



**UNCOVERING PAST EXPERIENCES THAT INFLUENCE THE  
PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS: AN  
INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY INTO PLAY**

A Thesis submitted by

Jennifer Wong-Powell

For the award of

Doctor of Education

2017

### **Abstract**

While early childhood teachers and play scholars endorse the benefits of play to the learning and development of young children, the provision of play in early childhood education continues to be challenged. However, an investigation into the challenge does not surround finding who might not support the use and implementation of play or the solutions to the obstacles for play opportunities in early childhood education. Rather, an inquiry is necessary in order to answer the whys and hows of human opinion, behaviour and experience. The question is: Who are we and where do we come from as early childhood teachers?

Through interpretive inquiry into play, the intention of this study was to provide researchers and early childhood teachers with a possible example of how to engage in reflections, inquiring into the rich and diverse interplay of factors that impact the approaches to play as well as play practices in early childhood education. Visualised through spiral loops, each phase of the data collection and interpretation were informed by the proceeding stage as new questions emerged, new connections were made and developments in deepening understandings impacted the direction of research. The methodology incorporated interpretive and participative inquiry, with the researcher as a participant insider using an autoethnographic technique.

The inquiry into play reveals the previous experiences with play and its influences on the use of play as well as its impact on the current orientations and developed theories on play. Situated in an international school in Sri Lanka, the participants include three female veteran early childhood teachers who are Sri Lankan in nationality. The research emphasises play as a culturally embedded and institutionally defined concept, repositioning play from a previously Western point of view to a social construct. The inquiry into play further provokes thinking and conversations about play, illustrating its complexity and robustness.

**Certification of Thesis**

This thesis is entirely the work of Jennifer Wong-Powell except where otherwise acknowledged. The work is original and has not previously been submitted for any other award, except where acknowledged.

Student and supervisors signatures of endorsement are held at USQ.

*Dr. Nicole Green*

Principal Supervisor

*Associate Professor Robyn Henderson*

Associate Supervisor

## **Acknowledgements**

My inquiry into play has taught me the true value of collaboration between professionals in the field of early childhood education. When early childhood teachers make reflections into the impact on their perspectives and approaches to play, we gain a profound understanding into the influences on our teaching practices, revealing the intricacies of play.

Throughout my research journey, I have gained an increasing self-understanding into myself as a mother and as an early childhood teacher, making reflections on the childhood experiences which have collectively shaped who I am and where I have come from. My reflections have revealed how much my mom and dad have influenced my passion towards making play happen in my own early childhood classroom and my commitment towards a better future for play time and opportunities in the early childhood classrooms of my colleagues. For that, I thank you so much mom and dad for providing me with such powerful childhood experiences with play which have become such an influential impact into my views on play and the way I approach play now.

However, an inquiry into the effects of play is not simple and straightforward. My sincerest appreciation and thanks goes out to my supervisors Dr. Nicole Green and Associate Professor Robyn Henderson for your guidance, support, encouragement and expertise. I have learnt so much from our thought-provoking conversations, your open-ended questions and the wisdom which you impart.

I also want to thank the teacher participants, my colleagues and all those who took part in my inquiry into play as the insights in which we gained required a journey together. I appreciate the willingness to engage in such professional conversations and such personal inquiries into who we are as early childhood teachers.

And finally to my family. To my husband and my best friend, Colin: thank you for your patience and the many late nights working on our computers side-by-side from Australia to Sri Lanka to Lithuania. To Dylan and Sam, my two wonderful children: I have learnt so much from both of you and the perspectives you bring. Never stop enjoying childhood and never stop playing, for playing is what will take you far ahead in life.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>List of Tables .....</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>THE BEGINNINGS OF AN INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY INTO PLAY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 An Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 My Story.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.2.1 How the research journey began .....	4
1.2.2 Reframing my role as an early childhood teacher .....	7
<b>1.3 The Research Questions .....</b>	<b>8</b>
1.3.1 Placing the research into context.....	11
<b>1.4 An Overview of the Chapters.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>1.5 Summary .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2 .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>CURRENT FOCI OF PLAY LITERATURE .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2.2 Exploring the World: Play and the Construction of Knowledge.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2.3 Theme One – Learning Expectations in Multiple Contexts.....</b>	<b>17</b>
2.3.1 Traditional values on teaching practices .....	18
2.3.2 More is better: Rising academic expectations in early childhood education	20
2.3.3 The effects of rising academic expectations: A focus on the United States of America .....	22
<b>2.4 Theme Two – A Misalignment: Play in Theory and Play in Practice.....</b>	<b>25</b>
2.4.1 Realising play in early childhood classrooms: A call for advocacy and support .....	27

<b>2.5 Theme Three – A Narrow Context: Moving Towards a Broader Focus .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>2.6 Opportunities for Further Research: Why Am I Inquiring into Play? .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>2.7 Summary .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3 .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>CONCEPTUALISING THE COMPLEXITIES OF PLAY .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>3.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>3.2 Seeing the World through a Constructivist Lens .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>3.3 How Do We Know: More than Words.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>3.4 Framing the Research Design: Interpretive Inquiry .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>3.5 Ways of Understanding and Knowing: Interpretive Methods .....</b>	<b>40</b>
3.5.1 The role of thick descriptions and interpretations .....	42
<b>3.6 Components to My Interpretive Inquiry .....</b>	<b>43</b>
3.6.1 An adapted model into teacher thinking.....	44
3.6.2 Deepening the inquiry into teacher thinking: Filters, frames and guides.....	46
<b>3.7 Positioning Myself as a Researcher: On the Inside.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>3.8 Summary .....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4 .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>CONSTRUCTING THE INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY INTO PLAY .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>4.2 The research questions: Manifestations of self-discovery .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>4.3 The Context for my Interpretive Inquiry: Where and Who?.....</b>	<b>56</b>
4.3.1 Context of the school.....	56
4.3.2 Participants in my study .....	58
<b>4.4 Data collection methods: How do I find out what I want to know? .....</b>	<b>60</b>
4.4.1 Focus group discussion .....	62
4.4.2 Individual teacher interviews .....	63
4.4.3 Classroom observations.....	65
4.4.4 Stimulated recall technique .....	68
4.4.5 Second focus group discussion.....	69
<b>4.5 Data analysis: How do I make sense of the data? .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>4.6 Trustworthy Re-Presentations: Credibility and Authenticity .....</b>	<b>74</b>
4.6.1 Building credible and trustworthy constructs of meanings .....	74

4.6.2 Evaluating the trustworthiness and authenticity of my inquiry .....	77
<b>4.7 Ethical considerations: What is my responsibility to the teacher participants? .....</b>	<b>79</b>
4.7.1 Risks and benefits.....	79
4.7.2 Informed consent .....	79
4.7.3 Confidentiality and privacy .....	80
4.7.4 Risk management .....	80
<b>4.8 Possible Limitations to My Study on Play .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>4.9 Summary .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5 .....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>THE EFFECTS OF FILTERS ON PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS.....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>5.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>5.2 Memories and Personal Experiences with Play: Filters .....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>5.3 A Focus into the Multiple Contexts of Play: Making Meaning .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>5.4 The Research Context.....</b>	<b>86</b>
5.4.1 The beginnings: Building rapport.....	87
<b>5.5 Meet Punya .....</b>	<b>89</b>
5.5.1 Memories with play and its impact .....	90
<b>5.6 Meet Tounnalina .....</b>	<b>92</b>
5.6.1 Memories with play and its impact .....	92
<b>5.7 Meet Nayana .....</b>	<b>95</b>
5.7.1 Memories with play and its impact .....	95
<b>5.8 My Own Reflection .....</b>	<b>98</b>
5.8.1 My memories with play and its impact .....	98
<b>5.9 Discussion.....</b>	<b>100</b>
5.9.1 Comparisons: Viewing and implementing play in different ways .....	100
5.9.2 Categorisations: The significance of institutional and cultural influences..	101
<b>5.10 Summary .....</b>	<b>102</b>

<b>CHAPTER 6 .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>FROM FILTERS TO FRAMES: THE IMPLICATION OF PLAY MEMORIES ON THE ORIENTATIONS AND DEVELOPED THEORIES ON PLAY .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>6.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>6.2 How Play is Conceptualised: Frames .....</b>	<b>104</b>
6.2.1 Play memories and the impact on immediate behaviours and actions: The story with watermelons .....	106
<b>6.3 Play Experiences in Education: Impact on Current Orientations and Developed Theories on Play .....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>6.4 Punya’s Story and Experiences .....</b>	<b>108</b>
6.4.1 Punya’s early childhood education: A is for apple. B is for boy. But what is V for?.....	108
6.4.2 Punya’s current orientation on play.....	110
6.4.3 Punya’s developed theory on play.....	112
<b>6.5 Tounnalina’s Story and Experiences.....</b>	<b>113</b>
6.5.1 Tounnalina’s early childhood education: At one with nature .....	113
6.5.2 Tounnalina’s current orientation on play .....	115
6.5.3 Tounnalina’s developed theory on play .....	116
<b>6.6 Nayana’s Story and Experiences .....</b>	<b>118</b>
6.6.1 Nayana’s early childhood education: Every day is a festive day .....	118
6.6.2 Nayana’s current orientation on play .....	120
6.6.3 Nayana’s developed theory on play .....	122
<b>6.7 My Own Story and Experiences .....</b>	<b>123</b>
6.7.1 My early childhood education: Follow along and you will know.....	123
6.7.2 My current orientation on play.....	124
6.7.3 My developed theory on play.....	127
<b>6.8 Discussion.....</b>	<b>129</b>
6.8.1 Contextualisation: Enriching the descriptions, comparisons and categorisations .....	129
<b>6.9 Summary .....</b>	<b>130</b>



<b>CHAPTER 7 .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>THE ROLE OF GUIDES: REFRAMING PLAY AS A SITUATIONALLY- BASED CONCEPT .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>7.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>7.2 The Plurality and Complexity of Play in Early Childhood Classrooms: Guides to Immediate Action.....</b>	<b>132</b>
<b>7.3 A Dichotomous Effect: Building an Understanding into the Impact of Play Experiences and the Challenges to Play .....</b>	<b>133</b>
7.3.1 Presenting Punya's Interpretations .....	134
7.3.2 Presenting Tounnalina's Interpretations.....	138
7.3.3 Presenting Nayana's Interpretations.....	141
7.3.4 Presenting My Interpretations .....	143
<b>7.4 The Realisation of Play in its Multiple Contexts .....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>7.5 The Significance of Temporal Factors: Institutional Constraints.....</b>	<b>148</b>
<b>7.6 Discussion.....</b>	<b>152</b>
7.6.1 Explanations: Re-examination and new questions .....	152
<b>7.7 Summary .....</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8 .....</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>THE RESEARCH JOURNEY WITH THREE EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS: OUR RE-INTERPRETATION OF PLAY .....</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>8.1 Introduction .....</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>8.2 Returning to the Beginning of My Interpretive Inquiry into Play .....</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>8.3 Blurring of Boundaries: Becoming a Participant .....</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>8.4 Revisiting the Chapters .....</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>8.5 Learnings from My Interpretive Inquiry into Play .....</b>	<b>166</b>
8.5.1 Epistemological learnings .....	166
8.5.2 My personal learnings .....	167
<b>8.6 Contributions of the Study to Play Literature .....</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>8.7 Making Further Impact on Play Practices .....</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>8.8 What is the Future for Play? .....</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>8.9 A Conclusion.....</b>	<b>174</b>

<b>References .....</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>Appendix A: Focus Group Structure and Pre-determined Questions.....</b>	<b>195</b>
<b>Appendix B: Classroom Observation Sheets.....</b>	<b>196</b>
<b>Appendix C: Reference to play types for teacher participants.....</b>	<b>199</b>

## **List of Figures**

- 1.1 Main sources of educational values
- 3.1 Merging the elements of my inquiry into play with thick descriptions
- 3.2 Model for inquiry into teacher thinking and classroom practices
- 3.3 Framework for my inquiry into play
- 3.4 Cycle of self-discovery
- 4.1 Bridging my philosophical and theoretical frameworks
- 4.2 Cycle of self-discovery aligned with my research questions
- 5.1 The preschool classrooms
- 5.2 Nayana's organisation of her classroom
- 6.1 The relationship between various factors influencing play in practice
- 7.1 Continuum of play
- 7.2 Tounnalina's reflection about the research process
- 7.3 Another reflection about the research process from Tounnalina
- 8.1 Constructing the complexity of play
- 8.2 Summarising my personal learnings

## **List of Tables**

- 2.1 Support structures advocating for play by region
- 4.1 Connections between an autoethnographic technique with my interpretive inquiry
- 4.2 The characteristics of an inquiry approach and play
- 4.3 Commonalities and differences between the teacher participants
- 4.4 Applying the hermeneutic spirals to my interpretive inquiry into play
- 4.5 Predetermined interview questions
- 4.6 Presenting the cyclical nature of my data analysis
- 4.7 Alignment between my inquiry into play and the principles of interpretive inquiry
- 4.8 Criteria for trustworthiness and authenticity in data
- 7.1 Distinction between play views and practices
- 8.1 Major themes from literature review on play

## CHAPTER 1 THE BEGINNINGS OF AN INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY INTO PLAY

### 1.1 An Introduction

My inquiry into play began when my first child was born in 2010. As a new mother I endlessly read books about how to be a good parent. I found myself searching for hours online about raising a healthy child. Through my exploration, it became apparent to me: not only does play connect a parent to her child, but through play children develop into physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively healthy beings.

Being an early childhood teacher of over 10 years, the benefits of play to the well-being of young children seemed almost obvious. As Vygotsky (1966) emphasised, play is the leading activity in the learning and development of young children. However, as my professional perspective on play as an early childhood educator merged with my personal position as a new mother, I began to ask questions about the whys and hows. Why do I value play as the leading activity in both my classroom and now as a mother of two young children? How is it that I came to my view on play? These questions marked the beginning of my research journey into play. The aim of my research was to uncover past experiences that influence the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers. I use the term *uncover* to represent the process of inquiry into teacher thinking that enabled teachers to rediscover their early childhood experiences perceived to impact who they are as teachers.

The purpose of this first chapter is to introduce myself as a researcher and the context for my study. This chapter establishes who I am as a mother, an early childhood teacher and now as a researcher. Also included is an outline of the chapters.

### 1.2 My Story

*Squeals of laughter erupted as splashes of water flooded my bathroom floor. No different from any other bathing time, my bathroom was filled with overexcited bouts of joy as the children bobbed around in the bathtub full of bubbly water. As I turned around to reach for the towels, the sounds of excitement turned to dead silence. The splashing ceased. The laughter stopped. The only noise I could hear was the dripping of water off my wet*

*clothes. The energy that once filled my bathroom rapidly turned to a feeling of dread. Why did I turn my back for that split second? I frantically turned around, relieved to find the children fully engaged with their toys. I watched my son trying to float his metal car onto the surface of the water and my daughter staring wide-eyed at the rubber ducky floating in front of her. Mesmerised and engaged, my children sat immersed in their investigation into the concepts of sinking and floating.*

As a mother, the above anecdote enables me to understand the role of play in the process of children's making sense of their worlds (Ackermann, Gauntlett, Whitebread, Wolbers & Weckstrom, 2013). Children learn about the world around them through play. Simultaneously, as a new mother searching for strategies on how to raise a healthy child, I was challenged by articles that discussed the decrease in time and opportunities for play at home and the consequences of the decline (Ginsburg, 2007; Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Miller & Almon, 2009). The articles made me more conscious about the time for play at home being reduced by factors including a busy family schedule, participation in a plethora of enrichment programs and an increased exposure to media. Consequently, more time of the day is structured around activities that place limitations on children's capabilities to create their own boundaries and direct their own play. Knowing the potential repercussions of a decline in play time, I promised myself that I will do my best so that my children would not experience this decrease in play at home.

Becoming more aware about the decrease in play time and opportunities also has implications for my professional life as an early childhood teacher. I have worked in international schools in Asia and Europe that embrace the constructivist approach to learning and development (International Baccalaureate Organization [IBO], 2009a). The philosophy of the international schools which I have worked in acknowledges that children have constructs about how the world works grounded on their experiences and prior learning. The constructs are revisited and revised based on new experiences and further learning which are achieved through inquiry. Inquiry requires sustained time and open-ended opportunities for children to ask questions, explore and investigate curiosities as children confirm, revise and adapt their knowledge about their worlds.

However, my experiences as an early childhood teacher in various international schools have resonated what I read as a new mother, exemplifying the gap between play in theory and the actual occurrence of time and opportunities for play in early childhood classrooms. While play is viewed as the way children learn best, there are increasingly high expectations being placed on the students including the expectation that they will learn to read and write as well as count, add and subtract beginning at a very young age. The high expectations are perceived by early childhood teachers to introduce the letters of the alphabet through formal lessons that focus on writing skills in addition to teaching mathematics through memorisation of facts.

What further complicates the gap between play in theory and play in practice are the contexts of the schools in which I have worked, which place priority on professional development in pedagogy and curriculum that focuses on the necessity for play-based learning in early childhood education. However, in practice learning opportunities in the classrooms are less flexible, less free and less spontaneous. Learning becomes less student-driven because of the perceived pressures of meeting the increasing expectations of the curriculum.

Despite what we know about how young children learn through play, in an era of rising expectations, play is placed in a position that is perceived as more of a complementary rather than a valuable activity in the learning and development of young children (Ackermann et al., 2013). In addition to my interest in finding out about the whys and hows about my approaches to play, the gap between play in theory and play in practice further motivated me to investigate further into play. My curiosity on what really affects the use of play in early childhood education thus has been fueled by the tensions that I have read about the state of play as a new mother as well as observed and experienced as an early childhood teacher in multiple contexts. My experiences have provoked such questions as: why is there misalignment between play in theory and play opportunities in early classrooms? If early childhood teachers are aware of the role of play in the learning and development of young children, why are the benefits of play not readily being maximised? These inquiry questions have become poignant as my encounters in my career as an early childhood teacher reflect the discontinuity between play in theory and play as practice.

### **1.2.1 How the research journey began**

One undertakes the research process in order to engage in an intensive learning process where new knowledge about a phenomenon is gained (Krauss, 2005). An inquiry therefore begins with characteristics of openness, humility and genuine engagement (Ellis, Macris & Marynowski, 2011). As I searched for an entry question, I asked myself: what truly preoccupies me and what remains mysterious to me? In asking myself these questions, I revisited my original inquiry questions of:

- why and how do early childhood teachers come to their views and beliefs about play and
- why is play-based learning not readily implemented in early childhood classrooms in spite of the well-established benefits of play to the learning and development of young children?

My inquiry questions have been what I am sincerely passionate about.

I then broadened my search of articles beyond strategies of raising healthy children and the decline of play opportunities in early childhood classrooms. As I widened my research, I came to understand that my initial inquiry questions stem from practical concerns. The investigation then became personally and professionally relevant and meaningful on two levels. The first level involved my new role as a mother and the fear about the decline of play both at home and in schools. The second surrounded the possible implications to my own teaching practices of the rising academic expectations placed on our young learners at the expense of play time and opportunities. The inquiry therefore led me to the realisation that I have not gained the self-knowledge of myself as an early childhood teacher. I have not truly engaged in reflections about the factors that shape my teaching practices, my beliefs on the role of play as the leading activity in my classroom and how such factors may impact the implementation of play in my own teaching practices. Thus the questions of who am I and where I come from emerged. As a teacher embarking on a research journey, I asked myself: what do I believe about play and where do these beliefs come from?

My inquiry was further heightened through professional conversations with other early childhood teachers where a common pattern developed: the teachers themselves felt that they do not engage in reflections about the factors that shape their pedagogical practices. It has been perceived by the early childhood teachers that they



are not provided with the space to engage in such reflections about their teaching practices nor do they feel they are given the time to do so. However, the most poignant point from my conversations with the early childhood teachers is that they do not have the knowledge about where to begin engaging in such a profound thinking process about their approaches to play.

I therefore responded to the needs and redirected my investigation. I then began to focus on how I could begin engaging in reflections about my own teaching practices and beliefs about play in the early years. As I began reading literature on the beliefs of early childhood teachers about the implementation of play in their classrooms, a theme began to emerge. The research on teacher beliefs and the use of play in early childhood classrooms predominantly examined how teacher belief systems informed teaching practices (Fives & Buehl, 2008; Fives & Buehl, 2012; Leaupepe, 2011; Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004; Quance, Lehrer & Stathopoulos, 2008; Sosu & Gray, 2012). Research provided the framework and opportunities for teachers to reflect on their personal and professional experiences through understanding the effects of their epistemologies on teaching practices. However, research has yet to investigate the relationship and possible affects between the previous experiences of teachers specific to play and the impact of such prior encounters on the use and implementation of play as the leading activity in early childhood classrooms (Armstrong, 2006; Five & Buehl, 2012; Leaupepe, 2011).

Our behaviours and actions are profoundly shaped by our past experiences, culture, values and beliefs (Davis & Andrzejewski, 2009). Knowing ourselves as teachers requires the self-knowledge into the various factors that influence our behaviours and actions. A deep knowing into our teaching practices unfolds from our early childhood memories to our teacher training and how such rich and diverse experiences shape who we are and what we do as teachers (Rust, 2010). As Meier and Stremmel (2010) emphasised, “perhaps there is nothing more important than keeping track of the stories of who we are and of those who have influenced us along the way” (p. 4).

