults' and children's perspectives, as adults spoke about types of learning through play that derived from the real-world actions in which children were engaged (e.g., reading books, negotiating with peers, playing physically for extended periods), whereas children spoke about learning that derived from the imaginary situation (e.g., learning how to be a pirate, learning to turn people into pigs, etc.). Other differences included mothers' emphasis on intrapersonal and educators' focus on physical learning through play.

### **7.3.3 Implications of the results**

Because there is research suggesting that the alignment of these stakeholders' perspectives might lead to better educational outcomes for children, this thesis then proposed that the biggest difference – that between children's and adults' – may provide a new way for educators to think about engaging with and extending learning through play. Critically, the main rule of the imaginary situation seemed to be the principal means through which children made and negotiated meaning in play. It was argued that using the main rule may also align more with mothers' perspectives because the main difference between their and educators' perspectives – the importance attributed to intrapersonal learning through play – was seen by mothers in relation to the imaginary activities in play, rather than real-world activities. Educators who focus on the children's activities in the imaginary situation (as they are revealed through the main rule) thus have a platform from which to understand children's individual, intrapersonal learning through play as the mothers did.

The main rule of the imaginary situation was thus proposed as a new way for adults to think about children's play. Educators in particular could use the main rule to focus their questions to children about their play, use the answers to enter into play, and understand the other rules of which the imaginary situation is comprised. Once the educator understands the rules, s/he can then play with children as an equal, gaining access to the children's imaginary worlds in a

respectful and egalitarian manner. Further, once the educator has established her/himself as a player with her/his co-players, there is scope to publically declare the main rule of the imaginary situation just as the children in the findings did.

A critical finding related to publically declaring the imaginary situation was that children appeared to use the act to reinterpret the most important rule according to their own individual motives. For example, Esha reinterpreted Trouble™ to be about not cheating (e.g., moving one's piece more than rolled on the dice), which appeared to be her own personal motive to ensure others were not cheating. Flynn reinterpreted play fighting to be about not crying, as that appeared to attract the attention of educators and result in their prohibiting the play. His public restatement of the main rule allowed him to change the "aim of the game" towards his own individual motive. I proposed that this scope for influence can be utilised by educators to direct play towards learning outcomes. This would be achieved by making the main or other rules similar to learning outcomes. For example, an educator might add the rule that players of Trouble™ need to write the number they rolled on a piece of paper so that the number is monitored by other players (to ensure, like Esha, that no one is cheating), and in this way practice numeracy (by counting together) and literacy (by writing the number symbol). Once this rule has been assimilated by the players, the educator could add another challenge by adding in another die so that children are practicing addition of two or three numbers and increasing the range of numbers they practice (to 12 or 18). Once this new rule has been taken on by the players, the educator can leave children to play by themselves, thus maintaining "a balance between child-led, child-initiated and educator supported learning", as the NQF curriculum reforms demand (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15; Irvine, 2013, p. 4; Sylva et al., 2008). As stated previously, engaging with the main rule of the imaginary situation is also likely to provide a new platform for educators to align their

perspectives with family members such as mothers, thus fulfilling the NQS *Area Six* by collaborating more with families and communities (DEECD, 2012, para. 14).

In summary, the findings of this thesis provide a picture of how insider stakeholder perspectives differ, and suggest a new way to align them better (as pictured in Figure 7.1). In doing so, educators are provided with a simple and accessible tool as a new way to think about the dilemmas related to when and how to enter in play and when to facilitate for “long periods of uninterrupted play” (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 25) so as to enable play to deliver on the learning outcomes required by the curriculum.

