

***'They get fed up with playing.'* Parents' views on play-based learning in the Preparatory Year**

Introduction

Within early childhood education the concept that play is the best way for children to learn coupled with the idea that parents are partners in the child's learning combine to form a large part of the bases for many early childhood educators' philosophical positioning. The research surrounding play is massive and varied; around parents' views on play, less so. Regardless, most early childhood education curriculum documents will make reference to the importance of play and of parent and early childhood teachers' professional relationships. As Hedges & Lee (2010) suggest, the notion of partnership between parents and teachers is 'a taken-for-granted feature' of early childhood education. Some research has investigated the links between these two ideas. Much of this is approached from the perspective of cultural difference (e.g. Brooker 2010; Dockett & Fler 1999, Fogle & Mendez 2006, Windisch, Jenvey & Drysdale 2003). This paper further investigates parents' views on play in the early years. Our exploration reveals a diversity and complexity of understandings and interpretations of play in the early years, even within the small, relatively homogenous group of parents in this study.

We open this paper with a discussion of some aspects of play in early childhood education and care. Here we are not attempting a rehearsal of the entire field; rather we focus on some of the tensions that are recognised in the interpretations and understandings of play, pedagogy and learning in early childhood. We then move on to research regarding parents' views of play and finally we analyse the views of one group of parents, investigating their complex and often contradictory understandings of play and learning. Our discussion resonates with Hedges and Lee (2010, p. 260), who suggest that '... the notion of parent-teacher partnership is much more complex, difficult and dynamic than the rhetoric of philosophy, policy and practice suggest.'

Play in early childhood education

Despite the wealth of discussion about play and its status as a right of all children, there remains contention in the early childhood literature about how play is defined and constructed (Ailwood, 2003; Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Hall & Abbott, 1991; Rogers, 2011; Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2003). One of the few things that can be said with any certainty about play is that 'children express play in many different ways and that adults interpret what play is in many different ways' (Sandberg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003, p. 2). Or as Brooker suggests, any discussion of play should always begin with 'it depends...' (2010, p. 154). Play has come to be understood as contingent (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010), dependent on context (Brooker,

2011), relational (Rogers 2011) and culturally mediated (Marfo & Beirsteker, 2011).

While the slippery nature of play is embraced to some degree, there also continues to be abundant reference in the literature to the characteristics that are commonly felt to typify play. In the early childhood context, the traditional notion that authentic play is to a large extent initiated and controlled by the child is widely accepted (Cooney, 2004; Hurwitz, 2003; Ranz-Smith, 2007). According to some commentators, the play world belongs to the child and teachers ought not interfere or take over the activities of play or to restrain the child's freedom to create the culture of their play (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006).

However, alongside this there is a growing commentary about the role of teachers within play, with some suggesting that play should be child initiated but teacher guided (Ashiabi, 2007). Hedges (2000) posited that the popular refrain 'learning through play' might be balanced with the idea of 'teaching through play' (p. 20), emphasising the crucial role of teachers in enriching children's play. This argument has been reiterated in research in Australia (Thorpe et al., 2004) and the UK (Wood, 2007). Thorpe et al. suggested that effective early years teachers set clear goals for their teaching and for children's learning programs that are 'play-based yet focused' (p. 22). The contradictions and tensions surrounding the idea of play and pedagogy have been further explored in recent research in early childhood (Brooker & Edwards 2010; Grieshaber & McArdle 2010; Rogers 2011). It is to some of these tensions that we now turn.

Tensions between work, pedagogy and play

The distinction between childhood activities considered 'play' and those identified as 'work' has been examined by a number of authors over the last three decades (Apple & King, 1977; Cooney, 2004; King, 1992; Ranz-Smith, 2007; Tyler, 1991). Historically, the transition to compulsory school is a key period when the work-play tension becomes clear. For example, Hall and Abbott (1991) have suggested that the importance placed upon play recedes once a child moves from pre-compulsory to compulsory schooling. Within the school context, work activities have been considered by teachers and children to be more important than play activities (Keating et al., 2000) although not necessarily less enjoyable (King, 1992).