However, as I think about myself as an early childhood teacher, I acknowledge that I have not engaged in reflections about the possible factors that impact my beliefs on the role of play in my classroom in addition to how I implement play into my own teaching practice. The motivation behind this study is therefore a combination of:

- my personal concern from the perspective of a mother of two young children and the decline of play time and opportunities both at home and in early childhood classrooms;
- the implication of the challenges to play on my own teaching practices, specifically with the rising academic expectations placed on our youngest learners;
- my quest for self-discovery as an early childhood teacher and the factors that influence my beliefs on play and my play practices;
- the pattern that emerged from my professional conversations with colleagues including the lack in space, time and a framework to engage in reflections about the influences on their views about play and the realisation of play in their own classrooms; and
- my findings from play literature and the theme that emerged, emphasising the effects of teacher beliefs on play in practice and the need for research to further investigate the previous play experiences of teachers and how such encounters might affect teaching practices.

Here I return to the purpose of doing research: that it is a process of gaining new knowledge into a phenomenon (Krauss, 2005). The research process of this study was intended to provide other researchers and other early childhood teachers with a possible framework on how to engage in reflections, inquiring into the past experiences grounded in multiple contexts including historical and cultural influences that shape teacher beliefs and play practices in early childhood classrooms. I hope that the understandings gained from my inquiry into play will better inform my position as a mother and my professional practice as an early childhood teacher as I seek to discover the various factors that impact the approaches to play. The aims of my study are:

1. offer a possible framework where early childhood teachers can engage in reflection about play in practice grounded in experiences that are rich and diverse in context;
2. provide insights into the previous experiences with play that are perceived to impact the current orientations and developed theories on play and the use of play in early childhood classrooms; and

3. reposition the context of play from a universal phenomenon to a concept that is culturally embedded as play situated in historical and cultural significance.

### **1.2.2 Reframing my role as an early childhood teacher**

Five years ago when I began my research journey, I was determined to respond to a genuine interest in understanding the factors grounded in historical and cultural complexities that influence my beliefs about play and my own teaching practices specific to the implementation of play as the leading activity in my classroom. As Kelchtermans (2009) suggested, teachers engage in an ongoing process of making sense of their experiences and the impact of these experiences on self. My interest began from a personal connection in finding out about myself as a mother and early childhood teacher which then extended to an interest in understanding a phenomenon from the perspectives of different individuals. What specifically preoccupies me are the previous lived experiences of early childhood teachers that are rich and diverse in contexts which impact teaching practices in later life.

As Henderson, Meier, Perry and Stremmel (2012) emphasised, research done by teachers stem from a teacher's own questions about and reflections on their teaching practices. Though teacher research takes on many forms and for different intentions, the fundamental purpose is to understand teaching and learning from the perspectives of those who live and interact daily in the classroom context.

The goal of teacher research is to gain insights into teaching and learning so as teachers can become more reflective practitioners and make effecting changes in the field of education. Teacher research is therefore about reshaping and reframing the role of the teacher. The research process is "not the simple accumulation of new objective information. It is, rather, the transformation of self-understanding" (Jardine, Friesen & Clifford, 2006, p. 166).

As I begin my investigation into the past experiences that shape teacher views about play and the teaching practices of early childhood teachers, I continue to remind myself of the motivations behind why I started the research journey in the first place. My inquiry into play is about gaining self-understanding into who I am as an early childhood teacher. It is my hope to become a more reflective practitioner so as I can move towards more informed approaches to teaching.

### 1.3 The Research Questions

Although the benefits of play are well-established (Ackermann et al., 2013; Armstrong, 2006; Bruce, 2011; Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Elkind, 2007; Emslie & Mesle, 2009; Mistrett & Bickart, 2009; Targowska, 2008), further research could investigate why play-based learning is theoretically accepted but not readily implemented in early childhood classrooms (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Rogers, 2011). Gaining insights into this misalignment requires a holistic examination into the factors that shape the developed theories about the role of play in early childhood education and current teaching practices (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

Fives and Buehl (2008) explored teacher beliefs through an examination into the personal epistemologies and implicit theories of teachers as well as teachers' knowledge about teaching and learning. According to the researchers, perspectives are a complex connection between different contexts including cognitive, emotional, behavioural, cultural and motivational factors. In highlighting the belief systems of teachers, an understanding into the research participants' pedagogical practices was gained. Specifically, the study of Fives and Buehl focused on how teacher beliefs may hinder the development and implementation of effective teaching practices.

Similarly in their research into the impact of implicit knowledge of kindergarten teachers on the use of play in their early childhood classrooms, Pui-Wah and Stimpson (2004) concluded that few teachers understood that there is a gap between their espoused theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974) on play and their actual classroom practices integrating play. The researchers reported a conflict between rhetoric and the practice of play as well as the presence of a play-work dichotomy. Providing insights into the thinking processes of teachers is invaluable in gaining the understanding about the inconsistencies between play in theory and as practice.

Lillemyr (2009) further contended that an understanding into teachers' view on play requires a focus into the underlying factors that shape the educational values of teachers. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the underlying values are closely connected to the philosophical, sociological as well as psychological attitudes of teachers. The underlying values illuminate how teachers understand play, the role of play in the learning and the development of children and whether play as an educational tool is meaningful to the teachers. The underlying values therefore explain where teachers' views about play come from based on their philosophical, sociological and psychological values and the use of play in early childhood classrooms.

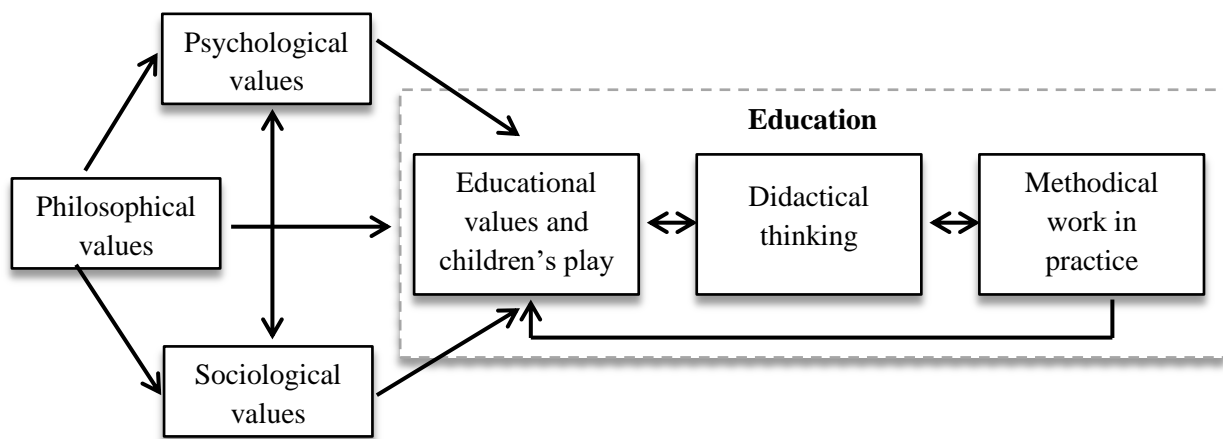


Figure 1.1 Main sources of education values (Lillemyr, 2009)

Though research focuses on the influence of teacher beliefs on teaching practices, empirical, peer-reviewed writing does not indicate how early childhood teachers come to develop their belief systems, educational values and espoused theories on teaching and learning grounded in the richness and diversity of their life histories (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014). While research provides opportunities for teachers to tell and relive their personal and professional experiences through understanding the effects of their epistemologies (Meier & Stremmel, 2010), little is known about the relationship and the possible affects between teachers' previous encounters with play and how such earlier experiences impact the commitment of early childhood teachers to the use of play in their classrooms (Armstrong, 2006; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Leaupepe, 2011).

As Woodside (2010) asserted, achieving high accuracy in understanding the thinking and behaviours of people results only from reflecting and collecting data about one's thoughts and feelings. The process of engaging in such an inquiry requires more than personal introspection. Insights into the effects on espoused theories and teaching practices need to originate from previous life experiences and how such histories affect current behaviours and actions (Leaupepe, 2011). As Said (2013) emphasised, "stories and narratives are a window into teachers' lives" (p. 2) that help us understand current situations (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014). Knowledge into "the front stage behaviors of teaching" (Rust, 2010, p. 2) therefore involve a focus beyond teacher education and the field experiences of teachers.

Further research therefore needs to examine the development of espoused theories grounded in a continuum encompassing a teacher's first experiences with play and continuing throughout life (Meier & Stremmel, 2010). Research needs to approach the factors that inform teaching practices from a holistic view as it acknowledges how complex, multi-dimensional and interrelated influences are on teaching practices (Brock, 2010). Reflections of early childhood teachers surrounding play therefore require analysis into the life histories, professional experiences and the thinking of teachers. However, as we begin to inquire into the rich and diverse experiences of teachers,

the question we're left with is, as we listen attentively to teacher's stories, and we make the teacher's voice the center of the operation, how can we broaden that understanding so that in the process of telling the story the teacher also comes to understand all of the political and social and ideological pressures that exist on their work. (Goodson, 2011, p. 120)

It is therefore through careful examination into the histories of teachers that tacit understandings and theories that teachers develop which inform teaching practices in later life are gained (Rust, 2010). Without knowledge into the earlier experiences with play, teachers may experience barriers in implementing play as a pedagogical approach (Leauepe, 2011). It is thus the intention of this study to gain deeper understandings into the impact of constructed theories and teaching practices that are grounded in the childhood play experiences of teachers beginning with myself in my journey for self-discovery. Furthermore, my study will inquire into the previous experiences with play that are rich in historical and cultural contexts from the lives of early childhood teachers that later impact teaching practices, specifically the implementation of play as the leading activity in early childhood classrooms.

The research questions which will guide the direction of my study are:

1. *What memories and personal experiences of teachers with play shape the implementation of play in their early childhood classrooms?*
2. *How do previous play experiences of early childhood teachers affect their current orientations and developed theories on play as an effective teaching practice?*

3. *What are the implications of culture and context on play as the leading activity to the learning and development of young children?*

### **1.3.1 Placing the research into context**

It is important to consider the terminology we use as “a lack of shared language and understanding currently inhibits communication between those working to provide children with the best opportunities for play” (Santer & Griffiths, 2007, p. xviii). Attention therefore needs to be given towards how the term *early childhood* is defined within the context of my inquiry into play.

According to the Australian Education Union (AEU, 2007) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009), the internationally accepted definition of *early childhood* entails children from birth through eight years of age. The above definition will be used within my study however with a narrowed age range. My study will include teachers of three, four and five year old children. The age range has been chosen as the focus for my study since it is a distinct stage of development where children experience more refined skills and greater challenges (Rogers, 2011). Children in this period are developing their competencies where exploration and social relationships are foundational. They are gaining greater understandings of their world as they further construct deeper and more complex meanings (Fahey, 2012). It is during these significant years that play behaviours form the foundation for learning throughout life (Jackman, 2005). The narrowed age group therefore appropriately lends itself to my study on the focus of play as the leading activity in early childhood education (Garner & Bergen, 2006).

The context of my study will also acknowledge the significance of the three to five years age range since it will be grounded in an international school that embraces a programme which maintains the early years as foundational to future learning (International Baccalaureate Organization [IBO], 2009b). The curriculum framework which the school has adopted acknowledges the rapid rate of development in three, four and five year old children. As one administrator at the school endorsed, the children at this stage are developing “all aspects of a well-rounded child through exploration” (J. Grandbois, personal communication, April 28, 2015). Pertaining to the school’s context, the concept of exploration is the core philosophy of the early childhood programme. Exploration is the way children learn as the classroom

environment is carefully designed to facilitate play. Through play, children begin to make connections and construct meaning about the world around them.

In short, the focus on teachers of three to five year old children supports the elements of my inquiry into play. The age range acknowledges:

1. the way children in this age range develop, learn and make sense of their world;
2. the role of play in teaching and learning in the early years; and
3. the context of the school including a pedagogical approach that reflects the characteristics of play.

#### **1.4 An Overview of the Chapters**

This section provides an overview of the structure of the chapters to follow.

**Chapter 1** is an introduction to my inquiry into play. It details why and how the research journey began and who I am as a researcher. The chapter explores the inquiry questions which I am passionate about. This chapter also introduces the research. An overview of the thesis chapters concludes Chapter 1.

**Chapter 2** is a review of literature on play. The chapter presents three major themes which focus on why play in early childhood education remains a topic of interest (Wood, 2011). The themes are as follows:

1. There is a decrease in play due to the rising academic expectations placed on young children in spite of the well-established benefits of play.
2. A decline in play time and opportunities in early childhood education highlights the misalignment between play in theory and play in practice.
3. There are many studies on children's play and researchers continue to survey play literature. However, literature on play is mainly dominated by North American and European perspectives and thus informs Western contexts.

**Chapter 3** discusses my ontological and epistemological perspectives.

Grounded in a constructivist standpoint, the methodology of interpretive inquiry and interpretive methods are favoured in my investigation into children's play. The chapter also details the framework for my interpretive inquiry into play, discussing the characteristics of filters, frames and guides impacting the function of teacher beliefs. Through interpretive inquiry and using interpretive methods, I emphasise the meanings which individuals socially construct as well as how people make sense of



their world based on their perceptions and interpretations of their situations and lived experiences. Given the level of teacher involvement, communication and negotiation in the construction of the lived experiences of the teacher participants, the chapter concludes with a discussion on my role as a researcher from an insider's position.

**Chapter 4** establishes the contexts for my research into play. The data collection methods including a focus group discussion, individual teacher interviews, observations into the early childhood classrooms of the participants, stimulated recall sessions and a final focus group discussion are detailed. The chapter also provides an analytical frame of making descriptions, comparisons, categorisations, contextualisation and explanations. The principles for gaining trustworthiness and guiding questions for evaluating the credibility and authenticity of data are then examined. Concluding the chapter is a discussion on the ethical considerations as well as the possible limitations to my study into play.

**Chapters 5, 6 and 7** combine the collection and interpretation of data. Each chapter is organised around an individual research question and intention and incorporates the filters-frames-guides framework. **Chapter 5** is dedicated to the descriptions of personal experiences and earlier memories with play that serve as filters to how the early childhood teachers perceive play occurring in their classrooms. Emerging from the descriptions are the comparisons and categorisations of the lived experiences of the teacher participants. **Chapter 6** uses the process of contextualisation to emphasise how the previous play experiences in the early childhood education of the participants are perceived to affect the teachers' current orientations and developed theories on play and how the participants believe the views to impact play in their classrooms. Placing the play memories and experiences of the early childhood teachers into wider contexts further elaborates and enriches the descriptions found in the previous chapter. **Chapter 7** discusses the implications of culture and context on play as the leading activity to the learning and development of young children. New explanations are presented as the early childhood teachers revealed a misalignment between their views on play and how they actually realise play in their classrooms. Uncovering new questions enabled the teacher participants an opportunity to re-prioritise their play practices. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 detail the previous experiences and factors which my teacher participants perceive to be factors impacting their play practices.

**Chapter 8**, the concluding chapter, recaptures my study as it revisits each of the chapters and what they achieved. It provides a discussion of the overall findings, what I have learnt from my inquiry into play and how and the findings contribute to and make impact on current literature on play. Considerations for further research are also addressed.

### **1.5 Summary**

Chapter 1 has provided an introduction to my study: *Uncovering past experiences that influence the pedagogical practices of early childhood teachers: An interpretive inquiry into play*. The chapter has discussed why and how the research journey began and who I am as a researcher. The structure for each of the chapters was also included.

The next chapter is a review of empirical, peer-reviewed literature on play. Three themes which have emerged from the review will be discussed. The themes informed the foundation for my investigation into the past experiences of early childhood teachers with play grounded in rich and diverse contexts.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **CURRENT FOCI OF PLAY LITERATURE**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter provided an introduction to my inquiry into children's play. It began by detailing why and how the research journey started as well as who I am as a mother of two young children, an early childhood teacher working in various international schools and as a researcher. The research questions were outlined. Chapter 1 concluded with a snapshot of the chapters for this thesis.

Chapter 2 will explore empirical, peer-reviewed literature on play. This chapter will begin with a discussion about play and the learning and development of young children. The major sections of this chapter are then structured around the three major themes emerging from the literature review including:

1. the decrease in time and opportunities for play with rising academic expectations at an increasingly younger age;
2. with a decline in play, a misalignment between play in theory and play in practice is emphasised; and
3. current literature on play is predominantly grounded in Western settings and dominated by Western perspectives.

This chapter will conclude with a discussion about the themes and the implications to my research inquiry.

#### **2.2 Exploring the World: Play and the Construction of Knowledge**

Learning takes place when children are able to make connections between their previous and current perceptions, test their points of view as well as confirm and revise their thinking (IBO, 2009a). Children make sense of their environment through observation, exploration, investigation and inquiry (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008). As children actively seek to understand their world by systemically engaging and interacting with their environment, meaning about the world is constructed and new competencies are developed.

The knowledge built by the learner is further shaped and sharpened when it is expressed or shared (Flick, 2009). Grounded in the social constructivist approach to learning, "the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development,

which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 24). The construction of knowledge therefore resides in the tenet that learning does not remain at an individual, static level (Fahey, 2012). Rather, learning is about collaborating, cooperating and negotiating (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008). Knowledge is therefore constructed as children actively seek to make sense of the world within a learning society or culture.

Children’s play becomes a pillar to the construction of knowledge because play reflects the principles of how children learn (Short, 2009). Through play children construct meaning from their experiences through engagement and interaction with the world around them (Ackermann et al., 2013, p. 13). Furthermore, children develop verbal tools as well as learn about social behaviours and ways of communicating with other as they play (Axelrod, 2015; Whitebread, 2012). As Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2015) summarised, “children learn best when they are active (rather than passive), are engaged (not distracted), and find an activity meaningful, and when an activity is socially interactive...play embodies each of these characteristics” (p. 1). It is through play that children interact with their environment and the people around them as they search for meaning and understanding about their world.

Inherent in the characteristics of play are the tenets of the social constructivist approach to learning. Children

engage with life, immersed in what is occurring around them until something catches their attention and raises curiosity or doubt. This curiosity creates a need to know that they explore through play...They move from curiosity to knowledge that leads to more in-depth investigations...These explorations and investigations, in turn, support them in constructing their understandings of the world. (Short, 2009, p. 13)

Following the Vygotskian idea, play is regarded as the leading activity to the learning and development of children as children move forward into higher levels of development through experiences with play (Elkonin, 2005; Leontiev, 2009; Vygotsky, 1966). As Bodrova and Leong (2006) further supported, children do not achieve developmental accomplishments as a result of maturation, but through

participation in the leading activity. Therefore the implication to early childhood education is that learning involves “intentional instruction...[that] foster the prerequisites for the academic skills but it should do it by promoting foundational competencies that are ‘uniquely preschool’ and promoting them through play” (Bodrova, 2008, p. 358). Play is thus essential to early childhood education as it ensures the healthy development and successful learning of young children (Ginsburg, 2007).

Not only is play deemed the leading activity, in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959) it is stated that children should have the full opportunity for play as it is the right of children to explore, learn and develop (Whitebread, 2012). Play-based learning is therefore a way in which educational outcomes are achieved (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Research, as Bodrova and Leong (2003) concluded, indicates that “an emphasis on play does not detract from academic learning but actually enables children to learn” (p. 7).

Here I remind myself about the origin of my initial inquiry as a new mother searching for strategies and tools on raising healthy children. As I set out to find effective parenting practices, my personal goal began to merge with my position as an early childhood teacher. I came across a body of peer-reviewed research literature about increasing academically structured teaching due to the pressures of meeting progressive expectations placed on our youngest learners in spite of what is known about the learning and development of young children through play (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Lynch, 2015; Opeyemi, 2015; Whitebread, 2012). This reveals the first major theme found throughout my review of play literature: *Learning Expectations in Multiple Contexts*.

### **2.3 Theme One – Learning Expectations in Multiple Contexts**

While the benefits of play are well-documented and supported by educators, developmental psychologists, pediatricians and researchers (Ackermann et al., 2013; Armstrong, 2006; Bruce, 2011; Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Elkind, 2007; Emslie & Mesle, 2009; Mistrett & Bickart, 2009; Targowska, 2008), “‘play’ is sometimes contrasted with ‘work’ and characterized as a type of activity which is essentially unimportant, trivial and lacking in any serious purpose” (Whitebread, 2012, p. 3). A clinical report dedicated to the health of children emphasised that time for play in schools is on the decline (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012). The report indicated that

opportunities for play have been reduced as early childhood environments are shifting more towards traditionally-oriented approaches to instruction due to increasing academic pressures.

The clinical report is supported by an ethnographic, internet-based study of teacher discussions on play in combination with reviews of literature and theory about play (Lynch, 2015). Play research in the past decade

has witnessed a rise in two seemingly contradictory trends. First, the research increasingly show that play expedites a variety of social, cognitive, motor, and linguistic improvements...Second, and paradoxically, in spite of the many benefits of play recognized by academics, recent years have seen a steady decrease in the amount of time kindergarten classes devoted to play. (p. 347)

As the reduction in play opportunities at school impacts me as an early childhood teacher, I was motivated to find out more. My interest led me to first inquire into reasons why certain contexts may value traditional teaching in the first place. My investigation opened up further questions which led me to explore literature about the rising academic expectations placed on our youngest learners. My review illuminated the United States of America as an example of pressures felt by early childhood teachers from increasing expectations in the early years at the expense of time and opportunities for play.

### **2.3.1 Traditional values on teaching practices**

In socially and morally conservative communities with more traditional backgrounds, pedagogy and curriculum reflect the notion that knowledge is transmitted from adult to child (Tobin & Kurban, 2010). In such contexts, children are viewed as “dependent-learners rather than able-learners” (Vong, 2012, p. 38). A more authoritarian and less constructivist approach to learning is therefore endorsed (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Manning (2006) and Pui-Wah (2011) illuminated this context to countries upholding Confucian ideals. They asserted that play is problematised and challenged as more formal and academic structures have prevailed in such countries. In Confucian culture, a hierarchy between teachers and students has been established (Lin, 2012). Teachers are respected and are viewed as the source

to knowledge and wisdom. As Vong (2012) suggested, the responsibility placed on teachers to transmit knowledge may have resulted in more teacher-directed pedagogy.