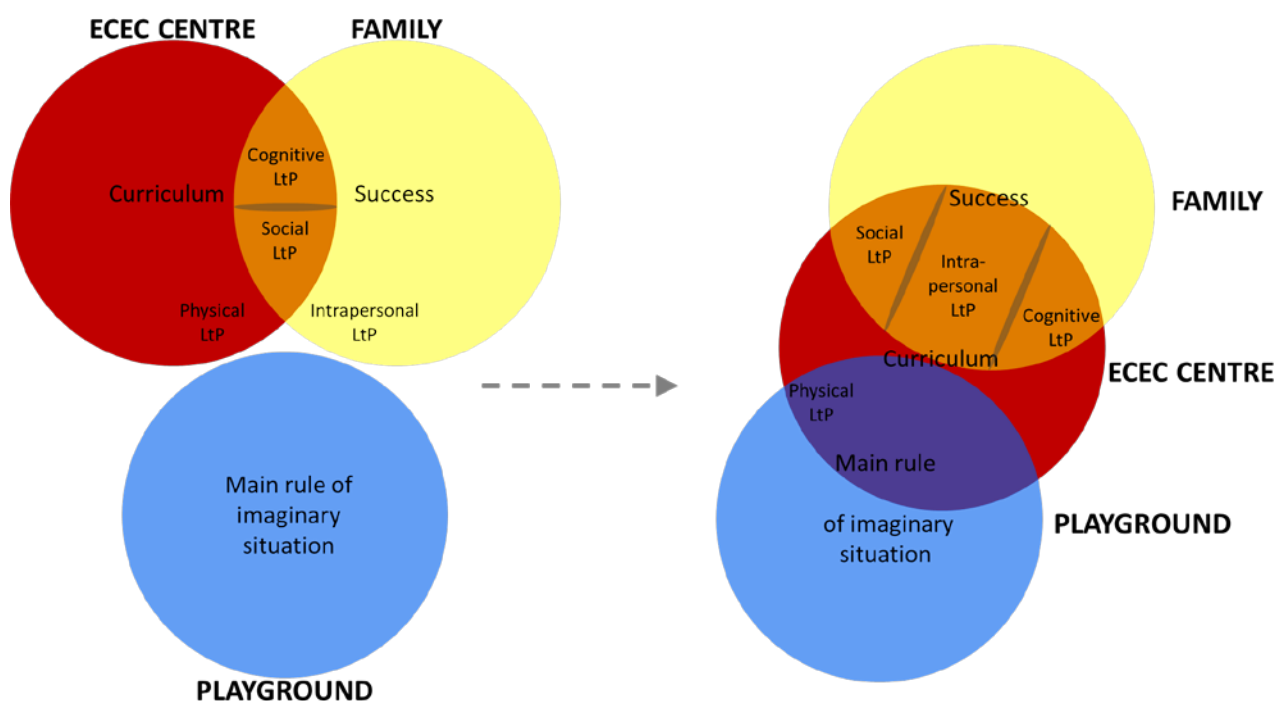


Figure 7.1 Proposed changes when educators actively engage with the main rule of the imaginary situation

While this new tool certainly does not solve *all* of the problems presented by the repositioning of the educators’ role, it does provide a meaningful point of access into play so that educators can more “intentionally” and “actively” engage with

and extend children's learning of curriculum outcomes through play (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 12). Thinking about, using, understanding and restating the main rule of the imaginary situation of play can allow educators to accommodate to the curricular demands related to learning through play in the national (EYLF) and state (VEYLDF) learning frameworks, as seen in the following two passages:

Early childhood educators take on many roles in play with children and use a range of strategies to support learning. They engage in sustained shared conversations with children to extend their thinking. They provide a balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning... They also recognise spontaneous teachable moments as they occur, and use them to build on children's learning (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15).

Active engagement with, and attunement to children in their play extends and supports their learning. Shared, sustained conversations are also a powerful and important feature of active adult engagement. The integration of child-directed play and learning, guided play and learning, and adult-led learning is illustrated in [Figure 1.1] (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 12)

## **7.4 Significance and contribution of these claims**

In the Introduction, I stated that this thesis was significant because it aimed to contribute to four main areas. These were contributions to: a sociology of childhood literature on children's perspectives; the new framing of learning through play in the NQF reforms; ways to align the intentions of the home and ECEC settings; and understandings about how the NQF, which came into effect in 2012, is being carried out nationally for the first time in Australia's history.

### 7.4.1 Literature on children's perspectives

This thesis sought to investigate the way children perceived learning through play in their ECEC centre. A distinction made in the Literature Review (see 2.2.2.3, p. 77) was between child's perspectives and children's perspectives: that children's perspectives are difficult to investigate because they are a mere representation of children's actual experiences and perceptions, whereas a child's perspective might be an adult approximation of those experiences and perceptions. The fact that this investigation showed that children's perspectives on play, learning and learning through play were distinct from adults' suggests that it did not depict the child's perspective so much as the children's perspectives. As a researcher, I needed to challenge my perspective about learning in terms of acquisition, my views about play in terms of fantasy removed from reality, and learning through play in terms of metacognition. The fact that I changed my perspective on such issues implies that this thesis makes a contribution to children's perspectives rather than the child's perspective (Sommers et al., 2010).