It has long been argued that the critical feature distinguishing play from work may be the matter of who instigates the activity. Apple and King's (1977) early research involved observations and interviews with children and their teacher in a kindergarten classroom during the first weeks of the school year. They found that regardless of the nature of the activity itself, it was the context that determined to which of the two categories the activity belongs. For children, if activity is teacher initiated it is work. If it is child initiated it is play. Further investigation of the work/play tension has been undertaken by Swedish researchers Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006). They suggest that the substance assigned to teacher initiated activities leads in part to the assumption

that 'real' learning may only occur when a particular activity has been organised and led by the teacher (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006).

Closely linked to the tension of play and work, therefore, is the relationship between play and pedagogy. It is argued that early years teachers are engaged in a 'precarious balancing act' (Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 272) as they strive to meet increasing curriculum requirements while remaining responsive to children and their play. In recent times in Australia, a significant raft of policy and regulation reform has seen the introduction of several new curriculum frameworks. *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF; Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009), the *Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guidelines* (QSA, 2010) and the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework: For all Children from Birth to Eight Years* (2009) are representative of these reforms. A new Australian Curriculum, which will be implemented in early years settings such as Queensland's Preparatory Year (Prep), will bring further focus to the role of teachers and their implementation of curriculum. This movement of neo-liberal politics and policy into the early years is explicitly linked with the development of curriculum documents and heightened public accountability for early childhood educators. The tensions between work, play and pedagogy are manifest in this context as early childhood educators in Australia struggle with the foregrounding of play as the pedagogical 'work' of early childhood. Rogers (2011) further suggests that while 'work' and 'play' remain in conceptual opposition within early childhood education, coming to grips with these more recent discussions of a 'pedagogy of play' will remain a challenge.

Parents interpreting play

The literature reviewed thus far has highlighted the problematic nature of defining play and identifying its value as a vehicle for learning. While this literature has explored the ways in which play might be conceptualised by children and teachers, there has been, to date, limited research into how parents might understand play. What literature there is investigating parents' understandings of play usually focuses on cultural differences, for example Australian indigenous parents (Windisch et al., 2003), African-American parents (Fogle & Mendez, 2006) or Asian-American compared with European-American parents (Parmar, Harkness & Super, 2004). Tobin and Kurban (2010) suggest that early childhood educators' difficulties and differences in communicating with parents may be a 'projection of problems onto immigrants' and a crossing of culture and class boundaries. All these researchers point to the complexity of the relationships between early childhood educators and parents; including conflicting understandings of the role of early childhood educators. Our analysis also points towards this complexity; revealing diversity within a group of parents who, at first glance, could be considered a homogenous group of white Australians.

Fisher et al.'s (2008) comparative study of parent and teacher perceptions of play in the US found that parents of 0-5 year old children held a broader

definition of play than did teachers. Fisher et al. proposed that broadening views of play may lead to the increased formalisation and structure of experiences for children, both at home and school. Also in the US, Fogle and Mendez (2006) explored African-American parents' beliefs about play. These parents held positive views about play and its significance. Parmar et al. (2004) compared the ways in which European-American and Asian-American parents value play, finding that the Asian parents generally preferred an early start to academic learning over the provision of play. In the UK, Brooker (2002, 2010) has undertaken research investigating the relationships between children's homes and early childhood settings. The tensions and contradictions between these sites in children's lives are made clear in Brooker's work, including of course the varying understandings and value placed on play.

There is a relatively small body of research into parent views of play in the Australian context. Olsen and Sumsion (2002) explored teacher practices regarding the use of dramatic play in Australian early childhood classrooms. While their study did not directly investigate parent views of play, the teachers participating in the study reported their feeling that parents were unsupportive of play. Dockett (2011) also reported that teachers feel parental attitudes to play constitute a barrier to play in early childhood. Parents in Dockett's study were perceived as not valuing play, seeking instead a focus on what was considered work. Alternatively, Windisch et al. (2003) investigated Australian indigenous parents' attitudes to play and found that parents placed high value on play generally, especially play that featured indigenous content.