In a study comparing preschool education in the United States and in China, Pang and Richey (2007) contended that the influences of Confucianism have maintained a more traditional pedagogical approach in the Chinese education system. Children are taught to obey their teachers with the expectation that they follow teacher instruction with little free choice. The authors suggested that it is a trend in Chinese early childhood classrooms to focus on teacher-driven lessons that may put the emotional and social development in addition to the creativity, individuality and independent thought second. Teaching and learning has therefore followed a teacher-directed, whole group ideal where all children are engaged with the same learning engagements.

The example of Confucian culture as one possible explanation to more traditional teaching may be expanded to other contexts. In Gupta's (2014) review of national policies and practices from Asian countries including Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, Singapore and India, she revealed that the gatekeeper to higher education rests on national entrance examinations. The competition and academic pressures from national systems that have traditionally been reserved for primary schools are now being filtered down to early childhood education. This has led to more textbook oriented, exam-driven and teacher-directed teaching in the early years.

The pressures placed on putting children in academically competitive schools at a young age in combination with high stakes examinations raised a new question for me. I began to wonder what the possible effects of such expectations would be on teaching and learning in the early years. I wondered how raising academic expectations at a progressively young age might influence the use of play to the learning and development of young children in early childhood classrooms. As I continued my review of literature on the teaching practices in the early years, the pattern which emerged became apparent. The amount of time and opportunities for play in early childhood environments is decreasing due to the rising academic expectations being placed on our youngest learners (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009).

### 2.3.2 More is better: Rising academic expectations in early childhood education

In their focus on learning through play, the LEGO Foundation claimed that there has been a decline in how much children play (Ackermann et al., 2013). Similarly, in promoting practices and policies related to the well-being of children, the Alliance for Childhood (Miller & Almon, 2009) identified the disappearance of time and opportunities for play as a critical issue affecting early childhood.

As Lester and Russell (2010) maintained in their examination into children's right to play, "the globalisation of markets has increased industrialisation, leading to larger specialist and mechanised units for production; this removes child workers from their immediate neighbourhoods and reduces the opportunity for interweaving play and work" (p. ix). An outcome from what Ackermann et al. (2013) termed as the 'emerging market' trend, has been a growing tendency to reduce the amount of play time for children both at home and in schools (Ginsburg, 2007; Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012).

The decrease in play time at home is a poignant point for me as a mother of two young children. Simultaneously, the decline in time and opportunities for play in schools impacts my teaching practices as an early childhood teacher. According to Opeyemi (2015), research into the benefits of play on the cognitive and developmental gains of children suggested that "play has been reduced and even in some cases, completely wiped out from some early childhood classrooms" (p. 186). In some contexts, the position of play in early childhood education has become so eroded that the use of the word *play* may even be avoided (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Trawick-Smith, Wolff, Koschel & Vallarelli, 2015). As Whitebread (2012) maintained,

increasingly in many countries within Europe and across the world, an 'earlier is better' approach has been adopted, with an emphasis upon introducing young children at the earliest possible stage to the formal skills of literacy and numeracy. This is inimical to the provision and support for rich play opportunities. (p. 3)

Using Hong Kong as an example, in their qualitative study on children's play, Wong, Wang and Cheng (2011) argued that the primary curriculum in Hong Kong is designed on high expectations placed on academic knowledge. The researchers



highlighted that primary age children are expected to complete written assignments daily and are tested regularly. Furthermore, transition from preschool into primary school in Hong Kong relies on demonstrating academic excellence in performance scores based on written examinations (Wong, 2008). The pressures felt by early childhood teachers consequently resulted in more teacher-directed pedagogy beginning at an earlier age with increasing focus on academic achievement.

The 'Too Much, Too Soon Campaign' launched in 2013 by members and supporters of the Save Childhood Movement Early Years Education Group highlighted the decline in play time and opportunities in schools in England. Evidence that supports the movement indicated an increasing use of 'teacher-led is best' statements in developing quality early childhood education for future academic achievement. The campaign further emphasised that there is a growing trend in England where children are amongst the most pressurised and tested in the world. Academic pressures and high stakes examinations are further being imposed on young children. The benefits of play have therefore been undermined by the promotion of more teacher-driven education and developmentally inappropriate pressures of high expectations being placed on our young learners.

In a paper presented by the Alliance for High Quality Education in the Early Years of Schooling (2014), the concern about the increasing formalisation of early childhood education in Western Australia is discussed. The paper examined the pressures placed on schools to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes, resulting in extended blocks of teacher-directed learning. However, emphasis on improving learning outcomes through more structured teaching practices comes at the expense of play-based learning. The pressure towards higher academic achievement therefore acutely affects education in the early years. Children at a young age are being tested on words learnt through rote memorisation, reading as well as knowledge of sound patterns and written symbols. While the results were designed to inform teaching and learning so that programs are developed to meet the needs of the children, the reality was that results were used to measure capability and progress towards achieving literacy and numeracy outcomes.

In his article titled *The Play Deficit*, Gray (2013) suggested that in the past 50 years, the United States has experienced a gradual decline in the opportunities for children to play. Though multiple reasons may account for the decrease in play, what remains unabated are the effects of rising academic expectations on the use of play in

early childhood teaching practices (Almon & Miller, 2011). While the benefits of play are well-established, teachers felt reluctant to question longstanding teaching practices that are grounded in tradition with particular emphasis on moving children to the next learning outcome in the curriculum (Adams, Alexander, Drummond & Moyles, 2004; Leaupepe, 2011). Teachers felt compelled to initiate, structure and direct activities.

Furthermore, as Hyvonen (2011) and Santer and Griffiths (2007) suggested, adult-driven activities are perceived to be more educationally productive as the learning engagements are structured around meeting the expectations of the curriculum. My review of play literature led to numerous studies on the United States and the increasing pressures to begin teaching academic skills at a progressively younger age at the expense of time and opportunities for play.

### **2.3.3 The effects of rising academic expectations: A focus on the United States of America**

In the national report *A Nation at Risk* (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), a decline in education performance was described in the United States based on lowered academic achievement on standardised assessments when compared to previous results; illiteracy rates amongst adults; and the rising need for remedial programs in reading, writing, spelling and computation. Education reform therefore took place where more rigorous and competitive expectations were developed. Naming it the *Crisis in the Kindergarten*, Miller and Almon (2009) asserted that the education of young children has changed dramatically in the United States since the national report.

States began to formally implement academic standards beginning with children as early as the pre-kindergarten age in attempt to increase academic achievements for future learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). For instance, there is the widespread belief that early reading in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten age will develop better readers in the long-run (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin & Almon, 2015). However, inherent in the standards is the demise of a child-centered approach to learning and development as the focus on building literacy and numeracy skills is at the forefront (Scott-Little, Lesko, Martella & Millburn, 2007). Rather, “more didactic, academic, and content-based approaches to preschool

education comes at the expense of more child-centered, play-oriented, and constructivist approaches” (Nicolopoulou, 2010, p. 1).

The current trend in U.S. early childhood education shifting towards more academic approaches of teacher-led instruction has mobilised a ‘Defending the Early Years’ (DEY) community. Through the collection of stories from early childhood teachers, their experiences illustrated the impact of the rising academic standards on their classroom practices. The following story captures the decline of play in the United States as one teacher emphasises,

we have gone from a curriculum where kids play to learn to a more rigorous curriculum where kids are expected to do things that 1st graders used to be expected to do. The expectations have gone from knowing some letters and sounds to having to read at a certain level. (Defending the Early Years, 2013, para. 31)

Furthermore, in their review of nine studies on the role of play, child-initiated learning, structured early childhood programs and standardised testing, Miller and Almon (2009) concluded that kindergarten children are experiencing greater pressures to meet inappropriate academic expectations that were standards previously reserved for older children. The pressures have come at the expense of child-centered and play-oriented environments as time and opportunities for play has been drastically reduced.

The conflict between the benefits of play and the effects of putting high academic expectations in early childhood education in the United States is additionally reflected in an open letter written by a father to his son’s future kindergarten teacher (Kovacs, 2014). The sequence of vignettes from his letter illustrates the effects of rising academic standards.

- If you don't have learning centers, I can muster up some resources to have them built for you. If you need bricks for counting, glitter for painting, or boxes for building, please don't hesitate to ask. I am in a position to be able to gather such things, and it is just as important that his classmates have the same opportunities as him, that they leave wanting to learn more and then some. Because if they don't, we risk a world full of people who aren't that imaginative or creative. (para. 24)

- It turns out there is research arguing we are already there, and the finger points at our educational policy. (para 25)
- If I am around too much, am too eager to help, know that I am just making sure that my boy, and the boys and girls around him, are getting the best education they can...where education means love of learning, not memorizing disassociated facts. (para. 26)

*The Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Education Professionals on the Common Core Standards Initiative* (Alliance for Childhood, 2010) is another example that further highlighted the concerns of rising academic standards at the expense of play in U.S. early childhood education. A recently adopted set of standards called the Common Core State Standards was adopted by 45 States (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2012). The statement which critically opposes the standards was signed by prominent members with early childhood interests including educators, pediatricians, developmental psychologists and researchers. One concern on the statement claimed:

such standards will lead to long hours of instruction in literacy and math. Young children learn best in active, hands-on ways and in the context of meaningful real-life experiences. New research shows that didactic instruction of discrete reading and math skills has already pushed play-based learning out of many kindergartens. (p. 1)

Taking the context of the United States, it provides one example as to why time and opportunities for play is declining. The impetus for increasing academic expectations in the early years in attempt to improve future learning is at the expense of play-oriented early learning environments. The dichotomy between academic achievement and play highlights the second major theme which was illuminated through my review of play literature: *A Misalignment: Play in Theory and Play in Practice*.

## **2.4 Theme Two – A Misalignment: Play in Theory and Play in Practice**

Evidence from play literature and early childhood education programs supports the significance of play in the healthy development of young children (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Mistrett & Bickart, 2009; Opeyemi, 2015; Santer & Griffiths, 2007). However, play as the way children learn or play-based learning as an effective educational tool often stays at the rhetoric level (Adams et al., 2004). As Vong (2012) stated, “the paradox remains that, while teachers may have a theoretical understanding of the benefits of play for learning due to their training, these ideas may not be reflected in actual practice” (p. 36). My review of relevant literature on play highlights the discontinuity between rhetoric and play in reality.

Though play is well-researched and well-documented as the leading activity to the learning and development of young children, the reality of research into classrooms including observations made in early childhood classrooms in India, Hong Kong, the United States, England and Sweden for instance, revealed that children from an early age are increasingly experiencing direct instruction into academic skills that are teacher-directed (Gupta, 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Pui-Wah, 2011; Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2006; Santer & Griffiths, 2007). While the benefits of play are realised, in actual practice learning through play has been minimised by teacher-driven activities.

Focusing on Hong Kong as an example, Fung and Cheng (2012) illuminated the misalignment between play in theory and play in practice from their interviews and classroom observations based in 20 early childhood education institutions. Their research focused on the attitudes and perceptions of their participants towards learning through play as well as the feasibility and the obstacles in implementing play-based learning. Though the benefits of play were acknowledged by the teachers, principals and parents interviewed, the implementation of play was not at the forefront of practice. The study revealed the concerns about parental doubts regarding the quality of academic learning achieved through play as well as the barriers in implementing play including rigid schedules where completion of assigned tasks were prioritised over playful learning. The conclusion was that the teachers had a tendency to place less emphasis on play-based learning experiences, resorting to rote learning and drills in order to meet the demands of parents and the expectations from their timetables.

A study commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) and conducted by Adams et al. (2004) provides further insights into the pressures placed on teachers for academic excellence where the role of play in early childhood classrooms has been reduced. The study reviewed the teaching practices of early childhood practitioners two years after the implementation of the Foundation Stage in England, a framework that establishes a play-based curriculum. Corresponding to the curriculum, interviews with teachers emphasised the expressed need and value for children to have play time and opportunities in order to explore their potential. However, the reality into classrooms based on observations revealed that little opportunity for sustained play was provided. Teachers felt the pressure from the system to focus on academic achievement where play was distinguished from teaching time.

Using a qualitative study conducted in three schools, Rogers and Evans' (2007) findings focused on the provision of role play to children ages four and five further highlight the gap between play in theory and play in practice. The teachers who were interviewed stated that they valued role play as an activity which promotes language development and social skills. However, observations into classrooms revealed that role play was interrupted when the play became too boisterous. Observations also showed that the decisions to group children for role play were based on the teacher-directed tasks that children were to undertake. Subsequently, opportunities for role play ended when children were requested to complete structured phonics and reading activities. Therefore while role play was a highly valued activity by the teachers, the study highlighted the difficulties in implementing role play in the classroom.

In her paper focusing on children's play and literacy development in six kindergarten and first grade classrooms, Wohlwend (2009) also examined the play and work dichotomy. Play, viewed by the early childhood teachers was necessary for development and the benefits of play on children's learning were unquestioned. The use of play was also viewed as a way to further the development of literacy skills. Analysis of videos taken of children's engagement in the classrooms suggested that opportunities for playful learning were provided through literacy rich activities. However, the misalignment between play in theory and play in practice began to emerge as the school year progressed. With increasing pressures to raise reading

skills, the time and opportunities for play began to decrease. By the end of the year, teachers more often resorted to direct instruction using structured activities.

Teachers are reluctant to challenge the contradiction between play in theory and play in reality (Leaupepe, 2011; Moyles, 2010; Sandberg & Samuelsson, 2006; Santer & Griffiths, 2007). Though teachers espouse to the values and benefits of play, teaching practices succumb to the pressures of rising academic expectations where rigour and time on structured tasks take over opportunities for play (Vera & Geneser, 2012). An analysis into play, policy and pedagogy in English reception classes (Rogers, 2011) suggested that teaching practices remain resistant to change and the misalignment between theory and research on play and play in practice is problematic. Play at the rhetoric level and play in reality is therefore conceptualised as a conflict of interests.

The ambiguity between play in theory and in practice is the struggle to find a balance between the pressures for quality early childhood education and a pedagogical approach to learning and development that emphasises play (Ginsburg, 2007; Santer & Griffiths, 2007). Consequently, play is increasingly perceived as a trivial and inconsequential teaching tool in early childhood education (Curtis & Carter, 2008). Tension exists “between the language of play and the extent to which adults understand its true potential and, indeed, are able to translate their understanding into an effective pedagogy” (Santer & Griffiths, 2007, p. 9).

There needs to be support structures that, not only highlight the conflict between play at the rhetoric level and play in reality, but are committed toward closing the gap between play in theory and play in practice (Wohlwend, 2009). This led me to investigate the support structures that exist to advocate for play in early childhood classrooms in spite of the rising academic expectations placed on young children.

#### **2.4.1 Realising play in early childhood classrooms: A call for advocacy and support**

As I continued my review of literature on play, my inquiry into the discontinuity between rhetoric and play in reality revealed numerous support structures advocating for play. With academic achievements progressively influencing the use of play in early childhood classrooms in multiple contexts (Adams et al., 2004; Miller & Almon, 2009; Wong et al., 2011), advocating for play is needed

in order to illuminate the conflict and provide support for increasing play time and opportunities for young children (Wohlwend, 2009).

Multiple campaigns, associations and organisations have been committed towards promoting play. Table 2.1 summaries some of the support structures which I came across in my investigation. *Play Australia* is one example of an organisation that has gathered, exchanged and circulated information about play and playful environments in hopes to improve planning, design and development of play opportunities. In the United States, as a response to the rising academic standards in early childhood education that undermines the value of play in classrooms, organisations have attempted to counteract teacher-directed learning activities and promote meeting expectations through playful learning experiences. Across Europe, support structures have worked to:

- raise awareness about children's right to play;
- promote the importance of play in childhood;
- campaign for increasing the freedom and space for children to play;
- guide decision making about children's need for play at various levels including families, communities, educators and policy makers; and
- provide guidance for play to be realised in early childhood classrooms.



<b>Support structures advocating for play by region</b>	
<b>Australia</b>	<p><i>Play Australia</i> (<a href="http://www.playaustralia.org.au/">http://www.playaustralia.org.au/</a>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotes the value of play</li> <li>• Increases play opportunities</li> <li>• Provides forums and networks of exchange in support of quality play</li> </ul>
<b>The United States of America</b>	<p><i>Empowered by Play</i> (<a href="http://www.empoweredbyplay.org/">http://www.empoweredbyplay.org/</a>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protects play amidst a hurried lifestyle, media-driven and consumer filled world</li> <li>• Offers interactive workshops and presentations to inform and energise families and teachers to promote play</li> </ul> <p><i>Defending the Early Years</i> (<a href="http://deyproject.org/">http://deyproject.org/</a>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supports children's right to play</li> <li>• Rallies educators to take action on policies affecting early childhood education</li> </ul> <p><i>Alliance for Childhood – Restoring Play</i> (<a href="http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/">http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/</a>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Campaigns to restore play and hands-on learning in early childhood education</li> </ul>
<b>Europe</b>	<p><i>Play England</i> (<a href="http://www.playengland.org.uk/">http://www.playengland.org.uk/</a>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raises awareness about the importance of play</li> <li>• Campaigns for children to have freedom and space for play</li> </ul> <p><i>Play Scotland</i> (<a href="http://www.playscotland.org/">http://www.playscotland.org/</a>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increases awareness on the importance of play</li> <li>• Ensures equal access to quality play opportunities</li> <li>• Develops strategies and resources as well as researches into the time, space and funding for play</li> </ul> <p><i>Play Wales</i> (<a href="http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/">http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/</a>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborates with organisations to influence and inform decisions about children's play</li> </ul> <p><i>Playboard Northern Ireland</i> (<a href="http://www.playboard.org/">http://www.playboard.org/</a>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Campaigns and lobbies for play as best practice</li> <li>• Researches into play to raise awareness</li> <li>• Partnerships with other organisations to put play on the agenda of policy makers</li> </ul>

Table 2.1 Support structures advocating for play by region

Given my experience as an international early childhood teacher, I am interested in contexts that account for the richness and diversity in experiences. My review of literature on the rising academic expectations at the expense of play and the gap between play in theory and in practice has mainly emphasised a Western perspective on play (Fleer, 2009). Furthermore, my investigation into the support structures that advocate for increasing play time and opportunities in early childhood education has been grounded in Western contexts including Australia, the United States and in Europe. The literature review has therefore highlighted the third major theme: *A Narrow Context: Moving Towards a Broader Focus*.

### **2.5 Theme Three – A Narrow Context: Moving Towards a Broader Focus**

Accounting for differences in understanding and human action requires attention and respect towards the rich and diverse contexts of specific cultures (Woodhead, 2006). As Gosso and Carvalho (2013) maintained, “every human activity is, thus, permeated with and affected by culture, and reciprocally affects culture’s dynamics and historical transformations. Play is no exception” (p. 1). Play is thus a complex concept. While it is a universal activity, consideration towards the cultural variability of play also needs to be of significant focus (Fleer, 2013). Play is a culturally constructed and embedded concept.

Play literature remains dominated by perspectives from the Western world (Fleer, 2009). Discourse on play, research into play as well as data derived from investigations into children’s play have been collected in Western contexts (Leauepe, 2010). Play literature that is outside Western frameworks is still very rare (Rogers, 2011). As Woodhead (2006) suggested, dominant paradigms

have been largely associated with recent history of economic, educational and social changes in a minority of economically rich, Western societies. Critique of these dominant paradigms has in itself been the stimulus for much innovative theoretical study...Ironically perhaps, these critiques have for the most part also originated amongst Western scholars. (p. 5)

Furthermore, play has been framed as a privileged practice within the Western world (Fleer, 2009). Play as a foundational feature in Western early childhood pedagogy has been a significant focus in early childhood education literature.

Dominated by literature based on Western views, there is difficulty in locating published literature on play regarding practices in East Asia for instance (Blaise, 2014). Using China as one example, play as an educational concept has been influenced by the Western ideology of play and modeled after curriculum approaches based on Western views (Li, Wang & Wong, 2011).

Discourse and pedagogy that is dominated by Western perspectives raise important considerations regarding its applicability to historically and culturally diverse classrooms (Gupta, 2011). The influence of Western literature on play does not acknowledge variability and therefore may be more remote and disconnected to non-Western views and practices. The challenge with current research dominated by Western perspectives is that it may be isolated to informing Western heritage communities. The concern is whether literature on play and practices that have been grounded in Western settings can be applied to diverse contexts in an unproblematic way (Woodhead, 2006). The focus on Western cultures therefore may misrepresent play outside the Western world.

More international perspectives are pertinent as the cultural relevance of play is currently omitted from literature (Dockett, 2011). Recognising the diversity and complexity of play requires recontextualising play, repositioning it as a cultural construction (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Much of this depends on who constructs the definition of play. Using contexts outside Western settings will better illustrate the historical and cultural variability in play literature and pedagogy.

Practitioners in the field of early childhood education therefore need to acknowledge how play is conceptualised within various societies that are built on different sets of beliefs than the dominant views found in play literature and pedagogy from Western understandings (Gupta, 2011). As Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) concluded, “when we think and talk together, we can build more rigorous and robust understandings that can accommodate the complexities in play” (p. 110). Early childhood practitioners therefore have much to learn about play from colleagues in rich and diverse contexts outside Western settings (Izumi-Taylor, Samuelsson & Rogers, 2010).