The findings relating to the children's perspectives on their own learning through play had numerous examples consistent with the sociocultural understanding of learning through play. Rather than depicting a child that needs educators to take an active role in teaching and guiding them, the results showed children as agentic in their own learning *in collaboration with their sociocultural environment*. Results depicted the children not as passive recipients of content teaching, nor as Piagetian pioneers of their own learning that are only impaired by adults interfering, but rather as equals in reinterpreting their sociocultural context. As Leggett and Ford (2013) contend, intentional teaching as it is framed in the EYLF "turns the lens upon the role of educators as they frame outcomes, but it is also necessary for children to be acknowledged for their own agency and motivation for independent goal attainment" (p. 43). The findings of this thesis go a long way in showing how agentic children are in their own learning (see 6.1.3, p. 254), suggesting that perhaps a more accurate model of content learning through play

would include educators as yet another player, in the same way multiple children playing together share access and agency in the imaginary situation.

The Literature Review also touched on the uniqueness of childhood compared to other culturally-ascribed periods in life (e.g., adulthood, retirement) (see p. 78). The children's results in this thesis stand as a contribution to their experiences and perceptions, particularly in relation to the value of play and the salience of the main rule ("the aim of the game") that creates its imaginary situation. This thesis is therefore significant as a contribution to our understanding of children's perspectives and the intrinsic value these perspectives hold.

#### **7.4.2 The repositioning of ECEC educator**

In the context described in the Introduction (see 1.1, p. 19) there was a repositioning of the educator's role to become more active and intentional. Yet the Literature Review (see 2.2.4, p. 91) suggested that educators are still bound to their identity as facilitators of play and the child-centred approach. The Findings, in turn, suggested that educators were mostly oriented towards balancing child- and content-centred approaches, and their practices were not chiefly active or intentional.

Fleer's (2010; 2011) and others' (e.g., Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013a) work has responded to the repositioning of the educator's role but present some problems if the findings of this thesis are representative of most ECEC centres. For example, Fleer's (2010) work relies on assessing children's interests through observation but this thesis suggested that the contrast between what adults observe to be learning through play and what children believe are quite distinct. Critically, the main rule of the imaginary situation provides a way of accessing the core meaning that play has for children that educator observations may not. Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie's (2013c) work also responds to the EYLF demand

that educators “provide a balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 15) by describing “purposefully-framed play” that ranges from child-initiated play facilitated by the educator’s provision of relevant materials to adult-initiated play that is extended by educator interaction (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2013c, p. 333). The main rule of the imaginary situation is a new way to think about these works because it provides an access point into what is *meaningful* for children in their play, as well as what they are *most interested in* (because the tool allows educators to understand what is motivating the children’s play). In contrast to this previous work, the main rule (or “the aim of the game”) is a simple question that educators can use without a large sophisticated theoretical background understanding and that is very concrete (in contrast to the notions of contextual intersubjectivity or purposefully-framed play). It is therefore a contribution to the challenges educators face as their role is repositioned in recent curricular reforms.

### **7.4.3 Alignment of the ECEC with the home setting**

The finding that intrapersonal learning through play was significant only for mothers and physical learning through play only significant for educators suggests one difference between the ECEC and home settings. In the mothers’ perspective, intrapersonal learning through play appeared to be occurring because of the imaginary actions of the children (e.g., Benji imagining himself as a powerful train driver, Myles’ discovery of his passion for rock concerts). However, all learning through play that was mentioned by the educators was related to the real-world activities in which children were engaged when playing (e.g., sharing toys with friends, running).

Further, because this thesis proposes recommendations for educators, it cannot reasonably expect children or mothers to change their practices or perspectives. Rather, by engaging in main rule of the imaginary situation, educators have a simple tool to understand the imaginary activities of children. This understanding



can thus be used in discussions and collaborations with family members. This will provide greater understanding between and alignment of the intentions of educators and family members. Research suggests that this continuity in settings will have a positive effect on children's educational outcomes (Melhuish, 2010; Schaller et al., 2007; Sylva et al., 2008; Wise & Sanson, 2003). Therefore, the findings of this thesis were significant because they contribute to understandings about how to better align learning through play in ECEC and home settings.

#### **7.4.4 How the NQF is being implemented**

The legislative arrangements for the NQF commenced in 2012, and this is the first time that learning outcomes have been regulated nationally, as mentioned in the Introduction (see 1.3.4, p. 42). The changes under the NQF broadly represent an international trend towards greater regulation of learning as it relates to outcomes (Ball, 2003; Hatch & Grieshaber, 2002; Rogers, 2013; VCAA, 2008). Findings of the EPPE study showed that ECEC centres which used sustained shared thinking were more likely to deliver "quality" outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009a), a finding which has had unparalleled impact on the ECEC field (Bennet, 2005; Fleer, 2010; Irvine, 2013).