Background to the research

The Preparatory Year (Prep) is a non-compulsory year of schooling available in all Queensland schools for children who turn five prior to June 30. In a major 2007 State Government reform, Prep replaced part-time "preschool" programs in Government schools, a major trial of the program having suggested that universal Prep would be beneficial for young children (Thorpe, et al., 2004). The introduction of Prep aligned pre-compulsory provision in Queensland with other Australian jurisdictions, although early years nomenclature remains inconsistent across Australia's State and Territory boundaries. In Queensland, the year prior to Prep is known as "kindergarten" or "pre-Prep", while the first year of compulsory school is Year One.

A key curriculum document supporting the Prep program, *the Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* (EYCG) (QSA, 2006), presents play as one of five key contexts for learning. The EYCG acknowledges that parents and educators might not share cohesive views about play, and calls for teachers to advocate on behalf of play-based approaches. Recent curriculum frameworks such as the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) are also relevant for Queensland's Preparatory Year, with the EYLF maintaining a specific emphasis on play-based learning. Furthermore, a new Australian curriculum, currently under development, is an additional curricula reference for the Prep Year, as it includes a focus on K-2 (five to eight year old children).

Methodology

The data discussed here were gathered as part of a larger study exploring how 26 parents (24 mothers and 2 fathers) at a non-government school viewed the Preparatory Year (O’Gorman, 2008). The school in which the study took place is situated in an area of high growth in outer urban south-east Queensland and had four Prep classrooms at the time of data collection. Participants were parents of children from across the four classrooms.

While interview data from the larger study were examined through the lens of phenomenography (Marton, 1986; O’Gorman, 2008), for the purposes of this paper, the authors used an inductive, thematic analysis to explore, specifically, the ways in which the parents discussed the place of play in the Prep classroom. Parents in the study typically referred to play as an illustration of their understanding of the Prep program. Ideas about the existence of play in the program, its value, how it might be defined, and whether it has a place in Prep were frequently raised by the participants during the interviews. Upon close reading and re-reading of these interviews, commonalities and differences emerged pointing us towards the need for a deeper understanding of parents’ perspectives on the place of play in early childhood education. Interviewer prompts are provided in italics.

Play is learning without knowing they’re learning

Many parents in this study described the Prep program their child was experiencing as *play-based*. In so doing, however, some interesting ideas about play emerged. For instance, play in Prep was seen to enable children to learn without realising they were learning; to be worthwhile because of an embedded literacy and numeracy focus, and to be directed by the teacher.

For example,

... [I]t is very play-based from what I’ve seen.

I: And you say that it’s play-based, tell me about that.

... [T]hey do a lot of things like on the computer and stuff as well. So, I mean it is actually playing, but they’re learning at the same time without actually realising ... (Parent 14).

This parent seems to be alluding to the idea that play is a good thing if (a) children are learning and (b) they don’t realise they are learning. Several of the parents explored this perspective,

They do a lot of learning without knowing they’re learning. ... A lot of games ... and I think the kids see it as all a game. And they do things like they’ll lay them out and measure them and that kind of thing. And the kids

don't even realise they're learning, but they are. So it's that kind of ... sort of play-based learning. (Parent 19).

... the kids don't even know they're doing maths and English because it's all play activities, which is good. I wouldn't like it if they sat down and they were doing textbooks at that age (Parent 5).

Through the above descriptions of Prep some ideas about the characteristics of 'play' are emerging. The first quote suggests that an activity is play if it is a game or if it involves hands-on aspects. Play also involves something different from sitting down with a textbook. These parents seem to be reproducing dominant discourses of play as the child's work – in other words play is valued as long as it is also explicitly focused on worthwhile school-based learning, especially literacy and numeracy.