As Gupta (2011) supported “educators need to challenge the very way dominant early childhood discourses have been constructed and imposed, and rebuild them differently by understanding difference in a different way” (p. 98). However,

challenging dominant discourses requires accounts taken from multiple contexts (Gupta, 2011). As Blaise (2014) warned,

western blindness continues in the field and is evident when race and ethnicity only seems to matter when ‘others’ are present in the play research. This blindness is compounded further when we fail to question appropriateness of employing western theories in other-than western contexts.

Though increasing communication between researchers internationally is prevailing, the knowledge about play predominantly comes from and remains about the Western world (Gosso & Carvalho, 2013). As an early childhood teacher working in diverse settings internationally, it is important for me to locate literature beyond the Western points of views. This leads me to the rationale for my inquiry into play.

### **2.6 Opportunities for Further Research: Why Am I Inquiring into Play?**

In Chapter 1, I detailed how my research journey began. Beginning with my original inquiry into strategies on how to raise healthy children, the intention of my research journey started with a genuine interest in gaining new knowledge (Krauss, 2005). It soon became apparent to me that my inquiry involved first, my role as a mother and the progressive decline of play time and opportunities for children and the consequences of the decreased experiences with play on the learning and development of my children. The second purpose surrounded the possible implications of the rising academic expectations that possibly undermine the place and value of play in early childhood classrooms and the influences of a decline in play time and opportunities to my own teaching practices.

The intention of emphasising play in my study is to, not only support play as the way children learn and develop, but advocate for the role of play to the effective pedagogy in early childhood learning environments. It is almost redundant to write about play as many studies have been published in journals as well as secondary and tertiary sources (Cheng & Johnson, 2010; Smidt, 2011). As Lynch (2015) concluded, it is not enough to add to the body of literature regarding the benefits of play. Further research is needed in order to develop strategies that inform teachers on how to implement playful teaching. Further research, as emphasised by Fung and Cheng (2012), should also consider the challenges of implementing such strategies. The

researchers concluded that “without an in-depth examination of [the diversity in] views, the stakeholders seemed stuck in a cycle of blaming each other for the difficulties” (p. 29). Their research therefore discloses a need for an inquiry into the factors that inform teaching practice. Research needs to focus on representing the understandings that shape the thoughts and actions of teachers which requires investigation into the multiple realities of individuals (Woodside, 2010).

My intention is therefore to investigate the complexities of play through examination into who I am as an early childhood teacher which will better inform me on the multiple realities of other early childhood teachers. As Guest, Namey and Mitchell (2013) suggested, meaning is constructed from the rich and diverse experiences which researchers may bring to the particular phenomenon under study.

My investigation into play intends to provide an alternative approach to Western perspectives on play, changing the frame of reference by enabling early childhood teachers to understand, celebrate and honour their differences in contextually rich and diverse environments. Through inquiry into the past experiences of early childhood teachers with different backgrounds and past experiences with play, the intention of my study is to reveal how play is meaningful and pertinent in different contexts rooted in historical and cultural significance. My inquiry into play intends to impact early childhood teachers and classrooms more widely, providing an example leading to scholarly conversations and generating further questions surrounding play in early childhood education internationally.

## **2.7 Summary**

Chapter 2 has provided a review of empirical, peer-reviewed literature on play. Three major themes were revealed including:

1. A rise in academic expectations that are placed on our young children which possibly undermine the position and value of play in early childhood classrooms.
2. With the increasing expectations of early childhood education, a gap between play in theory and play in practice has become apparent.
3. Literature on play however, has predominately been grounded in data and research that represents Western settings and points of views.

The review has revealed the past foci in research thereby opening up the opportunities for future research in relation to the objective of my inquiry into play.

Chapter 3 will develop the conceptual framework for my inquiry into play. It highlights the ontological, epistemological and methodological beliefs that will frame my interpretive approach to research. The chapter also details the components of filters, frames and guides into teacher thinking and beliefs.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CONCEPTUALISING THE COMPLEXITIES OF PLAY**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 2, the major themes which have emerged from a review of empirical, peer-reviewed literature on play were discussed. The chapter was organised around the themes of:

- the increasing academic expectations which possibly undermine the value and use of play in early childhood classrooms;
- the decrease in time and opportunities for play that illuminates the discontinuity between play at the rhetoric level and play in reality; and
- the literature and research on play that have been dominated by Western perspectives and contexts.

It is the intention of Chapter 3 to discuss my views about the nature of knowledge and reality through explanation about my philosophical orientation. The discussion will clarify the methods and components including filters, frames and guides for my research. That is, using a constructivist paradigm to view the world, I detail my interpretive inquiry into play and my use of interpretive methods to uncover the influences of past experiences with play on teaching practices. Through my use of interpretive inquiry, I attempt to gain an understanding of the factors that impact play practices through the meanings which are socially constructed and grounded in the perceptions of my teacher participants.

#### **3.2 Seeing the World through a Constructivist Lens**

In Chapter 1 I discussed how children make sense of their world through a social constructivist approach to learning. As children engage with their environment and interact with the people around them the process of exploration, collaboration, cooperation and negotiation enables children to construct meaning about their world (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008). Play embodies the characteristics of the social constructivist approach as it is an active, socially involving and meaningful activity where children construct their knowledge about the world around them (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015).

How children learn as well as make sense of their environment through social interaction reflects the lens in which I view the world. I therefore adopt a constructivist approach in how I see the world. The basic assumption of the constructivist approach is that knowledge is socially constructed (Mertens, 2015). Multiple constructions of a phenomenon can be captured based on the rich and diverse experiences and interpretations which individuals bring to their situations. As with children constructing meaning about their world through engagement and interaction with their environment and the people around them, understanding the multiple lived experiences of people also requires interaction and dialogue amongst individuals.

Constructivism assumes that the meaning of experiences and events are constructed by individuals, and therefore people construct the realities in which they participate (Charmaz, 2006). Meaning is embedded in the experiences of individuals which require research to elicit and understand how research participants construct their individual and shared meanings about the world. The lens in which I view the world is that people are shaped by their own experiences where multiple realities exist amongst individuals, groups and cultures (Creswell, 2013). However, it is through interaction and dialogue that rich and diverse standpoints are apprehended (Wahyuni, 2012). The constructivist paradigm thus frames the intentions of my study into play. Embracing this approach allows me to:

1. provide a framework to inquire into the lived experiences of early childhood teachers specific to play that illuminates the multiple rich and diverse backgrounds of the teacher participants;
2. gain insights into the multiple realities of early childhood teachers rooted in their lived experiences with play and the possible impact of such experiences on play practices; and
3. rethink the complexities of play that are grounded in rich and diverse historical and cultural contexts.

### **3.3 How Do We Know: More than Words**

The ways we can learn about the world manifests in how we view the world (Pascale, 2011). If my ontological premise is that meaning is socially constructed, the process of knowing necessarily requires some form of language between me as the researcher and the teacher participants. As Hughes (2010) has posited, language



illuminates how we understand social phenomena. It is through language that individuals undertake a dynamic process of negotiation, construction, sharing and representation which reflects the process of creating and recreating meanings. As the author contended, “language is much more than just a window on a world that exists independently of it. Instead, language *creates* our social world” (p. 41) and thus is at the heart of constructing meaning. Language therefore shapes how we think, act and speak (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010).

However, as Goldin-Meadow (2005) suggests, we are bounded by the words in which our language encompasses. Sometimes we are constrained when we do not have the language to express our meanings. Language needs to go beyond lexis and grammar that are spoken (McNaughton, 2009). My inquiry into play therefore necessitates interactions and involvement in the construction of meaning with the teacher participants beyond the use of language. The interactions between me and the teacher participants as well as the nonverbal communication can yield powerful descriptions and interpretations (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Significant underlying meanings can be detected that are grounded in individual, historical and cultural contexts (Bishop, 2008). Through dialogue, interactions and nonverbal communication, I can therefore attempt to arrive together with the teacher participants at common understandings that are rich and diverse in contexts.

If meaning is within a historical and cultural framework of socially constructed and shared meanings created and recreated through language and interaction, the relationship between me and the participants is an important consideration (Pascale, 2011). The researcher is viewed as the primary source of data collection and analysis since human instruments can be responsive and adaptive during the process of negotiation, construction and re-presentation of meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Scott and Usher (2011) maintained, the process of negotiation and renegotiation between the researcher and participants is the attempt to achieve accurate and coherent representations of the lives of those under investigation. Significant to my inquiry into play is therefore the process of making meaning, not only through discourse between me and the participants, but the relationships I build with the early childhood teachers throughout the research process (Creswell, 2013). Through such intimate relationships, I can engage in a journey of constructing and reconstructing the lives of the teacher participants.

As Angrosino (2005) summarised, researcher-participant relationships are “developing in response to a greater consciousness of situational identities and to the perception of relative power” (p. 167). I therefore learn about the world through a complex web characterised by language and researcher-participant relationships that acknowledge the situational identities of individuals grounded in the lived experiences that are rich and diverse in backgrounds. Through conversations and interactions with the participants, it is therefore my hope to understand a specific human experience constructed from the points of view of those who live it (Willis, 2007).

Given my ontological and epistemological standpoints, my intention is to inquire into the past experiences with play perceived to influence teaching practices of early childhood teachers. Gaining insight into the possible factors influencing play as a valuable activity in early childhood education necessitates a dynamic process of creating, recreating, sharing and re-presenting as well as the complex relationship between me as the researcher and the teacher participants.

### **3.4 Framing the Research Design: Interpretive Inquiry**

In framing the research design, I take into consideration a few elements. These elements shape how I structure my research design, adopting the methodology of interpretive inquiry. The first consideration is that, in understanding the influential factors on teaching practices, it is invaluable to reveal the implicit knowledge that originates from the rich and diverse contexts of early childhood teachers (Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004). Through an examination into the past experiences of the teacher participants, tacit understandings which the early childhood teachers construct that they perceive to later shape their teaching practices are gained (Rust, 2010). As I seek to inquire into the multiple lived realities of the participants, the detailed subjective meanings which the early childhood teachers perceive to mediate their behaviours and actions need to be taken into consideration. As Creswell (2013) emphasised, “this is how knowledge is known—through the subjective experiences of people” (p. 20).

As I investigate the individual experiences of the participants, the second consideration encompasses the need for descriptions and interpretations of the total phenomenon (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Since “to atomize phenomena into a restricted number of variables and then to focus only on certain factors is to miss the necessary dynamic interaction of several parts” (p. 33), the significance of approaching my inquiry from a holistic point of view is illuminated. Focus on the

whole, rather than the loose connections of individual characteristics therefore account for the complex web of interrelationships and connections between the constructions which the teacher participants will bring to their lived experiences.

A holistic view therefore encompasses the third consideration which necessitates an inquiry not only into the immediate behaviours and actions of individuals, but also the contextual and experiential factors that influence the process of meaning making. As Rowlands (2005) maintained, it is through a focus into the multiple contexts of people that an explanation into the emergence of the current situations of individuals is accurately represented. By investigating into the past experiences with play that is grounded in historical and cultural diversity, I hope to account for the differences in the perceptions of and experiences with play that shape the use of play as a leading activity in early childhood classrooms (Sanagavarapu & Wong, 2008).

When framing my research design, I attempt to weave together the considerations that may influence my inquiry into play (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Not only emphasising my philosophical perspectives as well as theoretical orientation, I take into consideration the three elements:

1. the subjective meanings which each individual brings to their behaviours and actions;
2. the understandings into the subjective meanings which people create, requiring an investigation from a holistic point of view; and
3. an inquiry into the intricate layers of a social phenomenon which necessitates focus into the historical and cultural influences.

I therefore adopt the methodology of interpretive inquiry. Ontologically, the basis behind interpretive inquiry is that reality and interpretation are socially constructed (Rowlands, 2005). Gaining understanding of social constructions is through language, consciousness and shared meanings. Also foundational to interpretive inquiry is the close relationships fostered between the researcher and participants. Experience of the world is not understood through the objective definitions of the researcher, but through subjectivity and should best be understood through the subjective meanings which individuals give to their lived experiences. Language and interactions between the researcher and participants recognise the

situational identities of people, thus a holistic view accounting for the historical and cultural contexts that shape the behaviours and actions of people is re-presented.

Through interpretive inquiry, researchers hope to answer the whys and hows of people's lived experiences by understanding the ways individuals organise, relate to and interact with the world (Guest et al., 2013). Interpretive inquirers are interested in how people perceive their lived experiences and how they construct their realities as well as the meanings which individuals attribute in order to make sense of their world. Central to this approach

is the idea that human existence is fundamentally characterised by temporality. People have a personal history. Their life develops in time, between birth and death. Interpretations, thoughts and actions in the present are influenced by experiences from the past and expectations for the future. (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 260)

Interpretive inquiry is concerned with understanding the meanings which individuals construct as well as how people make sense of their world and the experiences which they have and how such experiences make impact to the self.

In conclusion, the questions that guide interpretive inquirers are applied to my own inquiry. Interpretive inquirers are guided by questions including:

- Why does the phenomenon come about?
- How does it unfold over time? (Elliott & Timulak, 2005, p. 149)

In my focus on the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms, I seek to answer the question about the factors that influence a phenomenon.

Furthermore, as I investigate the previous experiences with play that possibly shape teaching practices, I am interested in the question regarding how a phenomenon, that is how play develops over time.

### **3.5 Ways of Understanding and Knowing: Interpretive Methods**

The methodological beliefs reflect the fundamental assumptions and views about the world and how it is perceived (Wahyuni, 2012). As Hesse-Biber (2010) claimed, this necessitates "researchers not to disavow their underlying belief systems

but rather to examine how their ontological and epistemological perspectives impact methodology” (p. 7). How I view reality and the ways I learn about the world influence my selection of my approaches to research. Interpretive methods align to my worldviews.

An interpretive position is premised on the assumption that experience is continuously constructed through the process of negotiation, construction, sharing and re-presentation of social phenomena (Hughes, 2010). According to Guest et al. (2013), an interpretive approach investigates social phenomena in their natural environments, attempting to make sense of the situations as well as interpret circumstances from the meaning in which individuals bring to them.

I will therefore utilise interpretive methods as it enables me to capture and represent the voices of the teacher participants. As Atieno (2009) maintained,

if the purpose is to learn from the participants in a setting or a process the way *they* experience it, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what they experience, the researcher needs methods that will allow for discovery and do justice to their perceptions and the complexity of their interpretations. (p. 16)

Interpretive methods take ordinary experiences as a focus for investigation and inquire into how meaning is constructed (Scott & Usher, 2011). Interaction between people is viewed as inseparable from experiences and meaning making. Using interpretive methods will allow me to focus on the rich and diverse lived experiences of the early childhood teachers that influence the meanings which they give to themselves and to their actions (Cohen et al., 2007).

Interpretive methods for research thus acknowledge the complexities of social phenomena where such intricacies cannot be defined through measurement with standard tools (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Peredaryenko and Krauss (2013) suggested, the notion is that “only people construct and bring meaning into the world through their qualities of sensitivity, responsiveness and flexibility, making them the most appropriate instruction for inquiries aiming to arrive at understanding, meaning, the promotion of critical awareness” (p. 1). Thus, interpretive methods place primacy on human instruments which are responsive and adaptive to the complexities of the contextual and experiential backgrounds of individuals.

Interpretive inquirers as Park (2006) claims, necessitates a disposition of openness and willingness to listen to the lived experiences emanating from the object of interpretation. As I interact with the teacher participants, the research process will enable meaning to be constructed, merging together multiple realities. Interpretive inquirers therefore place emphasis on firsthand experiences as well as methods of gathering data that acknowledge different contexts and which enable rich and detailed descriptions of social phenomena (Tuli, 2010).

### **3.5.1 The role of thick descriptions and interpretations**

As I reveal the multiple realities of the participants, thick descriptions and interpretations enable me to capture the meaning which the early childhood teachers bring to a particular phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2006). Thick descriptions not only take into consideration the immediate behaviours and actions of individuals, but also the contextual and experiential influences which shape meaning. Thick descriptions will emphasise the perspectives of the teacher participants as they emerge from our researcher-participant interactions, enabling me to report findings that illuminate the biographical, historical, situational, relational, cultural and interactional nature of their lived experiences (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010).

Thick descriptions emphasise the feelings, thoughts, details, contexts, meanings and webs of relationships that are spoken and observed through nonverbal communication (Dawson, 2010). By using thick descriptions it is my intention to capture a more holistic portrayal of the various factors grounded in historical and cultural significance which the teacher participants will bring to my inquiry into play that are perceived to influence teaching practices (Dey, 2005).

As illustrated in Figure 3.1, thick descriptions enable me to weave together my philosophical (ontologically and epistemologically) as well as theoretical orientations with the different elements of my investigation into the influences of past experiences with play. As I view the world as being socially constructed, thick descriptions and interpretations will enable me to re-present the interwoven contexts of the early childhood teachers, emphasising their multiple realities which are constructed through my engagement and interaction with the early childhood teachers. Language and non-verbal communication are therefore required in the process of understanding the complex layers of reality rooted in historical and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the use of thick descriptions and interpretations embodies interpretive methods since it

presents firsthand experiences, data methods that recognise diverse contexts and accounts that are rich and detailed in descriptions.

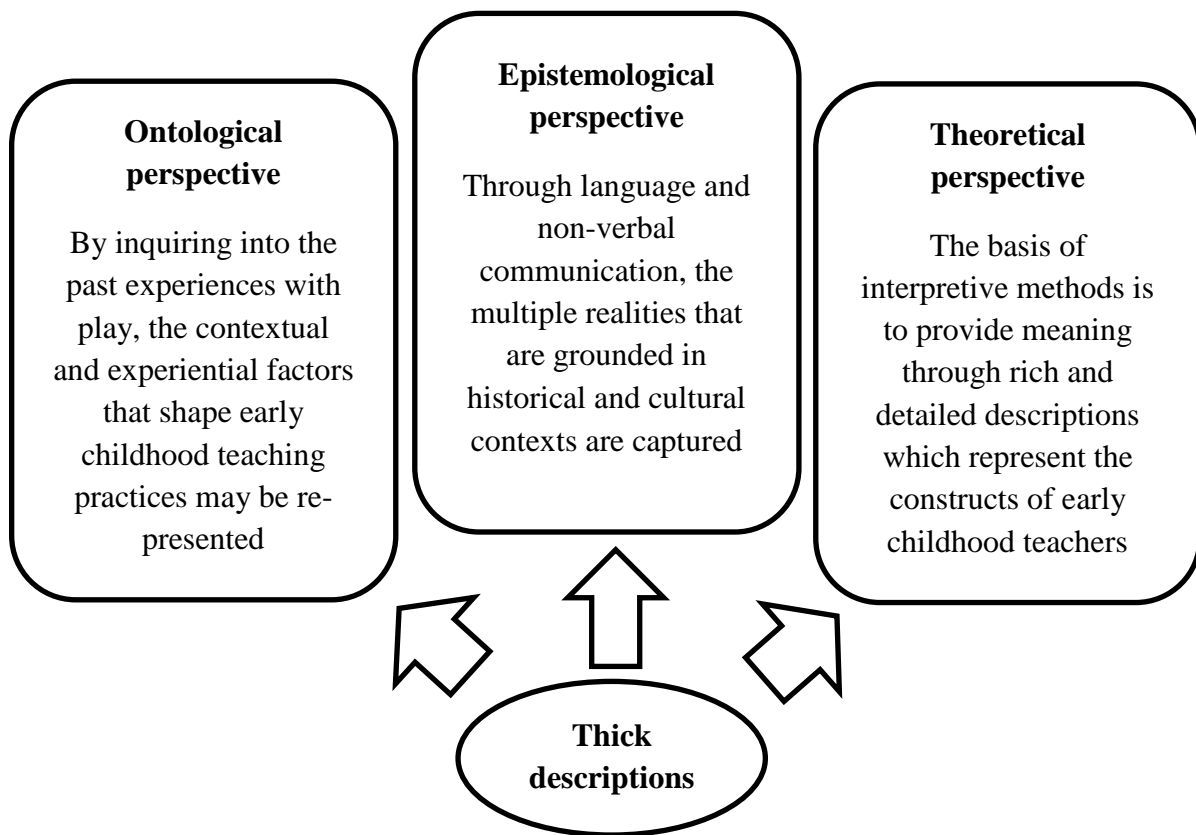


Figure 3.1 Merging the elements of my inquiry into play with thick descriptions

As Dawson (2010) summarised, thick descriptions require focus on the contextual details in observing, interpreting and presenting meaning that are captured through the intricate interactions between the researcher and participants. The various features of thick descriptions encompass the characteristics of interpretive inquiry and using interpretive methods in my investigation into play.

### 3.6 Components to My Interpretive Inquiry

Literature on play documents the importance of play in the learning and development during the early years (Ackermann et al., 2013; Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Opeyemi, 2015). Though the benefits of play are well-established, a substantial body of literature also indicates the gap between the rhetoric and reality of play (Adams, et al., 2004; Dent, 2013; Nicolopoulou, 2010). However, in their research on the views of parents, teachers and principals on the role of play, Fung and Cheng (2012) conclude that it is difficult to articulate the discrepancies between the

beliefs on play and the implementation of play in early childhood classrooms. Without an examination into the factors that influence the use of play, a lack of understanding about the gap between play in theory and play in practice remains. Further challenging the issue, Leaupepe (2011) suggested that in order for “teachers to be able to critically reflect upon their experiences and explore their own values and beliefs about play, it [is] important to provide time and space to do so” (p. 25).

An inquiry into the influences on behaviour and action necessitates a holistic approach, focusing on the loose parts that are built together to make meaning (Cohen et al., 2007). My research therefore hopes to offer a possible framework to inquire into the loose parts grounded in past experiences that influence play and reconstruct the interplay of factors that shape play in practice.