The findings of this thesis suggested that educator practices in relation to learning through play were in fact mostly premised on the child's autonomy in learning (see 6.3, p. 276). The "active" role that was expected of them under the VEYLDF appeared not to be assumed (DEECD & VCAA, 2011, p. 12). Instead, they appeared to be responding to demands for child- and content-centred approaches that the literature appeared to show mothers wanted. They appeared to do no not by guiding the children's interests in play towards curriculum, but instead facilitating play that reflected content learning *by pure coincidence*. This suggests that professional training and development courses may need to attend to the

apparent gap between educators' current practices and those expected under the NQF, giving educators accessible instruction how play interests can afford children's learning of content. Tayler (2012) explains that the aspirations of the National Quality Agenda (represented legislatively by the NQF) must be met with the relevant training if educators are to deliver the learning outcomes expected:

The capacity of COAG to enshrine the guiding principles of the National Quality Agenda, in practice, must remain in doubt. Translating a unified vision that places children with rights to participate and be supported to learn, within diverse child care and preschool programmes, requires both leadership and professional development (p. 10).

From my survey of the literature related to learning through play, I would add that for said professional development to help educators deliver learning outcomes, research into how play can be harnessed for maximum learning of specified learning outcomes is highly necessary, as I will elaborate in the section after next (see 7.6, below). The contribution this thesis makes is a small drop in a vast ocean of what we are yet to learn.

## **7.5 Limitations of the research**

Some of the limitations of this thesis included my assumptions about how children would use video cameras, my deficit model of their understanding of learning, and my initial biases in relation to learning through play. First, when thinking about the methodology most suited to research with young children, particularly to young children for whom verbal may not be a preferred form of communication, I chose video recordings. While I did not assume that inviting children to use video cameras was a methodology in of itself (Bird et al., 2014), I did not theorise how children would convey ideas using what was for many a new tool. I assumed that because it had a simple mode of operation (the push of a

red button) that children would be able to conceptualise the act of framing a recording, directing a camera lens towards an object of interest, understanding the notion that it was recording moving video (not a still photo), and so on. It is plausible that a longer period of familiarisation (epistemic play with a novel object to understand how it operates (see Hutt, 1971), along with modelling, demonstration and explicit instruction, would have facilitated the process of children recording their own and other players' play (Bird et al., 2014).

Second, I initially assumed that children did not understand learning if they did not talk about it with evidence of metacognition (see 2.2.2.2, p. 71). It took many months of watching VSRDs, re-reading transcripts, deductive analysis and reading sociocultural theory for me to understand the idea that when children said they were learning the main rule of the imaginary situation of play, they were using a different *but equally valid* model of learning to my own. The shift in my own understanding occurred after data were generated, and I may have had much richer data if I had been able to understand the participation model of learning during my time at Tall Eucalypts.

Finally, my own fascination with incidental learning such as learning through play was my personal impetus for this research. This fascination was premised on the assumption that play occurred naturally and that it represented the child's drive to learn. In this way, I myself have been less inclined to "interfere" in play and instead watch children do what I thought was learn. This has limited my understanding of sociocultural theories of learning through play to this day.

## **7.6 Future research directions arising from the claims**

One unique finding of this thesis was the significance of intrapersonal learning

through play to mothers. In order for educators to better understand the importance of intrapersonal learning, future research could interrogate exactly how mothers (and other family members) see children's participation in family practices leading to intrapersonal learning. This research would need to focus on all children's activities, as opposed to just play. Qualitative case study research into mothers' perspectives on *how* children learn to become who they are (and will be) would investigate the matter well. Findings may inform professional training for educators to better engage with families.

Another finding of this thesis was that only for educators was physical learning through play significant. In the Discussion, it was suggested that this may be because educators witnessed physical play more than any other type, and perhaps as a result believed the corresponding learning through play was physical. Educators' apparent responsiveness to the playground suggests a strong alignment between what educators see in the playground and how they implement learning through play. This is also a future avenue of research that may provide insight into how educators can better respond "intentionally" to the play preferences of children by engaging with their play.

This thesis also found that the three insider stakeholder perspectives were different from one another, and that a key way that educators can bring them closer is through engagement with the main rule of the imaginary situation of play. Future research could extend on this recommendation by conducting experimental research into educators' use of the main rule of the imaginary situation as an intervention. For example, a short professional development program focusing on the main rule of the imaginary situation could be introduced to a centre, and qualitative, focus group interviews with the educators after having completed the program could gauge their change in perspective and practices as a result.