Another parent suggested that activities were structured in a particular way that enabled the children to learn through play, without the requirement for preset goals. This parent also identified as play activities that were hands-on and interactive:

... [I]t's more play-based and not necessarily directed towards achievement of certain levels and goals. It's more they just go along at their level.

What's your experience of the play-based nature of the program? From what you can gather, tell me more about that.

The learning's ... structured amongst play so they're playing games and interacting ... for instance, sandpit and doing measuring. So they're learning about measuring things but it's done within the play environment. So they're filling up ... cups and saucepans and things. But they're learning about sizes at the same time but it's play. ... It's different to sitting and being told that this is large and this is small. (Parent 24).

For this parent, a play-based program does not set goals and children are allowed to progress at their own level. Play is also hands on rather than passive learning. Again, mathematical learning was cited, suggesting that play is acceptable when children are learning the basics of literacy and numeracy – whether they know it or not.

Another parent described the program as play-based but with formal aspects. In the following quote, she compares Prep with an alternative program that her older child attended:

When I compare it with the preschool year at [local childcare centre], that was very play orientated and even though it is play here, I think it's a more formalised form of play. It's not as free. It's not a free sort of system so much. You know, [older child] ... had so much time playing really ...

there wasn't a lot of challenges academically in that year ... for him, whereas there has been for the girls in the Prep Year here.

Tell me more about your thoughts on the way they play but it's more a formal type of play from your perspective.

... I think they are more restricted in their play perhaps in a lot of ways ... I just think that when I look at the [childcare centre] preschool year, I think perhaps ... it's just the play is less directed. That's the word I'm looking for, probably. The play is less directed whereas here it is, it's more directed, their play, into specific areas and aiming for specific outcomes even though it is play ... Whereas I think the [childcare centre] was a more informal type of play (Parent 21).

Here we see the view that play does not equal an academic challenge, again emphasising the perspective that play and academic learning are discrete. However, this parent's observation about the role of the teacher in this more formal style of play is astute. In stating that the children's play at Prep is 'restricted', 'directed' and 'aiming for specific outcomes' she has identified a key tension in the field regarding play, pedagogy and outcomes in early years classrooms. This tension is built upon below, as parents grapple with the balance between what is considered play and what is work.

Balancing play with work

Some parents described the program as incorporating play but also bridging the transition to formal school by balancing play with work. This understanding of the Prep Year clearly aligns with the Australian Government's emphasis on the importance of the early years as the foundation and preparation for future learning.

In the following quote, the parent avoids using the term 'work' but counterbalances the idea of play with an alternative focus on 'doing things':

It's not, you know, it's not school, it's not Grade One, it's not as structured, but there is that structure there, so they're learning, there's a time to play and there's a time that I have to focus on doing things (Parent 19).

Another parent was more forthright about how this balance between play and work might enhance the transition to school:

... [T]hey're getting used to being in a formal classroom situation, without it being too full on ... They do have to sit down at their desks and do their work, but they still have their time for playing and that kind of thing ... and ... with the different subjects ... They all have their maths in the morning, or their work with their numbers in the morning, then their English ... so it is sort of a big stepping stone, I think, to going into primary school (Parent 1).

These parents made clear distinctions between play and “doing things” which included “work” and getting ready for the following year of school. Again, we see here the emphasis on literacy and numeracy, and an assumption that play and learning occur at separate times of the day.

Not all parents described the Prep Year as play-based. There were many who outlined the apparent *lack* of play, which was welcomed by several but not all of the parents. The next section explores the views of parents who did not describe the program as play-based.

Play doesn't happen in Prep

Interviews for this project took place prior to the universal introduction of Prep in Queensland. At the time, parents were asked to share their thoughts about the (then) future provision of Prep Year in all Queensland schools. Almost without exception, they felt that Prep would be a good thing for children. In many cases, parents held up the Prep Year as a better alternative to part-time preschool because of a move *away* from play-based programs:

What do you think about that, that idea of the government providing a Prep Year for all children?