### **3.6.1 An adapted model into teacher thinking**

The framework for my holistic examination into the past experiences of play first began with an adapted model into teacher thinking and classroom practices (Wood & Bennett, 2000). As illustrated in Figure 3.2, the underlying assumption is that teacher beliefs, theories and intentions influence teaching practices. Specific focus was given to the constraints that may impact teacher thinking and actual teaching practices. Fulfilling ideal teaching orientations therefore depend on the multiple factors that limit teachers where such constraints serve to mediate actual practice.

Where the original model emphasises the constraints that impact what occurs in actuality, my study added another layer of focus which is colored gray in Figure 3.2. My inquiry into teacher thinking and classroom practices included an emphasis on the complexity of the past experiences of teachers, specifically the ways in which the previous experiences with play influence teaching practices.



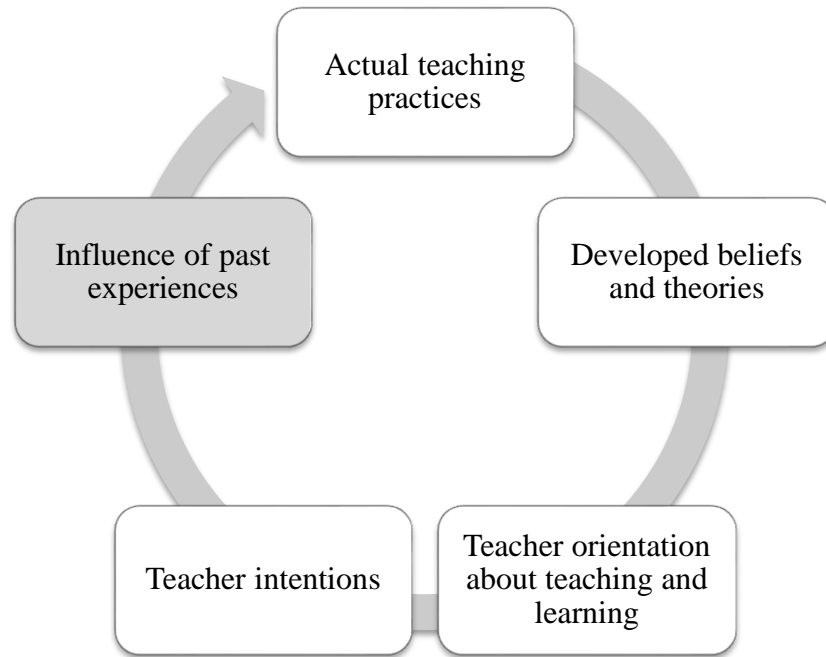


Figure 3.2 Model for inquiry into teacher thinking and classroom practices (adapted from Wood & Bennett, 2000)

A poignant consideration regarding the original model should be addressed. Wood and Bennett's model presents a framework for an investigation into teacher thinking and the impact of beliefs, teacher orientations and intentions on classroom practices. In spite of my adaptation by including the influences of past experiences, the impact of past experiences remained minimised. The constraint of the adapted model into teacher thinking illuminated the current foci of research into play and the opportunities for further research detailed in Chapters 1 and 2. Though research focuses on the beliefs of teachers, scholarly writing does not indicate how beliefs are grounded in the rich and diverse life experiences of teachers (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014). Research needs to approach the factors that shape teaching practices from a holistic view by revealing the complex, multi-dimensional and interrelated influences on teaching practices that emphasise the significant impact of earlier experiences of teachers on behaviours and actions in later life (Brock, 2010).

As realities are socially constructed and are grounded in the complexities of the life histories of the teacher participants, as an interpretive inquirer I needed to be responsive to what my investigation revealed using the adapted model into teaching thinking (Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2009). The qualities of *flexibility* and the characteristics of an *iterative approach* enabled me to respond to the constraint of the

initial model (Guest et al., 2013; Suter, 2012). Flexibility enabled me to adjust and modify procedures during the data collection process based on the incoming data. An iterative approach guided me to systematically review the data collected, making continuous comparisons in the constructions of understanding as well as revising methods where necessary in order to gain more accurate re-presentations of the lives of the teacher participants.

### **3.6.2 Deepening the inquiry into teacher thinking: Filters, frames and guides**

In response to what I learnt from the current foci of play literature and opportunities for further research, the use of a flexible, iterative approach enabled me to adopt a more current model in my inquiry into the influences on classroom practices. In their examination of the function of teacher beliefs, Five and Buehl (2012) developed a model that focuses on beliefs as integrated systems from a constructivist perspective. The systems may include experiences, identity, social contexts, personal religious beliefs as well as teaching and learning beliefs, roles and practices. The range in systems may also go beyond the school setting, recognising the pivotal influences that are rich and diverse in backgrounds.

The significance of the model is not in revealing the complexity and interrelatedness of systems. Rather, Five and Buehl suggested “what is perhaps the most important issue: What is the function or purpose of teachers’ beliefs. That is, what do they do?” (p. 478). In focusing on the explanation of how beliefs function for teachers in their practice, planning, reflecting and learning the model details three elements of filters, frames and guides.

*Filters for interpretation.* Filters are related to classroom practices as the filters influence the interpretation of information and experience and thus human perceptions. The filters affect what and how early childhood teachers learn and understand about play in theory. Filters also pertain to what is shared in the classroom or play in practice where time and opportunities for play are influenced.

*Frames for defining problems.* As teachers filter factors that influence approaches to play in teaching and learning, the frames shape how teachers interpret and construct their realities. Furthermore, frames shape how teachers understand the realities of people around them. Frames enable teachers to elaborate on how play is conceptualised as the leading activity in their early childhood classrooms.

*Guides for action.* In the process of conceptualising play in the classroom, the role of guides is then defined by teacher self-efficacy, motivational constructs in achieving their goal and perseverance to face challenges. Such characteristics shape the commitment of teachers to the use and implementation of play in their classrooms and applied to their teaching practices.

In responding to the need to gain a deeper understanding of the rich and diverse effects on teaching practices, I therefore adapted the framework from Fives and Buehl (see Figure 3.3) to enable an investigation into the factors that shape the place and value of play in early childhood pedagogy including the impact of culture and context.

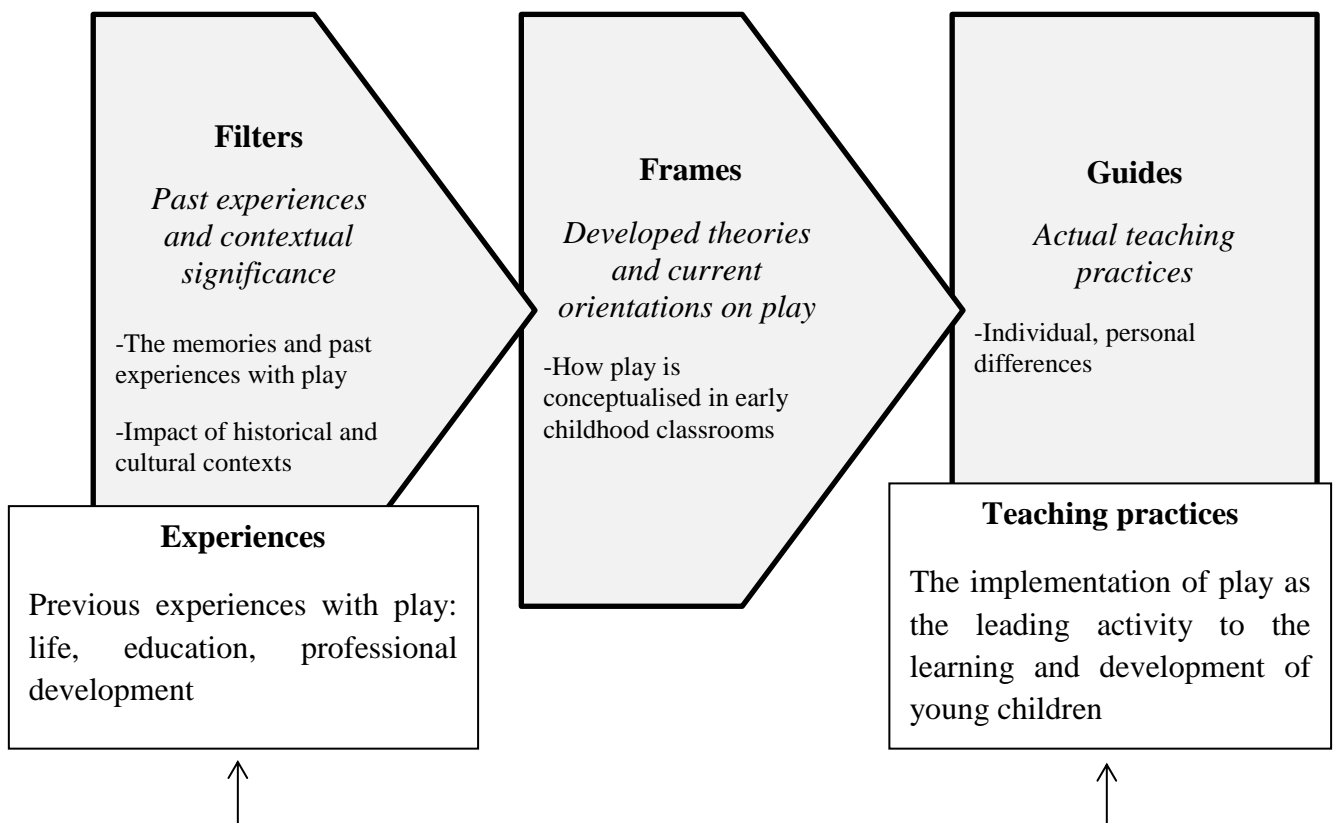


Figure 3.3 Framework for my inquiry into play (adapted from Fives & Buehl, 2012)

Fives and Buehl's model of inquiring into the filters, frames and guides that shape classroom practices account for the complexities of play. Filters are grounded in the experiences of individuals acknowledging the significance of historical and cultural contexts. Frames encompass the social constructs created by individuals based on their lived experiences. Guides account for personal differences that people

carry. My adapted model taken from Five and Buehl therefore provides a framework for an inquiry into the influences that shape the use and implementation of play in early childhood education beyond teacher belief systems, acknowledging the situational significance of the teacher participants. The model may also serve to provide an example in which other early childhood teachers or researchers could use to further their inquiry about play in early childhood classrooms as the research process may generate questions beyond the scope of my study.

### **3.7 Positioning Myself as a Researcher: On the Inside**

It is crucial for researchers to clarify their role as a researcher (Unluer, 2012) since we all view the world through our own filters. It is equally important for researchers to understand their influence in the construction of knowledge and to make their influence on the research process explicit (Gentles, Jack, Nicolas & McKibbin, 2014). As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) claimed, “the personhood of the researcher, including her or his membership status in relation to those participating in the research, is an essential and ever-present aspect of the investigation” (p. 55). Here, I revisit the position of the researcher from a constructivist standpoint and interpretive inquiry methodology to claim my researcher role as an insider.

The constructivist standpoint recognises the role of the researcher in the process of meaning making (Pascale, 2011). Researcher-participant relationships are fundamental since knowledge about the world is created, recreated and shared between individuals. As Lauckner, Paterson and Krupa (2012) claimed, understandings of our past and present experiences that influence our immediate behaviours and actions necessitate involvements and interactions between the researcher and participants.

Furthermore, as Goldkuhl (2012) maintained, one of the principles of interpretive inquiry is researcher-participant relationships. Primacy is given to the engagement and interaction between the researcher and participant since “knowledge may only be constructed collectively through a complex and context-dependent series of interactions” (Petit & Huault, 2008, p. 79).

Using interpretive inquiry methodology, understanding how people construct meaning about their world requires a focus into the lived experiences of individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Human instruments are favoured since they are responsive and adaptive during the process of negotiation, construction and re-

presentation of meaning. Interpretive inquiry therefore assumes the researcher is the primary source in the data collection and analysis process.

An outcome of the close interactions between the researcher and participants in the process of meaning making is that the researcher position becomes that of an insider (Dawson, 2010). The assumption is that the researcher is just as constructive in the field as any other participant (Andrade, 2009). Essentially then, the researcher becomes a participant.

The insider position of my role as a researcher becomes even more apparent as I examine the characteristics of an inside researcher. Fundamental to being an inside researcher is membership of a social group, organisation or culture as well as similar roles and experiences are shared (Greene, 2014). In my inquiry into play, membership into the group requires a professional learning commitment to better understand the factors that impact the use and implementation of play as the leading way children learn and develop. Further, the roles which are common between the participants and I are we are all early childhood teachers committed towards understanding more about the complexities of play and what influences who we are as early childhood teachers.

Therefore the environment where I work as a researcher, is also the setting in which I work in as an early childhood teacher. The experiences which I also share with the teacher participants is the current lack of self-knowledge about ourselves as teachers and our genuine interest in gaining insights into the complex web of factors and relationships that shape our play practices in our early childhood classrooms.

The characteristics of an inside researcher illuminate the claim that knowing ourselves as teachers necessitates a process of self-discovery and the factors that mediate behaviours and actions (Davis & Andrzejewski, 2009). Self-discovery involves a cycle of inquiry and interpretation that encapsulates the multi-dimensionality of contexts including societal, historical and personal influences. Figure 3.4 introduces the cycle that, not only guides me through the process of gaining self-knowledge, but also enables the teacher participants to gain a better understanding of the factors shaping their teaching practices.

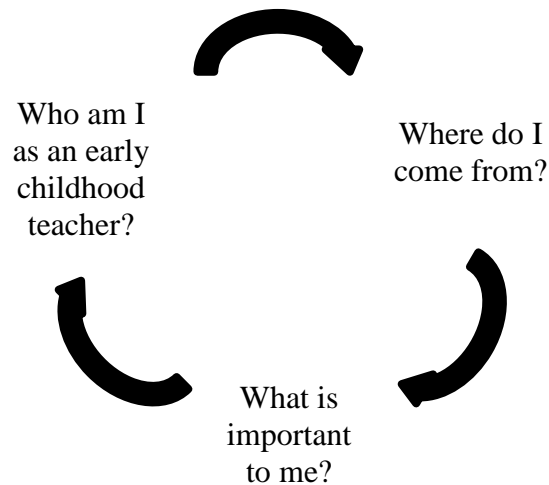


Figure 3.4 Cycle of self-discovery

Though my role as a researcher takes on an insider position, it is important to keep in mind that my role is not fixed throughout the research journey. The researcher “must continually ask themselves where they are at any given moment in relation to what they study and what are the potential ramifications of this position on their research” (Berger, 2015, p. 231). Though my role as a researcher primarily takes the insider position, I recognise that my role needs to be fluid so as to capture the diverse perspectives of each individual and the construction of meanings which the teacher participants give to their lived experiences.

### 3.8 Summary

Chapter 3 examined the philosophical and methodological philosophies that shape my study into play. How I see the world and how I view the ways of knowing influence the manner in which I approach my research. As Hesse-Biber (2010) stated, “methodology is the bridge that brings our philosophical standpoint (on ontology and epistemology) and method (perspective and tool) together [and] it is important to remember that the researcher travels this bridge throughout the research process” (p. 6). In other words, how I structured my inquiry into play reflects the way I look at the world and understand social reality, through a constructivist lens. The framework and the components that will guide my inquiry into the past experiences influencing play practices were also discussed including the filters, frames and guides that impact teacher thinking and beliefs. As an interpretive inquirer, the lived experiences of my teacher participants and the meanings in which they give to their realities consist of their subjectivity is grounded in our social constructs and their perceived knowledge.

Chapter 4 establishes the research design of my investigation into play. The contexts of the school and the teacher participants will be discussed. The data collection methods including a focus group discussion, individual teacher participant interviews, classroom observations, stimulated recall sessions and a second focus group discussion will be detailed. The chapter will also present the analytical frame for interpretation of data. Following will be an examination into how trustworthiness is gained and how the credibility and authenticity are evaluated in interpretive inquiry. The chapter will also outline the ethical considerations in addition to the possible limitations to my study into play.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONSTRUCTING THE INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY INTO PLAY

#### 4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 examined the conceptual and theoretical frameworks which my study is based. I see the world as a complex integration of social constructions created through intricate interactions and relationships between individuals. My philosophical orientation underscores my interpretive inquiry into play and my use of interpretive methods to capture the contextual and experiential influences that shape the creation and recreation of meaning. In Figure 4.1, I illustrate how I weaved together my ontological, epistemological and theoretical positions using the methodology of interpretive inquiry in Chapter 3.

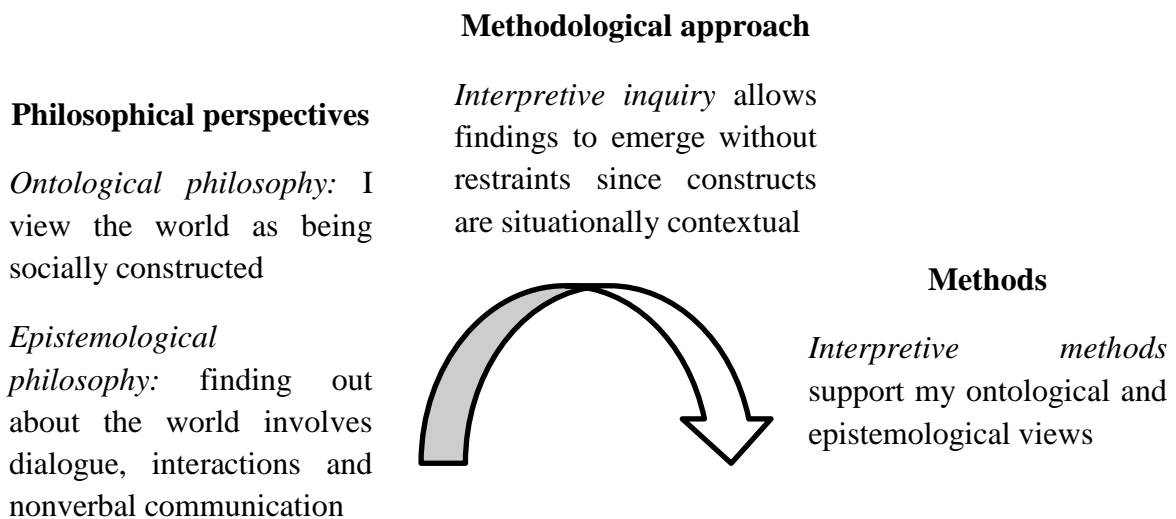


Figure 4.1 Bridging my philosophical and theoretical frameworks (adapted from Hesse-Biber, 2010)

Chapter 4 will begin with an examination of the connection between the intention of my study, my research questions and an autoethnographic technique. The school's context and an introduction to the teacher participants follow. The data collection methods will also be discussed along with the cyclical process to data analysis. Outlined are the principles used for gaining trustworthiness and the guiding questions used for evaluating credibility and authenticity in interpretive inquiry. The chapter concludes with a discussion regarding ethical considerations in addition to the possible limitations of my investigation into children's play.



#### **4.2 The research questions: Manifestations of self-discovery**

As Voloder (2008) explained, personal reflections, self-knowledge and self-construction helps understanding with the experiences of other individuals. In Chapter 1, I discussed the motivations behind my inquiry into the past experiences with play that is perceived to shape the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms. Understanding the factors that impact my teaching beliefs and practices regarding play has become an interest and of importance to me. However, our behaviours and actions are rooted in a complex web of beliefs, values, experiences and culture (Davis & Andrzejewski, 2009). Understanding therefore requires an inquiry into my early childhood memories with play and how such previous experiences inform and shape how I see play now and what I do in my classroom.

I revisit the cycle of self-discovery introduced in Chapter 3 since my research journey originates from my interest of knowing who I am as an early childhood teacher and where I come from in addition to the multiple factors that influence my beliefs, values and actions when it comes to using play as the leading activity in my own classroom. Where the cycle in the previous chapter first introduced the questions that guided me in my self-investigation into who I am as an early childhood teacher, I re-present the cycle (see Figure 4.2) with the connection to my research questions.

By linking my initial journey into the process of gaining self-knowledge with the foci of my research, I highlight the significance of self-discovery related to my study. The process of gaining self-understanding involves an interactive act where the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning invites people to acknowledge, confirm or question and contradict the meanings built (Kelchtermans, 2009). Self-discovery necessitates the “situatedness” (Starr, 2010, p. 3) of self in relation to other people within that context. By gaining personal insights into who I am, where I come from and the factors which I perceive to influence the use and implementation of play in my own classroom, I hope to gain a greater understanding into the experiences of the teacher participants. The process of gaining self-awareness mediates closer examinations of the experiences of others.