Future research into how purposefully-framed, modelled and open-ended play

might be used effectively by educators may get to the heart of how children learn specific content through play. This research could also verify how much adult control is possible before children cease to continue to see an activity as play. This could be done using Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie's (2013c) continuum of free and open-ended play to adult-initiated play, with various types of play along that continuum, trialled with an opportunity for children to give their perspectives on whether they believed it an activity was play or not. Findings about how much adult intervention is possible in play would be useful because play is the preferred activity and presumably the preferred form of learning for children. Most probably, the highest level of adult intervention possible without children ceasing to see an activity as play offers the greatest chance of educators delivering learning outcomes and curriculum content.

## **7.7 Final reflections: The Aim of the Game**

This thesis has used the title: “The Aim of the Game”. It has done so to draw attention to the differences in perspectives canvassed in the thesis, from “outsider” perspectives such as Romantic philosophers, psychologists, academics, educationalists, and policy-makers, to “insider” perspectives such as educators, mothers and children. Each stakeholder has a different goal in relation to play; a different “aim of the game.”

However, the title has another reading which is a simple mnemonic for one finding of the thesis which is the primary recommendation arising from it. Despite the many differences in perspectives, and which of these might be closest to reality, this thesis did not set out to judge the truth of any one perspective. The findings in this regard can only make recommendations to *educators*, as they are

the conduit between insider and outsider perspectives, the ones charged with the responsibility of implementing learning through play as it is envisioned in the NQF.

This thesis' findings suggested that educators can best align their perspectives with children's to implement learning through play as it is framed in the NQF. They also suggested that doing so may incidentally bring greater alignment between their and mothers' perspectives. Both outcomes stem from the same recommendation: to engage with, understand, utilise and reinterpret the *main rule of the imaginary situation of play*. And the main rule for the children is "the aim of the game": it is what they were trying to achieve in their play. For example, in the popular children's game Hide 'n' Seek, the "aim of the game" is to hide while someone ("It") counts. When I asked five-year-old Anna what she was learning in playing this game, she replied, "Well, somebody counts, and the rest of them hide" (Anna, 2:46#63). This was true of almost all the children's 772 comments on learning through play, that it was the main objective of the imaginary situation: the aim of the game. It was for this reason that they thought "the aim of the game" was what they were learning.

Therefore, "the aim of the game" is a simple metaphor for the broad differences in the reasons why play is provided for by various stakeholders, as well as a mnemonic for a new way that educators can think about and engage with learning through play in the current policy climate.

Word count (excluding Reference List): 99, 481

## CHAPTER 8 - GLOSSARY OF TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS

Glossary of symbols used in transcription according to discourse analysis conventions (DuBois, Scheutze-Coburn, Cumming, & Paolino, 1993):

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| Symbol              | Meaning   |
|---------------------|---|
| [word]              | Intended meaning. Usually words are placed over referents – such as “him”, “they”, “it” – where it is not clear from the context who or what they refer to.   |
| ...                 | This punctuation signifies a truncation as in APA quoting, where segments are omitted by the transcriber for the sake of brevity.   |
| [*action*]          | The symbols [* and *] bracket a description of an action that is not transmitted in the transcript such as someone laughing or making a gesture.  |
| *word*              | Words between * and * have been emphasised by the speaker in some way – usually saying them louder, longer, or with some visual emphasis such as facial expressions.  |
| Word-               | The use of a dash without a space after the word signifies a truncation on the part of the speaker. Usually this occurs when a speaker starts one sentence and decides to start another before finishing the first (e.g., “He said that- What I meant to say was that he didn’t like it”)   |
| (words)             | The use of () parenthesis here mirrors that of normal discourse, where the speaker has said something parenthetically. Thus, the contents of these parentheses are that of the speaker, and not my words.   |
| (Name, 0:00-1:01#1) | This is a referencing style of my own, which shows the speaker (“Name”), which specifies the VSRD, the time the utterance began (0:00), and if there is a truncation (... above), the time that the last section after that truncation begins (1:01), followed by the sequence of the videos for that speaker (#1). In most cases, there is only one video for that speaker, so the majority of citations using this style end with “#1”. |
| [xx]                | Word that is impossible to decipher from the transcript   |

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# APPENDIX

## 8.1 TEACHER CONSENT FORM

*Copy for Researcher*

TITLE OF PROJECT: "Stakeholder perspectives: Teacher, family, and child perspectives on learning through play in early childhood educational settings"

BRIEF TITLE: "Stakeholder Perspectives"

SUPERVISOR: Associate Professor Susan Edwards

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Yeshe Colliver

I ..... (the participant) have read (or, where appropriate, have had read to me) and understood the information provided in the Letter to Teachers.

- Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I agree to participate in this research project for the allocated time slots over three weeks (April 30<sup>th</sup> - May 29<sup>th</sup>).
- I agree to record children's play experiences
- I agree to develop a movie about the children's play experiences
- I agree to attending a sharing session with children and families about the movie
- I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time without it affecting my employment at the centre.
- I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.
- Video data will only be viewed by the supervisor Associate Professor Susan Edwards and the Student Researcher Yeshe Colliver. I realise that the researchers will do everything possible to keep my participation anonymous but that that may not be guaranteed.

(Optional) I would like the results to be sent to me to confirm that they are an accurate representation of what occurred in the videos. Please send them to the following address:

.....  
.....

NAME OF PARTICIPANT: .....

SIGNATURE .....

DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF SUPERVISOR:.....

DATE:.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

DATE:.....

## 8.2 PARENT/ GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Copy for Researcher

TITLE OF PROJECT: "Stakeholder perspectives: Teacher, family, and child perspectives on learning through play in early childhood educational settings"

BRIEF TITLE: "Stakeholder Perspectives"

SUPERVISOR: Associate Professor Susan Edwards

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Yeshe Colliver

I ..... *(the legal guardian of the child)*  
..... have read *(or, where appropriate, have had read to me)* and understood the information provided in the Letter to Legal Guardian.

- Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I agree to allow my child to participate in this research project for the allocated time slots over three weeks (April 30<sup>th</sup> - May 29<sup>th</sup>).
- I realise that I or my child can withdraw consent at any time without it affecting my child's educational outcomes.
- I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me or my child in any way, unless specified by me or my child.
- Video data will only be viewed by the supervisor Associate Professor Susan Edwards and the Student Researcher Yeshe Colliver. I realise that the researchers will do everything possible to keep my participation anonymous but that that may not be guaranteed.

(Optional) I would like the results to be sent to me to confirm that they are an accurate representation of what occurred in the videos. Please send them to the following address: .....

NAME OF GUARDIAN: .....

SIGNATURE .....

DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF SUPERVISOR:.....

DATE:.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

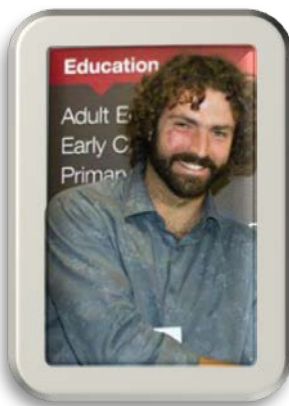
DATE:.....



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### 8.3 CHILD INFORMATION LETTER

(Copy for child to keep)



Hello! My name is Yeshe.

You will meet me in class.



I am writing a book about play.

I would like to find out what you think about play.



I want to hear about how you learn when you play.



I would like you to video record your play in class.



I would like you to talk about how you like to play and what you learn.

You might want to use another name in my book or you might want to use your own name. It's up to you.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

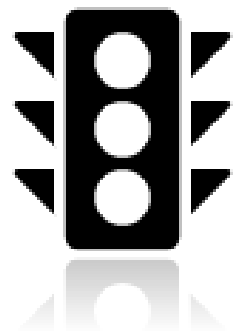


Hello! My name is Yeshe.

You will meet me in class.



Would you like to video record how you play?



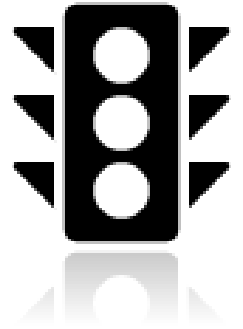
Would you like to talk with me about how you learn  
through play?



I would like to write about your ideas in my book.

Can I use your name in my book?

Or would you like to think of a pretend name?




Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### 8.4 THE "OK SHEET"

NAME OF CHILD: .....

|                   |         |
|-------------------|---------|
| Day 1 of research | OK sign |
| Day 2 of research |         |
| Day 3 of research |         |
| Day 4 of research |         |
| Day 5 of research |         |
| Day 6 of research |         |
| Day 7 of research |         |
| Day 8 of research |         |
| Day 9 of research |         |

SIGNATURE ..... DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF SUPERVISOR:  DATE: .....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....  
DATE:.....