I think it would be fantastic. These part-time preschools, where they basically just go to play, ... yes they are making friends and they probably are achieving something ... but I've always said that you're going to need a degree to be a checkout chick in years to come, and if ... you're the biggest sponge around when you're four and five and if you don't utilise that ... I think it's crazy (Parent 4).

The view expressed here is that play is useful for social development but not for 'real' learning that prepares children for the future. This justification of the lack of play is highlighted by the suggestion that it would be 'crazy' to provide play in Prep when children are at an age when they are 'sponges'.

This view of the Prep Year as an alternative to a play-based program rather than a play-based program in itself was frequently expressed by the parents in this study. Like the parent quoted above, a number of the other parents criticised play-based programs in other settings for their focus on 'playing, painting, singing and dancing' at the expense of "structure" and academic learning.

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).

Dismissing early childhood educators as 'baby-sitters' reflects a widespread misunderstanding of early childhood educators' work and their role in developing children's learning through engaging with play experiences. Many parents reflected the idea that play should not have a place in the Prep

classroom, valuing instead the school readiness and structured aspects of the program.

They're not just sitting in a classroom, you know, painting and playing, they really are integrated into the Junior School completely (Parent 26).

Here, the kids are learning their alphabet and their counting and numbers and things, whereas at (another site) they seem to be just playing and painting and singing and dancing. Didn't seem to be as much of the writing and that sort of skills that the children are using, ready for Grade One (Parent 8).

What emerged in these interviews was the parents' interpretation that play and engagement with non-literacy and numeracy based activities do not equate to real learning, and that real learning, literacy and numeracy, are the "nitty-gritty" of what prepares children for school.

Well just through speaking to other friends who have children that just go to preschool ... it seems to be a lot like the kindy program, just playing with play dough and doing their painting and stuff. Where this is just more learning. More of the Year One, getting ready for Year One. And I know I keep going back to that, because that's what I think is fantastic about it (Parent 9).

I think they get fed up with playing. They've done years of playing at home. They want to start getting into the nitty-gritty (Parent 4).

However, not all parents valued play so little. The following parent described her disappointment at the lack of play in the program:

I honestly believed that the Prep program would be the five days of preschool and that it would be more play-based learning. And I was quite shocked to find that it wasn't that at all. (Parent 23).

This parent acknowledged that her child had made strong academic progress during Prep, but the cost of that progress had been the removal of play:

I think [child] has gained a lot from doing the Prep Year. However, I don't agree with the rigid structure of the Prep Year and I don't believe that they have enough play-based activities out there ...

... And non-structured activity time ... When you see 24 Preppies walk out of the classroom with exactly the same thing once a week, you just think, oh, like where's their imagination? They're not allowed to really have much of an imagination ... (Parent 23).

For this parent, activity time in itself did not constitute play. If an activity is structured or children must complete it, it cannot be play. Further, this parent suggested a reason for the lack of play in Prep:

... it feels to me like they want to be different and that they're going to create some kind of super-genius kids by implementing this earlier.
(Parent 23)

This is supported in this study, with a number of parents suggesting a formalised Prep Year program with reduced play opportunities and a strong literacy and numeracy focus better prepares children for school and the future.

Discussion

An examination of the data suggests that the parents' views of play, and indeed whether play was actually occurring at all, were diverse; a point that is unsurprising given the diversity of definitions amongst researchers and teachers as well. For all but one of the parents, play in the Prep classroom was considered acceptable as long as it did not interfere with 'real' school. The two key ways this was evident were in the views that play was acceptable if a) play was learning without knowing they're learning and b) play happened after the 'work' of school was done. In contrast to this was the perspective that play did not actually happen in the Prep classroom, with some parents feeling positive about the perceived lack of play. Only one participant was clearly unhappy with the place of play in the Prep classroom, desiring far greater play opportunities for her child.