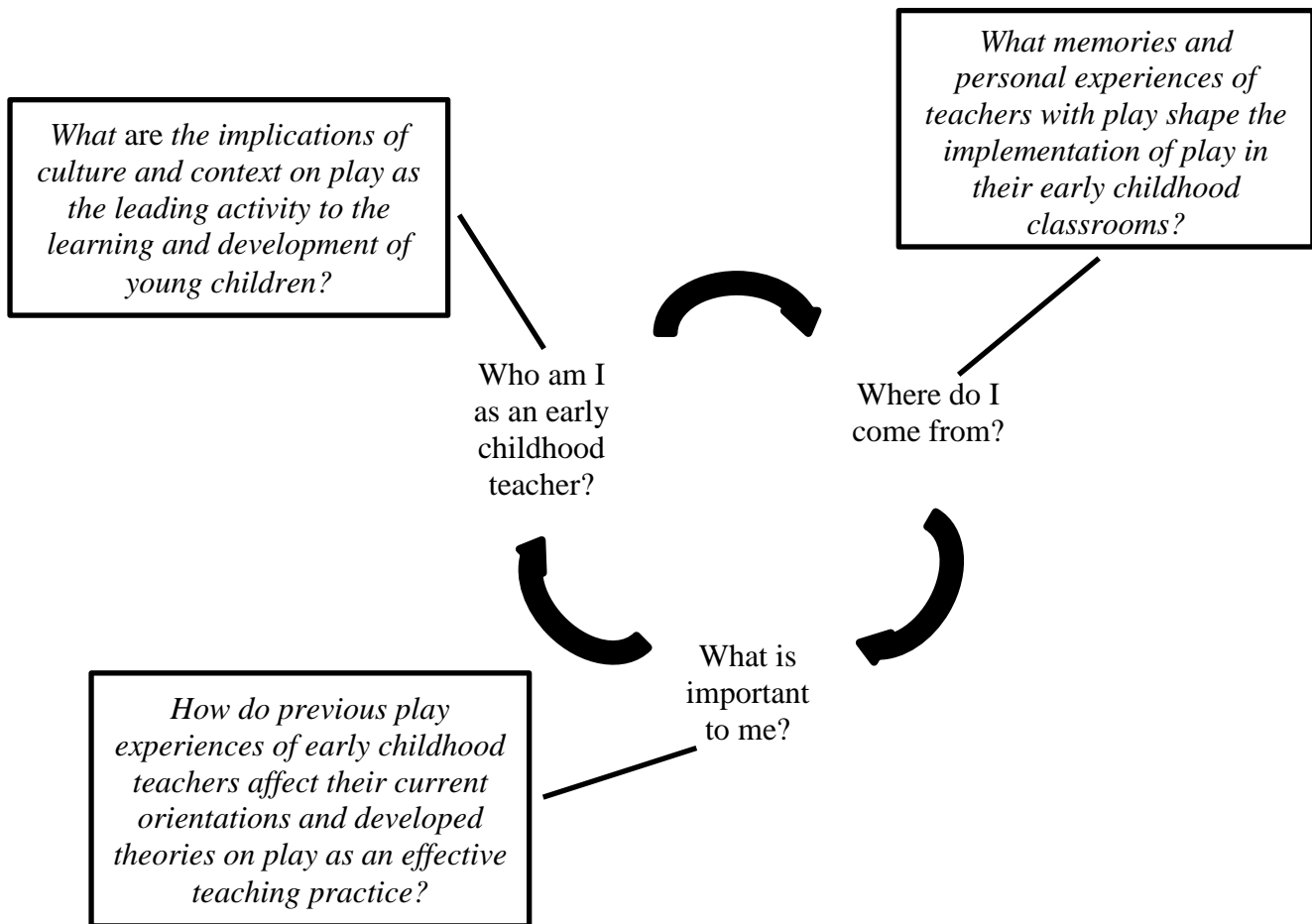


Figure 4.2 Cycle of self-discovery aligned with my research questions

The intention of the cycle is to not only guide me in documenting my experiences, but to also attempt an understanding of my situation and orientation to play in order to better understand the experiences and realities of the teacher participants (Voloder, 2008). As Hamdan (2012) suggested, an autoethnographic technique will enable me to make connections between my own personal experiences and constructions with play to the pedagogical practices and theories regarding play as well as the literature on play and the professional conversations surrounding play in early childhood education. The connections, in turn will enable me to better understand other individuals as I seek to abstract, describe, interpret and re-present the lived experiences beyond my own context.

Taken from Chang (2007) in her close examination into autoethnographies, I summarise in Table 4.1 the characteristics of an autoethnographic technique applied to my study's intentions and research questions. The characteristics include *understanding* experiences through focus on the historical and cultural contexts of

experiences, *connection* into an individual's past meanings and present constructions and *expansion* into the multiple realities of the teacher participants. The characteristics of an autoethnographic technique thus encapsulate my inquiry into the past experiences with play and the perceived impact on children's play in early childhood classrooms.

<b>The intentions of the research question</b>	<b>My research questions</b>	<b>Alignment with an autoethnographic technique</b>
Offer a possible framework to guide reflection into experiences that are rich in context about play in practice	<i>What memories and personal experiences of teachers with play shape the implementation of play in their early childhood classrooms?</i>	<i>Understand</i> historically and culturally grounded experiences and the connection to other people and their constructs of the world
Provide descriptions and interpretations into the past experiences with play that are perceived to impact behaviours and actions regarding play in early childhood classrooms	<i>How do previous play experiences of early childhood teachers affect their current orientations and developed theories on play as an effective teaching practice?</i>	<i>Connection</i> with our individual past experiences and our individual and collective present realities
Rethink and reposition the context of play to a concept that is situationally-based	<i>What are the implications of culture and context on play as the leading activity to the learning and development of young children?</i>	<i>Expand</i> understanding of a phenomenon into unfamiliar contexts

Table 4.1 Connections between an autoethnographic technique with my interpretive inquiry

My approach to self-discovery, an attempt to understand myself as a mother and early childhood teacher, will therefore enable me to relate to the experiences of the teacher participants. I hope that an autoethnographic technique will contribute to my descriptions, interpretations and understandings of the rich and diverse experiences and contexts of other early childhood teachers.

### **4.3 The Context for my Interpretive Inquiry: Where and Who?**

In this section, I detail the context of the school where I conduct my research and I introduce the teacher participants. While the early childhood teachers work at the same school and share similarities, the backgrounds and experiences of the teachers support a study into diversities and multiple lived realities.

#### **4.3.1 Context of the school**

My interpretive inquiry into the previous experiences with play that are perceived to impact teaching practices of early childhood teachers takes place at an international school in Sri Lanka. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality of the school, it will be referred to as *The International School* from here on.

The International School is located on a green and spacious campus, in a suburb of Sri Lanka. It is an English medium international school that caters to the needs of internationally mobile expatriate families as well as Sri Lankan students. The school's mission is to guide the global community towards international and intercultural understanding while developing the whole person as a responsible learner who strives for personal excellence. The school is culturally diverse, comprising about 400 students from more than 40 nationalities with a teaching staff consisting of almost 60 teachers from 9 nationalities. In a culturally diverse environment, the philosophy of The International School is to instill values of respect and tolerance while respecting the individuality and difference of every person.

The school is an International Baccalaureate (IB, 2015) World School which offers a continuum of international education. The International School provides education from Preschool to Grade 12 through its Primary Years Programme (PYP), Middle Years Programme (MYP) and the Diploma Programme (DP). The primary school of The International School follows the PYP which is an inquiry approach to learning, encompassing the notion that students are actively involved in their own learning as they take the initiative and responsibility to gain deeper understandings about their world (IBO, 2009b). The role of children as learners is to engage with previous understandings and explore their learning environment to extend their current knowledge. It is through active interaction with the environment and the people around that students can seek answers to their questions. As stated by the IBO (2009b), the curriculum model is grounded in the constructivist approach. The orientation to children's learning is that

learners have beliefs about how the world works based on their experiences and prior learning. Those beliefs, models or constructs are revisited and revised in the light of new experiences and further learning. As we strive to make meaning of our lives and the world around us we travel continually on the cyclic path of constructing, testing, and confirming or revising our personal models of how the world works. (p. 6)

In the context of the early childhood program at The International School, emphasis is placed on the role of inquiry as the way three, four and five year old children respond to their natural curiosities about the world. Inquiry is “an active engagement with the environment in an effort to make sense of the world, and consequent reflection on the connections between the experiences encountered and the information gathered” (IBO, 2009b, p. 30).

The International School was therefore chosen as the context for my investigation into play as an inquiry approach to learning in the early years fits the conditions of my study. As illustrated in Table 4.2, the approach to inquiry reflects the characteristics of play. As one of the gatekeepers of The International School defines, “inquiry is play” (J. Grandbois, personal communication, April 28, 2015). Inquiry, like play begins with a child’s natural curiosity and from there, the child inquires or plays to make connections. Through inquiry, children construct meaning as they engage in self-guided learning experiences in response to self-initiated curiosities. Similarly through play, children are actively involved in their learning as they guide themselves through activities that enable them to make connections and construct meaning about their world.

<b>Inquiry</b> (Fahey, 2012; IBO, 2009b)	<b>Play</b> (Ackermann et al., 2013)
Children respond to their natural curiosities as they actively initiate engagement with their environment, taking responsibility and ownership for their learning	Children are intrinsically motivated to make sense of their world as they explore and interact with their environment, taking control of their instincts, interests and ideas
Is a process that moves children from their current level of understanding to new and deeper understanding	Is a process that strengthens connections as well as creates new ones, helping children make sense of their world
Enables children to make connections between previous learning and current learning	Enables children to bring together what they have learnt, know and understand
Learning is relevant and meaningful	Learning is purposeful

Table 4.2 The characteristics of an inquiry approach and play

Therefore in the early childhood program at The International School, inquiry and play take on a similar role (J. Grandbois, personal communication, April 28, 2015). Play is the core philosophy of the early childhood programme. Through play, children develop all aspects of a well-rounded child where desired objectives are achieved. As one of the teacher participants defines, play is “an opportunity that we give the kids to explore and learn. It’s not really a must to have an apparatus. It can even be without anything. Play is about doing something. Play is about acting something to discover something” (Focus group discussion, March 25, 2013).

The context of the school therefore reflects the considerations of my study into play. As I hoped to illuminate the rich and diverse past experiences impacting play practices, research in a school where diversity resonates throughout the student and teacher body as well as the environment is foundational. Furthermore, in a school where an inquiry approach to learning reflects the characteristics of play, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding into how previous experiences with play impact the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms.

#### 4.3.2 Participants in my study

Since interpretive inquiry attempts to understand the actions of individuals in particular situations, the participants are selected in hopes to aid understanding of the

specific phenomenon under investigation (Morehouse, 2011). In the early childhood program, there are two preschool (three and four year olds) and two kindergarten (five year olds) classes with one classroom teacher. Each early childhood classroom also has an assistant teacher in addition to various specialist teachers who work closely with the students including a physical education teacher, three swimming teachers, a drama teacher, an art teacher and the librarian. The teacher participants of my inquiry were recruited by individually approaching the early childhood teachers working at The International School in Sri Lanka.

Initially my group included the two preschool teachers as well as two kindergarten classroom teachers. However, as the research process evolved, contact was lost with one participant when she left The International School. While the data that were collected from the departing participant were withdrawn, information derived from the collective discussions could not have been excluded since the data gathered involved a group where discerning information specific to that participant was difficult.

Reference to the teacher participants as well as the data gathered and interpreted from the information and experiences of the participants therefore comprised two preschool teachers and one kindergarten teacher. In Table 4.3 I detail the surface commonalities and individual differences of the teacher participants. By nature of the teaching staff, all of the early childhood teachers are female, Sri Lankan by nationality, have received their teacher training in Sri Lanka and are all veteran early childhood teachers. However, the teachers differ in their educational backgrounds and their teaching experiences range from teaching solely at The International School to teaching in other schools with differing approaches to teaching and learning including in the local Sri Lankan context and at other international schools abroad.

<b>Commonalities</b>  -Female -Sri Lankan -Teacher training in Sri Lanka -Veteran teachers	<b>Participant A - Punya</b> -Ethnicity: Sinhalese -Educational background: Diploma in Teaching with Montessori Training -Teaching experience: solely at The International School as an early childhood teacher
	<b>Participant B - Tounnalina</b> -Ethnicity: Tamil -Educational background: diploma in early childhood education -Teaching experience: promoted from an assistant teacher to a classroom teacher and early years coordinator
	<b>Participant C – Nayana</b> -Ethnicity: Sinhalese -Educational background: Diploma in Professional Studies in Education -Teaching experience: different international schools including in the Middle East

Table 4.3 Commonalities and differences between the teacher participants

The group of teacher participants represented a small, informative sample. The early childhood teachers were not chosen for typicality or even untypicality, but because of the *explanatory power* they could potentially generate (Scott & Usher, 2011). I hoped that my sample group would provide rich information that serves to deepen understanding of the phenomenon under study (Petty, Thomson & Stew, 2012). The explanatory power “is exercised to specifically pick information-rich cases on the basis of their matched criteria to the ones required to answer the research questions being asked” (p. 73). In my research, the early childhood teachers were selected in hopes to yield insights that are illuminative to my inquiry into the factors that are perceived to impact the pedagogical practices of teachers with regards to play in early childhood classrooms.

#### **4.4 Data collection methods: How do I find out what I want to know?**

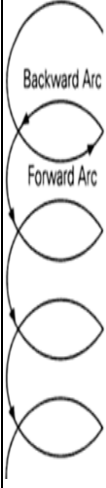
My investigation into the past experiences of early childhood teachers with play can be visualised as a series of hermeneutic spirals (Marcis, 2012). Since my philosophical principles which guided how I approach my interpretive inquiry into



play are hermeneutic in nature, the methods which I used to gather data needed to be sensitive towards the multiple contexts and experiences which the teacher participants were coming from. The methods I employed also apprehended data that enabled thick descriptions and interpretations for my re-presentations of the early childhood teachers' multiple realities, diverse experiences and individual perceptions of their worlds. The data collection methods used included:

1. an initial focus group discussion,
2. individual interviews with the teacher participants,
3. observations into the early childhood classrooms of the teacher participants,
4. individual stimulated recall sessions and
5. a final focus group discussion.

In Table 4.4, I detail the different methods and the purpose of the data collection phase which I used. Each loop in the spiral reflected my attempt at getting closer to what I hoped to understand as I entered each new phase of data collection with a specific inquiry focus (Macris, 2012). What I gained and learnt in one loop, informed the direction of my questions in the following loop. As Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) summarised, the hermeneutic spirals “can lead the researcher to discover the most unexpected “answers,” which in turn can lead to revised research questions, also potentially unanticipated, which could not have been posed without having stumbled on the unexpected answer to the initial question” (p. 55).



<b>Data collection method</b>	<b>What I hoped to achieve: The inquiry focus</b>
<i>Focus group discussion</i>	Establish a relationship with the teacher participants and focus on teacher beliefs about play and its place in early childhood classrooms
<i>Individual interviews</i>	Emphasise the factors that shape the use of play, discovering the significance of past experiences rich in multiple contexts
<i>Classroom observations</i>	Use authentic examples from the classrooms of the teacher participants to provide further detail, depth and richness
<i>Stimulated recall sessions</i>	Share data from my classroom observations to make sense, construct and re-present participant experiences
<i>Focus group discussion</i>	Provide a reflective opportunity to address research material and the research experience from the participants' points of views

Figure 4.4 Applying the hermeneutic spirals to my interpretive inquiry into play

The spiral pattern thus describes the process of creativity and the discovery of new knowledge in my interpretive inquiry into play. In the following sub-sections I discuss each loop of data collection in further detail.

#### 4.4.1 Focus group discussion

The first loop of a research study attempts to get closer to the participants (Macris, 2012). The questions asked intend to build rapport, establish the research as well as elicit information about the participants' backgrounds (Guest et al., 2013). My first phase of data collection encompassed a focus group discussion since it is a method that facilitates trust and openness in a group. The focus group was therefore important in creating a nonthreatening research atmosphere and relationships. In setting the group dynamics, I hoped to enable the early childhood teachers at The International School to develop and define their roles in addition to construct the framework for researcher-participant interaction throughout the research process. Finally, characteristic of a focus group discussion is the conversations that reveal the perspectives, belief and experiences of the teacher participants. It was my intention that the discussion would lead to the diverse viewpoints on play and the use and

implementation of play as the leading activity to the learning and development of young children.

The discussion took approximately an hour and a half and was recorded using a camera with both video and audio capabilities. My technique involved the use of a predetermined structure and questions as a preliminary guide (which can be viewed in Appendix A). The questions were designed to be open-ended and elicit the differences in beliefs, values and perspectives of the teacher participants. I returned to my emergent approach to research where the characteristics of openness and flexibility enabled me to adjust my questions and direction of the data collection process. While the structure and questions served to guide me through the focus group discussion, I was also responding to the data being shared by the teacher participants as I adapted my interactions to capture the diverse points of view and the multiple realities of the early childhood teachers.

A focus group discussion therefore reflects the principles of an interpretive inquiry as the method acknowledges meaning making through interaction and negotiation (Willis, 2007). Furthermore, as the teacher participants responded to the process and questions differently, the discussion also accounted for the diversity in voices and experiences. As Guest et al. (2013) summarised, the elements of a focus group illuminate the “power of multiple minds, diverse points of view, and variety of human experience” (p. 209).

#### **4.4.2 Individual teacher interviews**

As Scott and Usher (2011) maintained, interviews serve a range of purposes. My intention for the interviews with the teacher participants included:

- an opportunity to individually re-examine the data gathered and meanings constructed from the focus group discussion;
- the use of another method to collect further data about the beliefs on the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms; and
- a way to access past experiences and the perceived effects on teaching practices.

The interviews with the early childhood teachers took about an hour and were recorded. I approached the interviews using semi-structured techniques where I

encouraged the participants to take increasing lead of the interview after my initiation. My interviews began with questions that were predetermined and further questions emerged from the conversations during the interviews. The predetermined questions were developed from the nature of topics and patterns interpreted from the focus group discussion. In Table 4.5 I detail the predetermined questions.

<b>Re-examination of data</b>	<b>Further data about the use of play</b>	<b>Access to past experiences</b>
<p>A key point I took away from the focus group discussion was an understanding that free play and play organised by teachers are different in nature and purpose.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you please talk more about this?</li> <li>• Could you tell me what these two types of play might look like in your classroom?</li> </ul> <p>In discussing the ideal play classroom environment, it was agreed that there is a wish that play would just be accepted and respected. Why do you think there is this challenge to play?</p> <p>We spent some time discussing playdates which children go to after school and how play has “diminished” from the past because children are spending less time interacting and engaging with one another. Can you tell me your thoughts on why you feel play has changed?</p>	<p>One of the factors affecting the use play that was discussed during the focus group was the expectations placed on the students and teachers to meet high academic standards. In what ways does this influence your decisions on the use of play in the classroom?</p> <p>A pattern that emerged from the discussion was a felt need to find a balance between meeting grade-level expectations and preparing the students for the next grade with the opportunity to learn through play. What influences and factors inform your thoughts and actions on finding this balance?</p>	<p>It was mentioned throughout the discussion that curriculum expectations, human and material resources and time were factors that affected the use of play in your classrooms. Tell me more about factors from <i>your life experiences</i> that you see further influencing your decisions about the use of play in your classroom.</p> <p>During the discussion you identified...<u>give the specific example from the focus group discussion pertaining to the specific participant...</u>as a significant influence from your life that has led you to your position on play. As you remember a play scenario that has recently occurred in your classroom, how has the past experience informed your decisions?</p>

Table 4.5 Predetermined interview questions

By using the predetermined interview questions in addition to the emerging questions from the conversations, the individual interviews enabled me to develop detailed descriptions and interpretations that integrated the multiple perspectives of the teacher participants. The individual interviews enabled me to inquire into how the early childhood teachers:

- perceive the use and implementation of play in their classrooms,
- describe the past experiences which they feel to have influenced their beliefs about play and
- make sense of their lived experiences that shape their immediate behaviours and actions in their classrooms.

#### **4.4.3 Classroom observations**

The classroom observations enabled me to focus on what was taking place in situ (Cohen et al., 2007). Rather than solely depending on the use of narratives, the observations facilitated an investigation into the natural context as it enabled me to gather authentic samples of what was actually happening in the classrooms of the teacher participants (Scott & Morrison, 2005). Furthermore, observations are a key component in the study to the in-depth understanding of classrooms (Wien, 2011) as research into early childhood classrooms has outlined the gap between play in theory and play in practice (Adams et al., 2004; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Rogers & Evans, 2007; Wohlwend, 2009). Observations were therefore fundamental to the detail, depth and richness of my inquiry into play.

Observations are about “researchers recording the data of interest directly, based on their own perceptions and impressions” (Rolfe & Emmett, 2010, p. 313). The kind of behaviour observed therefore depends on the aims and interests of the researcher. The purpose for my classroom observations was to observe the instances where play was used as a learning experience for young children as I hoped to investigate the relationship between the previous life experiences with play and its effects on the use and implementation of play in the classrooms of the teacher participants.

Multiple methods were used to gather data during the observation phase as a way to strengthen the collection of data and to broaden the scope of the observations made. The methods in which I used aligned to my viewpoints including:

- my philosophical perspectives where I view realities as being socially constructed as well as the significance of interaction and dialogue between myself as a researcher and the teacher participants;
- my methodological perspective where the use of interpretive inquiry enables me to investigate the subjective meanings of the teacher participants and gain an understanding of human systems from a holistic view; and
- my use of thick descriptions and interpretations to capture the multiple and diverse meanings which I construct with the inclusion of the teacher participants' voices.

Furthermore, my choice in observation methods was guided by how I see children learn which also aligns to The International School's orientation towards children's learning. Following the social constructivist approach, children actively seek to make sense of their world by interacting with their environment through observation, exploration, investigation and inquiry (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008). Learning is a process of co-construction where children collaborate, cooperate and negotiate with others (Flick, 2009).

The methods which I used included *event-sequenced observations*, *anecdotal records* and *running records* (Rolfe & Emmett, 2010).

*Event-sequenced observations* – Event-sequenced observations enabled me to record the occurrence of various play activities in the early childhood classrooms. While what I perceived as play was guided by the elements of the social constructivist approach, I also used Hyvonen's (2011) definitions of different play types since the different play situations are used in her research into the perspectives of Finnish early childhood teachers to develop pedagogical thinking about play. The definitions were used since the emphasis is on the role of the teacher, supporting the notion that learning for young children is about collaborating, cooperating and negotiating both with adults and with peers (Duncan & Lockwood, 2008). Furthermore, the types of play develop a common vocabulary, providing a shared way of communicating and thinking about play between myself as a researcher and my teacher participants throughout the research process. The event-sequenced observations provided me with information on the frequency and different types of play occurring in the early

childhood classrooms. I hoped this would be insightful to the discontinuity between play in theory and play in practice.