## 8.5 FAMILY MEMBER CONSENT FORM

*Copy for Researcher*

TITLE OF PROJECT: “Stakeholder perspectives: Teacher, family, and child perspectives on learning through play in early childhood educational settings”

BRIEF TITLE: “Stakeholder Perspectives”

SUPERVISOR: Associate Professor Susan Edwards

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Yeshe Colliver

I ..... (family member of the child)  
..... (child’s name) have read (or, where appropriate, have had read to me) and understood the information provided in the Letter to Family Members.

- Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I agree to participate in this research project for the allocated time slots over three weeks (April 30<sup>th</sup> - May 29<sup>th</sup>).
- I agree to record my family’s child’s play experiences and to be recorded whilst discussing such videos.
- I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time without it affecting my family’s child’s educational outcomes.
- I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me or my family’s child in any way, unless specified by me or my family’s child.
- Video data will only be viewed by the supervisor Associate Professor Susan Edwards and the Student Researcher Yeshe Colliver. I realise that the researchers will do everything possible to keep my participation anonymous but that that may not be guaranteed.

(Optional) I would like the results to be sent to me to confirm that they are an accurate representation of what occurred in the videos. Please send them to the following address:

.....  
.....

NAME OF FAMILY MEMBER: .....

SIGNATURE .....

DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF SUPERVISOR: .....

DATE:.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

DATE:.....

FAMILY MEMBER CONSENT FORM

**Copy for Family Member**

TITLE OF PROJECT: “Stakeholder perspectives: Teacher, family, and child perspectives on learning through play in early childhood educational settings”

BRIEF TITLE: “Stakeholder Perspectives”

SUPERVISOR: Associate Professor Susan Edwards

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Yeshe Colliver

I ..... (family member of the child) ..... (child's name) have read (or, where appropriate, have had read to me) and understood the information provided in the Letter to Family Members.

- Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I agree to participate in this research project for the allocated time slots over three weeks (April 30<sup>th</sup> - May 29<sup>th</sup>).
- I agree to record my family's child's play experiences and to be recorded whilst discussing such videos.
- I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time without it affecting my family's child's educational outcomes.
- I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me or my family's child in any way, unless specified by me or my family's child.
- Video data will only be viewed by the supervisor Associate Professor Susan Edwards and the Student Researcher Yeshe Colliver. I realise that the researchers will do everything possible to keep my participation anonymous but that that may not be guaranteed.

(Optional) I would like the results to be sent to me to confirm that they are an accurate representation of what occurred in the videos. Please send them to the following address:

.....  
.....

NAME OF FAMILY MEMBER: .....

SIGNATURE .....

DATE .....

SIGNATURE OF SUPERVISOR: .....

DATE:.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

DATE:.....





## 8.6 DEECD ethics

2012\_001509

Mr Yeshe Colliver  
Australian Catholic University  
Level 3, 174 Victoria Parade  
EAST MELBOURNE 3002

Dear Mr Colliver

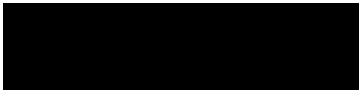
Thank you for your application of 4 April 2012 in which you request permission to conduct research in Victorian government schools and/or early childhood settings titled *Stakeholder perspectives: teacher, family, and child perspectives on learning through play in early childhood educational settings*.

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. The research is conducted in accordance with the final documentation you provided to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.
2. Separate approval for the research needs to be sought from school principals and/or centre directors. This is to be supported by the DEECD approved documentation and, if applicable, the letter of approval from a relevant and formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee.
3. The project is commenced within 12 months of this approval letter and any extensions or variations to your study, including those requested by an ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for its consideration before you proceed.
4. As a matter of courtesy, you advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools or governing body of the early childhood settings that you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director or governing body.
5. You acknowledge the support of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in any publications arising from the research.
6. The Research Agreement conditions, which include the reporting requirements at the conclusion of your study, are upheld. A reminder will be sent for reports not submitted by the study's indicative completion date.
7. If DEECD has commissioned you to undertake this research, the responsible Branch/Division will need to approve any material you provide for publication on the Department's Research Register.

I wish you well with your research study. Should you have further enquiries on this matter, please contact Kathleen Nolan, Research Officer, Research and Evaluation, by telephone on (03) 9637 3244 or by email at [nolan.kathleen.j@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:nolan.kathleen.j@edumail.vic.gov.au).