The parents' reflections on what might constitute a 'play-based' curriculum were varied and interesting; providing an enlightening comparison to some of the discussions about play in the literature. The diversity of opinion within this group mirrored the ongoing debate about how the term 'play' ought to be defined (Ailwood, 2003; Sandberg & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2003; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Rogers, 2011). Moreover, while defining the term 'play' is problematic, the suggestion by Sandberg and Pramling Samuelsson (2003) that adults may *interpret* play in different ways seems to be also reflected in the comments made by parents in this study.

The participants in this study had broad definitions of play. They described play activities as involving children in practical, small-group activities that seemed to be essentially teacher-directed rather than generated from the children themselves. However, because the children were not sitting at their desks doing 'work', these activities were defined as play by the parents. This construct of play would seem to be at odds with the views of researchers such as Atkin (1991) who claimed that an essential feature of play is that it is voluntary. Yet, Hall and Abbott (1991) warned against taking too narrow a definition of play. Their suggestion that play ought to evolve as children enter formal schooling may well be represented in the views of the parents here. Many of these parents perceived their children to be in formal schooling, even though the Preparatory Year is a non-compulsory year of school in Queensland. These parents'

definitions of a play-based curriculum, therefore, may have taken into account a more formal, teacher-directed construct of play; a version of play they felt was more appropriate for their children than a predominantly child-initiated version might have been.

At other times in the interviews, parents described periods of free choice, when children were able to explore materials without the direct intervention of teachers. Descriptions of these sessions seem to reflect an understanding of play having characteristics, one of which is that it is controlled by the child (Dockett, 1999). These episodes of free play seemed to be confined to after-lunch sessions or when the children were 'hot' or 'tired' and the parents emphasised that this type of play was beneficial for the children at the end of the day, when "work" was complete.

There was one parent who perceived the Prep Year program as not play-based at all. This parent stridently rejected the idea that the program was of a high quality because it offered limited opportunities for play. Using phrases such as 'rigid structure', 'pretty rough', 'kids should initiate', 'missed out on play time', this parent described her disappointment in discovering that Prep was very different from how she expected it would be.

Conclusion

Since its introduction in 2007, the Preparatory Year has become entrenched in Queensland's early years landscape. However, in the period since the program's introduction, a raft of curriculum frameworks have been introduced in Australia, each with the potential to significantly reshape the early years of schooling. As the new national curriculum agenda in Australia takes hold, additional questions may be posed and new challenges will arise particularly in relation to the role of play, including parents' understandings of play.

This paper has highlighted some ongoing questions and challenges around the ways in which parents might define play, how they might identify what constitutes play, and how they might explore its purposes and benefits. These questions and challenges emerge from a broader socio-political context dominated by discourses of school readiness and the pre-eminence of literacy and numeracy as "real work". The data presented illustrate how a group of parents at one school think about play and its potential (or not) as a means of facilitating readiness for school. The majority of these parents held the view that play is useful if it serves the broader literacy and numeracy agenda; if it provides a balance against activities defined as "work". Indeed, many were content to accept that play didn't really take place in Prep at all.

Traditionally in precompulsory early childhood programs, play has been recognised as a key context for learning and partnerships with parents a universal aspiration. The data presented here suggests that parents have their own views and agendas regarding play and its value in their children's early childhood classrooms. These agendas are complex and contradictory, even

amongst this relatively homogenous group of parents. For early childhood educators these complexities require an ongoing engagement and debate. This is a difficult, but necessary, challenge as the value of play and of partnerships with parents now not only sits in a broad and general philosophy of early childhood education, but is also built into the emerging raft of curricula and regulatory policy. Grappling with the complexities of our understandings of play and early childhood education as teachers, parents and researchers is a fundamental challenge as we reconceptualise the place of play in ever changing early years contexts.

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