*Anecdotal records* –The anecdotal records enabled me to gather detailed accounts into what play looked and sounded like in the classrooms of the teacher participants. Using Fler and Richardson’s (2004) sociocultural approach to making observations, the richness of the interactions and contexts of play became the foci during my classroom observations. By keeping descriptive notes on the play activities occurring in the classrooms, it was my intention to gain a detailed picture of the behaviours and actions of the teacher participants. The anecdotal records therefore aligned to my use of thick descriptions and interpretations.

*Running records* – Finally, the running records were aimed to provide snapshots of rich descriptions of what was occurring in the classrooms as well as provide longhand records of the dialogue and interactions taking place. As the running records enabled me to focus on the role of the teacher as well as the conversations between the teacher and students, this method supports the notion that learning occurs through engagement and interaction with the world (Ackermann et al., 2013). The hope was to use the running records to provide detailed pictures of what was happening in the early childhood classrooms during specific intervals of my classroom observations. In Appendix B, I present the event-sequenced observation sheet, observational protocol guiding the anecdotal records and the running record form which I used during my classroom observations.

In combination with the methods used for making classroom observations, I also took photos to enrich my observations and interpretations. First, the purpose of taking photos was to enable me to recapture the moment to focus on the non-verbal interactions and interpersonal relationships between students and teachers. Second, the photographs were used in the stimulated recall phase of the data collection process as a recall technique.

The intention of the observations was to “produce penetrating insights and highly contextual understanding” (Guest et al., 2013, p. 76). The classroom observations were therefore intended to use authentic examples to add depth to the understandings of the lived experiences that are perceived to shape the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms.

#### 4.4.4 Stimulated recall technique

Since researcher-participant relationships are fundamental to the construction of realities, how I described and interpreted my classroom observations involved working together with the teacher participants. A stimulated recall technique enabled me to construct thick descriptions and interpretations of my classroom observations based on how the teacher participants perceived and understood play happening in their early childhood classrooms.

As Vesterinen, Toom and Patrikainen (2010) suggested, the stimulated recall method seeks to enable an individual to relive an experience through the use of cues from an original situation. The intention is to construct an interpretation of the observations that are grounded on the cognitive thinking and decision-making processes of the early childhood teachers from their points of view. Through this process, it was my hope that the stimulated recall sessions would detail the diverse contexts which the teacher participants perceived to have influenced their behaviours and actions as well as the use and implementation of play in their classrooms.

Each stimulated recall session took approximately an hour. As I presented a series of photos that were taken from my classroom observations, I began the discussions with the teacher participants by using open-ended questions including:

- What are your thoughts/feelings when you view these photos?
- As you look at these photos, what do you see happening?
- As you examine the photos, what might some of your findings be?
- As you reflect on this lesson, what ideas or insights are you discovering?
- When you think about the planning of the learning opportunities in the photos, what were the factors that influenced your decisions about the organisation of your classroom and the way you approached the learning engagements?

By using open-ended questions, this invited the early childhood teachers to engage in conversations about what was happening in their classrooms as well as to reflect and think deeply about why the situations may have occurred. Answering the whys encouraged the teacher participants to revisit the factors they perceived to influence their teaching practices.

The stimulated recall sessions used a semi-structured approach where I initiated the conversations and posed questions when clarity or elaboration was



needed. However, the teacher participants took increasing lead of the discussions as the sessions progressed. In order to increase the use of a common language and reference about play, I also provided the definitions for the types of play I used to guide my event-sequenced observations (Hyvonen, 2011). While the definitions were provided to the teacher participants, the actual name of each type of play was not disclosed in order to increase the inclusion of the voices of the early childhood teachers (refer to Appendix C).

My aim for using a stimulated recall method was therefore to:

1. engage and involve the teacher participants in the process of making sense of the data gathered from my classroom observations;
2. construct an interpretation of how play is perceived in the early childhood classrooms; and
3. reflect on the lived experiences that influence the use of play in the classrooms of the teacher participants.

The hope was that the stimulated recall method would be foundational in gaining insights into teacher thinking and decision-making processes since the emphasis was on different contexts and the multiple influences on teacher behaviours and actions.

#### **4.4.5 Second focus group discussion**

By conducting a second focus group discussion, I aimed to explore the experiences, emotions and thoughts of the teacher participants regarding the research process. It was my hope that reflection about the aspects that were enjoyable as well as difficult and challenging would provide another opportunity to gain further insights and be of further support in the descriptions and interpretations of my findings.

The focus group session took approximately an hour. Maintaining the emergent approach to research, the characteristics of openness and flexibility throughout the discussion were embedded in my role as the researcher. This meant that the teacher participants were encouraged to lead the discussion and thus frame the structure of this session. However, as Fanning and Gaba (2007) suggest, the process of reflecting on an experience naturally moves through the *description*, *analogy* and *application* phases. The initial phase involved the teacher participants making recollections about the research process, describing what happened and what they did.

As the early childhood teachers shared their experiences, analogies were formed as meanings were given to their individual experiences. By personalising the experiences, the teacher participants were able to see the different views formed by each member of the group and how the experiences applied to each participant individually.

Reflection is a powerful tool that enables deep thinking, learning and understanding (Moyles, 2010). Reflection involves thinking about why we behave in the manner we do as well as what experiences and values we bring to a particular instance. Through discussion about the research process, the objective of my final phase of data collection was to provide the teacher participants with the reflective opportunity to think deeply about the use and implementation of play and the influences shaping children's play in their classrooms. It was therefore my hope that the reflective discussion would further process findings as well as explore important insights and any gaps in data.

#### **4.5 Data analysis: How do I make sense of the data?**

I revisit the way in which I view the world as Stewart (2011) posited that the way I make sense of the data must reflect the research methodology in which I worked within. An interpretive framework was used to guide my research approach as it enabled me to view the teacher participants as taking an active role in constructing their perceptions of the diverse experiences and factors that shape their teaching practices. Analysis of the data thus reflected the view that meaning is socially constructed and that meaning takes on the form of multiple realities. My descriptions and interpretations of data therefore did not take place during dedicated moments. Rather, the interpretation of data occurred throughout my research process, responding to the moments of working together with the teacher participants as they surfaced.

Thus the way in which I approached data analysis was grounded in an inductive point of view. Unearthing perceptions required an iterative process of reading and rereading data in order to uncover the complexities of insights (Sin, 2010). As Wahyuni (2012) has stated, "performing data analysis on qualitative data basically involves dismantling, segmenting and reassembling data to form meaningful findings" (p. 75). The interpretive process involved weaving between understanding parts of the data in order to achieve an understanding of the larger whole (Creswell,

2013). The significance of iteration as Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) suggest is “not as a repetitive mechanical task but as a deeply reflexive process...key to sparking insight and developing meaning” (p. 77).

An inductive process to data analysis is cyclical in nature and is throughout the research process (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). As Turner (2003) contended, “understanding occurs because we circle from the whole to the parts and back to the whole again, constantly forming and continually revising our understandings or projections about the whole as more parts of it come into view” (p. 9). As I adopted a cyclical nature to interpreting the data gathered, I combined and adapted the circular processes to data analysis taken from Dey (2005) and Hennink et al. (2011). I identified my circular process of data analysis to include:

1. descriptions,
2. comparisons,
3. categorisations,
4. contextualisation and
5. explanations.

The cyclical nature to data analysis enabled me to focus on the data as a whole, dismantling and segmenting the data into parts and then reassembling the data to form detailed representations of the multiple realities of the teacher participants.

*Descriptions* – Beginning with descriptions, the data formed a foundation that provided rich details and insights into the lived experiences of the teacher participants. The use of descriptions enabled me to become familiar with the multiple realities of the early childhood teachers as well as their previous experiences with play, bringing me closer to understanding the teacher participants from their perspectives.

*Comparisons* – The descriptions led me to then make comparisons in the data. By making comparisons, I was able to identify the components that made the experiences of the teacher participants distinct from one another. Through this process, the nuances of the individual experiences that are perceived to shape the use and implementation of play in the classrooms of the teacher participants were illuminated.


*Categorisations* – As the different lived experiences were emphasised, the process of categorisation also enabled me to identify associations and patterns in data.

Through focus on the characteristics that were similar in the lived experiences of the teacher participants, I was able to further refine my findings. However, following the dismantling and segmenting of data, seeing the data as a whole again was fundamental to the process.

*Contextualisation* – The process of contextualisation enabled me to focus on the relationships between categories, interpreting the individual components and how each element linked into a conceptual framework that began to explain my phenomenon under study. At this point in the analysis, a higher level of abstraction is reached and ‘new complexions’ are acquired (Dey, 2005).

*Explanations* – Through understanding the individual components of the lived experiences of the teacher participants and the linkages between their multiple realities, the relationships between complexities in data are revealed. Representing the data therefore results in an explanatory framework that advances our knowledge about the phenomenon under study.

I revisit the spiral loop and re-present the process of the backward and forward arcs in Table 4.6. The spiral pattern summarises the cyclical process of collecting and revisiting data with the teacher participants as additional questions emerged, new connections were made and developments that deepen understanding of the factors that impact the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms developed (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). As Van Wylsberghe and Khan (2007) claimed, “the entity or phenomenon under study emerges throughout the course of the study, and it is this surfacing that can bring the study to a natural conclusion” (84).



<b>Cyclical nature of data analysis</b>	<b>Interpretations: Inclusion of teacher voices</b> <i>Re-examination (backward arc)</i> <i>New questions (forward arc)</i>
Descriptions	I provided a summary of the main points after each discussion with the teachers as one way to increase the accuracy in meaning making. The summary provided the participants with the foundation for the descriptions of their past experiences with play. This process provided an opportunity to confirm my interpretations or re-examine their responses by elaborating on what was discussed or modifying my interpretations to better represent their lived experiences.
Comparisons Categorisations	After each phase of data collection and summary that were provided to the early childhood teachers, further investigation took place through the process of transcribing the audio and video recordings of the discussions. I used the transcriptions of each recording to examine the patterns and nuances in the stories of the early childhood teachers. Through the process of making comparisons and categorisations, new questions emerged.
Contextualisation	Presenting the new questions to the teacher participants enabled me to place the lived experiences of the early childhood teachers into context by linking my interpretations to the conceptual framework where higher levels of abstraction took place and new complexions are created.
Explanations	The cyclical process of including the teacher participants enabled the participants to take a critical part in the interpretation of data, continuously including their voices into the explanations which contribute to our understanding of the impact of our past experiences with play to our teaching practices.

Table 4.6 Presenting the cyclical nature of my data analysis

The circular process to data analysis therefore aligns to the practices of interpretive inquiry where flexibility enabled me to adjust my approach to interpretation in response to the data and the process of iteration enabled me to visit and revisit my findings. Throughout the data analysis process, I worked with the teacher participants to include their voices in revealing the differences and similarities in their lived experiences. As Hennink et al. (2011) summarised, the data analysis process “should go beyond description to develop a new explanation or framework to account for, better understand and explain the study issues...more than participants

could have reported themselves, therefore it involves categorizing, conceptualizing and theorizing” (p. 265).

#### **4.6 Trustworthy Re-Presentations: Credibility and Authenticity**

Interpretive inquiry is not a unified or unequivocal approach since it requires sense making as meanings emerge (Suter, 2012). However, the emergent design does not imply an underdeveloped or unplanned research process (Wright, 2009). In the following sections, I discuss the process which guided me in conducting and evaluating my interpretive inquiry into play in order to collect credible data as well as construct and re-present trustworthy interpretations of the lived experiences of the teacher participants.

##### **4.6.1 Building credible and trustworthy constructs of meanings**

In their paper on interpretive inquiry, Klein and Myers (1999) develop a set of principles to guide researchers to conduct and evaluate interpretive inquiry of a hermeneutic nature. The application of the seven fundamental ideas to interpretive inquiry serves to increase cogent and trustworthiness of a research study. The principles include:

1. the hermeneutic circle,
2. contextualisation,
3. interaction,
4. abstraction and generalisation,
5. dialogical reasoning,
6. multiple interpretations and
7. suspicion.

Though the principles may be presented separately, the principles are interdependent and the application depends on the emerging data to decide whether, how and which of the principles should be applied and appropriated to my research process.

In Table 4.7, I detail how I applied the principles of interpretive inquiry to my inquiry into play. The most significant principle of interpretive inquiry is the *hermeneutic circle*. The assumption is that understanding the factors that shape the teaching practices of the teacher participants will require me to understand the parts of the factors and the interrelationships between factors. *Contextualisation* is the

principle based on the assumption that the past experiences of the early childhood teachers are situated in social and historical contexts. Though circumstances are contextually grounded, my *interaction* and position as a researcher will depend on the process of construction. While emphasis is placed on the individual experiences of the teacher participants, their circumstances may be related to ideas and concepts that can be applied to other and multiple situations beyond the scope of my research. Thus an element of *abstraction and generalisation* may be applied. Important in the process of abstraction and generalisation will be the principle of *dialogical reasoning* which will require me to identify the lenses through which I describe and interpret as well as represent data. Furthermore, understanding the lenses through which the early childhood teachers view their realities will be guided by the principle of *multiple interpretations* where a difference in perceptions may be examined. Though the principles encompass various forms of critical thought, as a researcher I need to maintain *suspicion*, remaining cautious about the possible false perceptions and shortsightedness of my data.

<b>Principles of interpretive inquiry</b>	<b>Philosophical emphasis</b>	<b>Alignment between the principles and my research journey</b>
<i>The hermeneutic circle</i>	Understanding is achieved by considering the fragmented meaning of parts and how they weave together to form the whole context	What are the various past experiences that encompass life, education and professional development that work together to impact the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms?
<i>Contextualisation</i>	Reflection on the social and historical background of the research environment is needed to understand how the investigation has emerged	What was my research purpose that has guided me to begin my inquiry into play?
<i>Interaction between the researchers and the subjects</i>	Research materials are socially constructed through researcher and participant interaction	How do we learn about the world and how does my epistemological philosophy link to the relationships I have developed with the teacher participants?
<i>Abstraction and Generalisation</i>	Specific, individual details may be applied to one or two theories to describe the nature of human understanding and social action	How has my self-knowledge about who I am as a mother and an early childhood teacher helped me understand the circumstances and situations of the early childhood teachers in my study?
<i>Dialogical Reasoning</i>	Possible contradictions between the philosophical and theoretical orientations guiding the research design and the data gathered needs to be examined	How have my worldviews affected the manner in which I approach the research journey and my interpretation of data?
<i>Multiple Interpretations</i>	Examination into the contextually diverse circumstances of the social phenomenon reveals the multiple interpretations and viewpoints	What are the worldviews and standpoints of me and the teacher participants that influence the perception and construction of experiences?
<i>Suspicion</i>	What might be the possible biases in the collection of data?	What are the limitations of an investigation into teacher thinking?

Table 4.7 Alignment between my inquiry into play and the principles of interpretive inquiry (taken from Klein & Myers, 1999)



I used the set of principles from Klein and Myers (1999) as I hoped to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of my data. Therefore, I structured the connection between the principles of interpretive inquiry to my study through a series of questions and referred to the principles and questions throughout the research process.

#### **4.6.2 Evaluating the trustworthiness and authenticity of my inquiry**

Interpretive inquiry requires sensitivity towards representing the construction of individual subjective worlds (Cohen et al., 2007). Meaning making is socially constructed and people create their own sense of realities. Interpretive inquirers are therefore putting forth rich descriptions and interpretations to portray the realities of people. Understanding the lived experiences of individuals is reached through the processes of negotiating, constructing, sharing and re-presenting (Piantanida & Garman, 2009).

In representing the experiences of the early childhood teachers, the research process included an element of critical consciousness involving reflexivity, self-awareness and questioning to prevent shortsightedness (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). As an interpretive inquirer, I constantly asked myself about the influences of my own values and beliefs in interpreting the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the teacher participants. As Henderson et al. (2012) highlighted, the researcher undergoes deliberate scrutiny of his or her own interpretive point of view, which is rooted in personal and formal theories, culturally learned way of seeing and personal core values.

Furthermore, in order to ensure quality interpretive knowledge construction, Lincoln and Guba (1986, 2013) developed standards for *trustworthiness* and *authenticity* to evaluate an inquiry. As I detail in Table 4.8, I used the criteria for trustworthiness and authenticity but adapted them into essential questions which I referred to throughout the data collection and analysis process. *Trustworthiness* refers to the quality of an inquiry, whether the findings are an outcome of a systematic process and whether the descriptions and interpretations can be trusted. The purpose of trustworthiness is therefore to increase truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality of the data. The criteria of trustworthiness are represented through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. *Authenticity* refers to the validity of the inquiry, the potential outcomes of the findings and interpretations. The implication of authenticity is to make sense of one another's understanding and act

with confidence on the understanding gained. As Cohen et al. (2007) detailed, authenticity includes fairness, ontological authentication, educative authentication, catalytic authentication and tactical authentication.

	<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Essential questions</b>
<b>Trustworthiness</b>	<i>Credibility</i>	-Did I have prolonged engagement with the teacher participants? -Was I making persistent observations? -Did I use different data collection methods? -Were my descriptions and interpretations shared with the teacher participants?
	<i>Transferability</i>	-Were the multiple and diverse contexts of the teacher participants acknowledged?
	<i>Dependability</i>	-Did I engage in open-ended, emergent inquiry?
	<i>Confirmability</i>	-Can my research be tracked back to the teacher participants?
<b>Authenticity</b>	<i>Fairness</i>	-Have I presented all the constructions and values of the teacher participants?
	<i>Ontological authentication</i>	-Have the constructions of the multiple realities of the teacher participants been matured, expanded and elaborated?
	<i>Educative authentication</i>	-Have the participants increased their understanding of the whats and whys of the various constructions expressed, focusing on the multiple realities of each other?
	<i>Catalytic authentication</i>	-Did I give the teacher participants a voice, honouring their input and empowering them to make decisions?
	<i>Tactical authentication</i>	-Did I honour a process where the teacher participants were able to think about future behaviour and action?

Table 4.8 Criteria for trustworthiness and authenticity in data (adapted from Lincoln & Guba, 1986, 2013)

In short, as interpretive inquiry aims to capture and re-present the lived experiences of people, it has been fundamental for me to maintain sensitivity towards the lived experiences of the teacher participants. As the multiple realities of individuals are socially constructed through the process of working together and negotiation, it has been important for me to acknowledge the situational contexts that affected how I gathered and analysed data. Furthermore, my use of the criteria for trustworthiness and authenticity through essential questions which I referred to throughout the research process was to reflect on the truthfulness, honesty, accuracy and actionability of my findings and interpretations.

#### **4.7 Ethical considerations: What is my responsibility to the teacher participants?**

The awareness towards ethical issues in research should be addressed in order to ensure the integrity of the researcher and to protect the research participants. As Aluwihare-Samaranayake (2012) highlighted, ethics pertains to the notion of “doing good and avoiding harm” (p. 65). Therefore, prior to my investigation into the previous play experiences with the early childhood teachers, I underwent the process of gaining ethical clearance from The University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee. The process involved:

1. assessing the level of risk to the teacher participants,
2. gaining informed consent,
3. maintaining confidentiality and
4. managing possible risks.

##### **4.7.1 Risks and benefits**

In assessing the risks involved with my research, multiple conversations took place with the Primary School Principal of The International School. The potential significance and impact of my inquiry into play were viewed as benefits to the growth and development of the early childhood teachers, providing them with a possible framework that would build their capacity for reflection into their teaching practices. Commitment to professional renewal is integral to being a teacher at The International School and it was viewed that the early childhood teachers would develop their self-understanding of who they are as early childhood teachers. The research was viewed as an opportunity to foster collaborative learning amongst colleagues, enabling the early childhood teachers to become better informed about the factors that impact their play practices.

##### **4.7.2 Informed consent**

Verbal and written consent were obtained from the Head of School and Primary School Principal to use The International School as the site for my inquiry into play. Written and verbal consent were also obtained from the early childhood teachers for their participation in the focus group discussions, individual interviews and stimulated recall sessions as well as my observations into their classrooms.

Written consent was also required from the parents of the three, four and five year old students in the early childhood classrooms since observations of play

practices inescapably linked to observations of the behaviours and actions of students. The parents of the students previously provided written consent upon admission to The International School for teachers to conduct observations of their child. Additional written consent was also obtained from each of the parents of the students which detailed my presence and purpose in the early childhood classrooms.

#### **4.7.3 Confidentiality and privacy**

Confidentiality of the teacher participants was ensured throughout the research process as no identifying descriptions were gathered. Furthermore, data documents were securely stored within locked locations in order to protect participant privacy. While confidentiality was preserved, anonymity within the school was not guaranteed since the participants knew who else was involved in my research through the group discussions. In addition, given The International School is a small school, colleagues knew the early childhood teachers were involved in my inquiry into play.

#### **4.7.4 Risk management**

The level of risk was monitored through ongoing communication with the teacher participants and openness about the research. Debrief sessions also took place:

1. after the first focus group discussion,
2. after the individual interviews with the early childhood teachers and
3. a final debrief session took place upon the completion of all the phases of data collection.

The various debrief sessions aimed to maintain positive relationships with the teacher participants in addition to provide the early childhood teachers with the opportunity to discuss their experiences with the study.

### **4.8 Possible Limitations to My Study on Play**

The range of limits in my investigation into play included:

- the sample of teacher participants,
- the focus on participant viewpoints and
- the subjective nature of an interpretive inquiry.