Yours sincerely



**Dr Elizabeth Hartnell-Young**  
Group Manager  
Education Policy and Research

20/04/2012

enc

## 8.7 Permission to use Hedegaard's (2009) model

**From:** [Mariane Hedegaard](#)  
**To:** [Yeshe Colliver](#)  
**Subject:** RE: Request for non-exclusive rights to your work  
**Date:** Thursday, 5 September 2013 7:03:36 PM

---

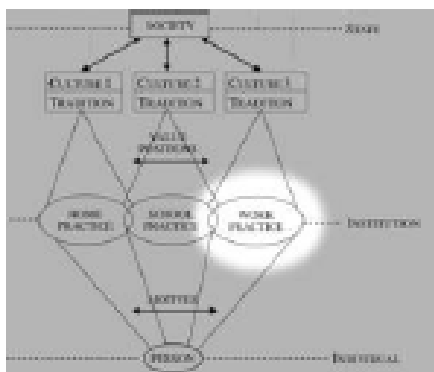
Dear Yeshe Colliver  
You are welcome to include my model in your article.  
Best wishes Mariane Hedegaard

---

**From:** Yeshe Colliver [mailto:Yeshe.Colliver@acu.edu.au]  
**Sent:** 3. september 2013 09:24  
**To:** Mariane Hedegaard  
**Subject:** Request for non-exclusive rights to your work

Hi Mariane,

As an avid reader and admirer of your work, I have recently finished a manuscript that I would like to submit for publication on stakeholder perspectives on learning through play. I have found your work extremely useful in analysing perspectives of educators, parents, and children. I have found it to fit with Barbara Rogoff's work, in particular her planes of analysis (e.g., 1995). Specifically, I would like to use a model from your paper in *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, entitled "Children's development from a cultural-historical approach: Children's activity in everyday local settings as foundation for their development". I have referenced the paper below with page 73, and I have reproduced it with a particular focus on "work practice" (see below).



Hedegaard, M. (2009). Children's development from a cultural-historical approach: Children's activity in everyday local settings as foundation for their development. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 16, 64 - 81.

If it would not bother you, I would like to request the following:

- non-exclusive rights to reproduce the item within my article in *Early Years* targeted at a specialist academic readership with a defined circulation;
- print and electronic rights in perpetuity (i.e. no time-limited licenses) to cover reproduction of the material in an online version available to customers;
- worldwide English-language distribution rights;
- if you have access to a jpeg or other image file of this model, that you send it at 300 dpi minimum resolution.

Thank you very much for your help, and I hope to meet you in person one day you visit



## 8.8 ACU HREC approval

**From:** [Gabrielle Ryan](#)  
**To:** [Yeshe Colliver](#)  
**Subject:** PW: Extension approved 2012 55V  
**Date:** Thursday, 9 August 2012 3:40:59 PM

---

Dear Yeshe

Here is a copy of the email that was sent confirming your extension.

Cheers  
Gabil

Gabrielle Ryan  
Research Services Officer (Ethics)  
Australian Catholic University Limited  
St Patrick's Campus  
Level 5, 250 Victoria Parade, Fitzroy VIC 3065  
Locked Bag 4115, Fitzroy VIC 3065  
Ph: +61 3 9953 3150  
Fax: +61 3 9953 3315  
Email: [res.ethics@acu.edu.au](mailto:res.ethics@acu.edu.au)

ABN 15 050 192 660  
CRICOS Registration: 00004G, 00112C, 00873F, 00885B

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

**From:** Gabrielle Ryan [<mailto:Gabrielle.Ryan@acu.edu.au>]  
**Sent:** Friday, 22 June 2012 4:01 PM  
**To:** Suzy Edwards; Yeshe Jampa Colliver  
**Cc:** Gabrielle Ryan  
**Subject:** Extension approved 2012 55V

Dear Susan Elizabeth,

Ethics Register Number : 2012 55V  
Project Title : Stakeholder Perspectives: Teacher, Family and Child Perspectives on Learning through Play in Early Childhood Educational Settings Data Collection Date Extended : 28/09/2012

Thank you for returning the Ethics Progress Report for your project.

The Deputy Chair of the Human Research Ethics Committee has approved your request to extend the period of data collection. The new expiry date for data collection is the 28/09/2012 .

We wish you well in this ongoing project.

Kind regards,  
Gabrielle Ryan

Ethics Officer | Research Services  
Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research) Australian Catholic University Locked Bag 4115,  
Fitzroy, VIC, 3065  
T: 03 9953 3150 F: 03 9953 3315

THIS IS AN AUTOMATICALLY GENERATED RESEARCHMASTER EMAIL