*Limitation one: Sample of teachers.* First, my study was delimited to teachers of three, four and five year old children who I carefully selected and who agreed to participate in my research. My sample of participants therefore did not cover the range of teachers under the internationally accepted definition of early childhood (AEU, 2007; NAEYC, 2009).

However, the intention to limit the teacher participants to a small group which I selected was to provide my inquiry with a more focused cohort, using an age range that is stated to be the distinct period that has significance in the development of play behaviours that are foundational throughout life (Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Fahey, 2012). As Patton (2014) explained, a purposive sampling group illuminates the investigation, providing rich information for an inquiry into play.

*Limitation two: Study of teacher viewpoints.* A further consideration was the challenge to empirically study the perspectives of teachers (Hyvonen, 2011). Important was to consider that the responses of the teacher participants may not have reflected their actual beliefs or practices (Cohen et al., 2007). Viewpoints also may have been at an unconscious level thus the difficulty in expressing and discussing perspectives (Lim, 2010).

By using multiple research methods, I aimed to overcome such difficulties in the collection of data on teacher thinking (Adams & Cox, 2008). The first purpose of using multiple research methods was to enable me to make comparisons between data across methods (Lodico et al., 2010; Woodside, 2010). The process therefore allowed me to strengthen my descriptions and interpretations of the factors which the early childhood teachers perceived to affect their teaching practices across methods as opposed to relying on a single data source. The second intention of using multiple research methods was to expand on data (Maxwell, 2013). Through the use of different methods, I was able to broaden my findings by gaining further information. The focus group discussions enabled me to build rapport with the early childhood teachers to engage in an inquiry into teacher thinking. By making classroom observations, I was able to use the data to describe the immediate behaviours of the teacher participants in their classrooms. Through the use of the individual interviews and the stimulated recall sessions, the factors that affect play practices were constructed together with the early childhood teachers. The use of multiple research methods thus resulted in more thorough and rich insights as the process intended to

provide accurate meanings that I constructed by involving the teacher participants through discussions throughout the research journey.

*Limitation three: Subjectivity in interpretive inquiry.* Finally, my interpretive inquiry into the past experiences with play was inescapably shaped by my subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological philosophies as well as my methodological frameworks (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). However, as Scott and Usher (2011) explain,

one's pre-understandings, far from being closed prejudices or biases...actually make one more open minded because in the process of interpretation and understanding they are put at risk, tested and modified through the encounter with what one is trying to understand. So rather than bracketing or 'suspending' them, we should use them as the essential starting point for acquiring knowledge. (p. 32)

Recognising the influences that impacted my research process was therefore crucial (Flick, 2009). By acknowledging the influences that included my beliefs, background and life experiences, accounts of the factors that impact the way in which I approached and interpreted my findings was disclosed (Tan, Wilson & Olver, 2009; Thorne, Kirkman & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). While researcher bias was not eliminated, an awareness and openness to the effects of the researcher becomes accounted for (Markham, 2005).

#### **4.9 Summary**

Chapter 4 has detailed the contexts of the school and the teacher participants in my research into play. Guided by my philosophical viewpoints where realities are constructed through my interaction and work together with the teacher participants, the chapter also detailed the data collection methods and the way in which I interpreted the data. I emphasise the inclusion of the voices of the early childhood teachers and their participation in interpreting the data as well as constructing meaning throughout the research process. Given the importance of sensitivity towards the lived experiences of the teacher participants, a discussion on gaining and evaluating the credibility, trustworthiness and authenticity of my research was also

included. The chapter concluded with the ethical considerations as well as the possible limitations of my study into play.

Chapters 5 through 7 will present the descriptions, nuances and patterns as well as explanations that have been interpreted and constructed with the inclusion of the teacher participants' input and voices. Each chapter addresses a research question and intention. Each chapter is also connected to the filters-frames-guide framework presented in Chapter 3.

Chapter 5 addresses my first research question where the effects of filters including the memories of play and its impact on teaching practices are presented. The descriptions re-present the distinct lived experiences of the teacher participants. While the descriptions enabled me to make comparisons in the data, patterns were also identified as characteristics that were similar in the lived experiences of the early childhood teachers emerged.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE EFFECTS OF FILTERS ON PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 4 I outlined the contexts of the school and the teacher participants for my inquiry into children's play. The data collection methods including an initial focus group discussion, individual interviews with the early childhood teachers, observations into the classrooms of the teacher participants, stimulated recall session after the observations and a final focus group discussion were detailed. A cyclical approach to data interpretation was also discussed, emphasising the social construction of realities through interaction and working together with the teacher participants. A discussion about how to gain and evaluate the credibility, trustworthiness and authenticity in interpretive inquiry was included. The chapter concluded with a section about the ethics of care in addition to the possible limitations of my research.

Chapter 5 answers my first research question: *What memories and personal experiences of teachers with play shape the implementation of play in their early childhood classrooms?* The chapter will present descriptions on the filters which impact how the early childhood teachers perceive and approach play in their classrooms. The chapter begins with a discussion about the filters for perception and how meaning is constructed based on the backgrounds of what it means to be Sri Lankan. Following are the descriptions of the memories and personal experiences with play of the teacher participants which were written with input from the early childhood teachers. The descriptions also enable me to present the nuances and patterns in the data. I also include reflections into my own childhood memories with play and the impact of my previous experiences on my views of play since understanding my own reality provides a better understanding into the realities of the teacher participants (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Through my own reflections, I am more aware of the situational dynamics of my individual participants.

#### **5.2 Memories and Personal Experiences with Play: Filters**

The intention of this chapter is to offer a possible way to approach reflection into the various *filters* (Fives & Buehl, 2012) that detail the lived experiences which



are perceived by the teacher participants to have shaped their views and approaches to play in their early childhood classrooms. Filters, as examined in Chapter 3 are the previous experiences that influence teacher thinking, and therefore the interpretation and approaches to a phenomenon. An individual makes meaning based on past events and content that influences the immediate perception and interpretation of information and experiences.

The focus into the filters affecting the beliefs and approaches to play in the early childhood classrooms of the teacher participants working at The International School necessitated reflections into the behaviours and actions grounded in previous experiences with play. As Brock (2010) emphasised, the process of reflecting on play promotes “analysis and discourse, supporting a search for new understandings and self-awareness, allowing legitimate engagement with different perspectives” (p. 48). Reflections with the teacher participants therefore provided an approach to my interpretive inquiry into the past experiences with play that are perceived to influence teacher thinking and the approaches to play in early childhood classrooms. Through reflection, the diverse and rich lived experiences of the teacher participants and the effects on teaching practices were illuminated, offering a different perspective into play literature.

### **5.3 A Focus into the Multiple Contexts of Play: Making Meaning**

As Krauss (2005) detailed, “the role of meaning is of paramount importance in human life...[as] human beings have a natural inclination to understand and make meaning out of their lives and experiences” (p. 762). Meaning is formed through the interaction and translation of different internal and external contexts. The way in which meaning is constructed is attributed to the different objects, people and life events which individuals encounter and experience. As the construction of meaning is shaped by the situated lived experiences of individuals, the multiple contexts including cognitive, emotional, behavioural, cultural and motivational factors that shape meaning making need to be considered.

Meaning is the underlying motivation behind an individual’s thoughts, actions, interpretation and application of knowledge. Since our thoughts, behaviours and actions are profoundly shaped by our lived experiences, culture, values and beliefs (Davis & Andrzejewski, 2009), understanding the contexts of meaning making

requires reflection and the collection of data that requires more than mere personal introspection (Woodside, 2010).

The complexity of meaning was fundamental to my inquiry into the past experiences with play and the influences on the use of play in early childhood classrooms. Revealing the meanings in which the teacher participants have constructed required a holistic focus, acknowledging the multiple contexts that shape the thinking, beliefs and meanings in which the teacher participants created.

Furthermore, since my research was conducted in an international school in Sri Lanka, it is essential to consider the diverse experiences and contexts that influence the lived experiences of the teacher participants. As Barlas and Wanasundera (2009) supported, Sri Lankans have a perspective on life that is grounded in their own backgrounds including religion, political standpoints and personal experiences which makes for great insights.

Understanding the factors that shape teaching practices therefore required me to learn about Sri Lankan culture, history and the multiple effects on the lived experiences of the teacher participants and the way the early childhood teachers constructed meaning and perceived their realities grounded in the rich and diverse backgrounds they come from. Sri Lanka is rooted in historical and cultural heritage that have profound impact on how its people view and construct reality (Daskon, 2010). Being more flexible and sensitive to the contexts was vital since my inquiry needed to go beyond teaching traditions, norms and beliefs. Rather, understanding the complex and distinctive historical and cultural contexts was embraced.

#### **5.4 The Research Context**

I begin this section with a narrative from my point of view about my first encounter with The International School and with the teacher participants from a researcher's position. Prior to beginning my research, my role at The International School was that of a kindergarten teacher. However, when I initiated my study into children's play, the place where I worked became the place where I conducted my interpretive inquiry.

The narrative bears significant implication since "the happenings of the past have conditioned the present, and so knowing something about the Sri Lankan background is almost a necessity for those who want a more intimate knowledge of the country and its people" (Barlas & Wanasundera, 2009, p. 9). The historical and

cultural contexts therefore have profound impact on how Sri Lankans construct meaning and view their realities.

#### **5.4.1 The beginnings: Building rapport**

No different from any other day going into work, clouds of thick black smoke mask my sights of the rich flora and fauna of the Sri Lankan paradise isle. Going into work involves an adrenaline rush as my tuk tuk driver haphazardly obeys the traffic rules while dangerously weaving in and out of hairy situations in attempt to avoid all obstacles including rushing cars and cows crossing the street.

Suddenly, my driver abruptly stops his tuk tuk on the side of a busy street and points to a solid, dark blue concrete wall standing about 10 feet tall which has been built on a permanently fixed wall of rocks. Dozens of tuk tuks are parked side by side, waiting for their turn to zoom off into the clouds of fumes as they anticipate their next passengers. My driver motions again and I realise I have arrived. In the midst of the bustling street congested with people catching buses, cows roaming to their next shop front, tuk tuks maneuvering the busy street and honking horns from cars rushing passed I stood beside of my tuk tuk gazing across the street. Who would have ever thought what was behind this fortified exterior at the heart of a busy city of nearly 648,000 people would be a spacious, green, quiet and calm school campus.

As I approached the large black gate of the school, the two sides succinctly open and I am greeted by several guards wearing light brown uniforms. As they each take a careful look at me, I am quickly received with smiles and nods of welcome. As I proceed onto the school grounds, I walk through the front foyer and begin my climb up the stairs towards the primary building where the early childhood classrooms are located on the first two floors of the building. My walk towards the classrooms is characterised by warmth and friendliness with smiles all around. I hear laughter. I see happiness. I feel a positive vibe.

The preschool classrooms, where I am to meet the teacher participants, are a purpose-built area of four spacious classrooms recently reconstructed into four interconnected quadrants. The preschool area occupies the entire lower level of the primary building. There are four doors to enter into the preschool classrooms. Large windows run the full length of the front and back walls of the rooms. The classrooms are well-lit and the blasting air-conditioners are a relief from the Sri Lankan heat and humidity. Entering from any of the four doors into the preschool classrooms, I get an

overview of the entire preschool area since the rooms are barely separated by a wall (refer to Figure 5.1).

Dark blue bulletin boards that hang from ceiling to floor colourfully display children's work in addition to photos of them engaged in their learnings. There are tables that are set-up in clusters that enable group work. There are distinct centers including an art area; sand and water play; a corner for construction; various role play centers including a dress-up corner, a home area and a shop; a library with a listening station; as well as a math corner and a writing area. Resources are neatly sorted, labeled and organised into colourful plastic baskets that enable students to locate which area of the room the resources are from. The shelves are tailored to the height of young children, making all the learning materials accessible to students. There is also a real-life stove, microwave and refrigerator on one side of the preschool classrooms.

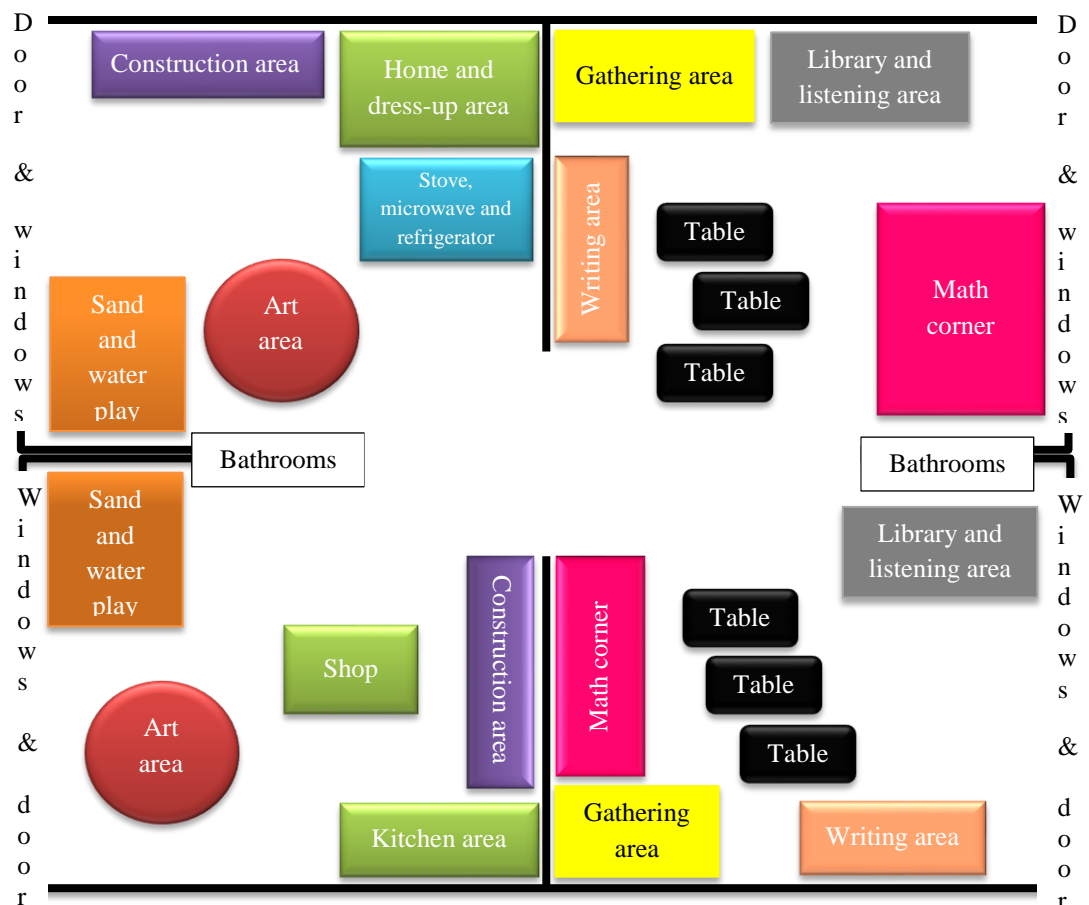


Figure 5.1 The preschool classrooms

I find a cluster of tables and chairs located in the middle of one of the preschool classrooms and begin to set up my computer. I am again greeted by nods of

welcome and warm smiles as a tray of tea and coffee is delivered by the cafeteria staff. Another two trays arrive. One with a sweet, dried fruit crumble and another tray filled with one of the most popular short eats in Sri Lanka: steaming, fiery flavoured fish cutlets.

Food takes on a vital role in the day-to-day lives of Sri Lankan people, especially to the teacher participants. Not only was my research journey marked by wonderful smells and tastes of Sri Lanka, but the childhood memories and stories of play told by the teacher participants are surrounded by the presence of food. The arrival of food in my first encounter with the teacher participants was therefore significant and meaningful as food for a Sri Lankan signifies sharing, honesty and identity (Shook & Upasena, 2015).

As the classroom air fills with wonderful smells, the teacher participants begin to enter the room. The classroom environment fills with jovial voices of excited chatter. The teacher participants spot me and approach me with warm smiles, “ayubowan!” they all shout as they greet me. Arms are extended and hugs are given. Our exchange signifies the start of our incredible journey together. This was the beginning of our work together of sharing, constructing and re-presenting the past experiences with play that affect the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms.

### **5.5 Meet Punya**

Punya is a teacher in the preschool at The International School. She has been at the school for over 30 years and over the years she has seen the school grow and change in different ways. However, the experience which made most impact to Punya was an incident in the school’s history which took place on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1987. Struggling with a civil war, the school was attacked on this particular day. Buildings were set on fire. Millions of rupees worth of equipment was lost. The administrative block of the school was completely destroyed and all of the school’s records perished. Though it was a frightening time for all of the staff, they pulled together as a community and supported each other. School continued in different locations and the staff became more resourceful and they developed their resilience, focusing on what was most important to them: their students.

Such a historic moment could never be forgotten. The political history of the country and the extreme struggles and challenges which the staff faced at the school

emphasises who Punya is today. After more than 25 years of violence in Sri Lanka and after experiencing the conflict directly at the school, Punya's priorities resonate in the relationships she values. Punya's commitment is towards the relationships she builds and maintains.

For Punya, the school is like her family. The International School is a second home for her. An important part of being at school is therefore about the people, being around people and being able to work cooperatively. The community is also what Punya prioritises for her students. The organisation of her preschool classroom is about working in groups and supporting each other. School life and learning are about team building and friendships.

### **5.5.1 Memories with play and its impact**

Punya's favorite play memory was having picnics with her cousins. She learnt how to cook delicious rice and curry in little clay pots by watching her parents. Using the same clay pots that her mom and dad used, Punya, along with her cousins pretended to make rice and curry. Into the clay pots, all sorts of rocks and stones which were gathered from the garden were thrown in. She mixed all the ingredients together and let the mixture simmer on an open fire that was built by piling up a bunch of dried sticks and coconut shells. As she cooked, the cousins rolled out the bamboo mats in preparation for serving up. Occasionally Punya returned to the clay pots to check on the rice, mix the curry and tend to the fire. When it was time to serve up, the portions were divided. Punya and her cousins sat down together and enjoyed their cooking. As Punya remembered, "though the stones went *crrr, crrr, crrr* in our mouths, we would find our cooking really tasty. This was our work. We made it. We made it together" (Interview, April 5, 2013).

As she grew up, Punya's play remained simple. She recalled walking home from school with her friends. They climbed trees, plucked the mangoes and shared it between the friends. The value of money was not important and the little pocket money the friends had, they used to buy a piece of pineapple or a little bit of gram. As they walked home, they ate and talked and laughed together. That is what Punya defined as fun. Eating was what the friends enjoyed doing together.

Punya also remembered creating a game with her friends where they balanced themselves along the Pannipitiya Wall, a part of a suburb of Colombo city in Sri Lanka. Walking in a straight line, one behind another, the friends tried to pass one

another by asking each other who is a Christian and who is a Buddhist. If one decided they were a Christian, they tried to pass the person in front and move forward. If one decided they were a Buddhist, they needed to stay behind until their next turn.

Punya recollected her teenage years to also be fantastic. She has three brothers and two sisters which she adores. Her brothers used to join Punya and her friends and go on outings around town. There would be a large group of 50 people as they were also friendly with all of their neighbours. Together, they played cricket or went swimming. Sometimes they went to a movie and occupied two to three rows in the theater.

As Punya summarised:

*to me, all my play experiences held significance and meaning. Even though my play was simple, I treasured all of the moments. I especially valued the relationships I built and the good fun I had with being around other people. I enjoyed cooking with my cousins and I loved being with my brothers and friends. Plucking and sharing mangoes was simple but enjoyable. Talking and laughing with my friends was simple but true happiness. Walking along the Pannipitiya Wall playing made up games was simple but pure fun. It was all so simple, but I cherished each and every one of those moments and interactions. (Interview April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013)*

Though Punya's play was simple, this is what she values in her preschool classroom. She enjoyed cooking and doing things outside and playing outdoors. Using sticks and coconut shells was what she had as a child and the cousins and friends made the best out of what nature offered. According to Punya, play should not be about fancy and expensive toys that children are getting nowadays. Play should not be bounded by the fears of children being outdoors and getting sick from playing with sticks and dirt. Play should be about enjoying simple fun with family and friends.

What Punya has learnt from the political history of Sri Lanka and the historical moment at The International School is that learning and growing is about sharing experiences with close ones. From the picnics with her cousins to the walks home with her friends and the time spent with her brothers, the experiences is what

Punya wants for her students: simple, cooperative activities, but pure fun and happiness for her students.

### **5.6 Meet Tounnalina**

Tounnalina has been working at The International School for 14 years. During her time at The International School, Tounnalina's experiences ranged from beginning as an assistant teacher to becoming the early childhood coordinator. She is now one of the two preschool teachers at the school. Tounnalina's experiences at The International School see the rise in academic expectations being placed on the preschool and kindergarten students with each passing year. The children are expected to know the letters of the alphabet by the time they leave preschool and are expected to read by the time they finish kindergarten. The children in preschool are learning numbers to 100 and being able to add and subtract when they reach kindergarten.

For Tounnalina, she sometimes feels at a loss because she wants to spend more time doing activities that the children are interested in. She wants to have more opportunities for play, to set up her classroom environment and observe the children as they explore the centers which she has planned and organised for them. However, increasingly she plans and structures activities for the sake of record keeping.

One example taken from her experiences is the change in how she begins her morning based on the request from administration. The children are required to come in first thing in the morning to copy write the title of the book they read at home the previous night and draw a response about the book in their reading journals. Tounnalina noticed the children quickly scribbling in their books and then rushing off to a center in the classroom to start exploring. The response from her three and four year olds is always the same: "Can we play now? Can we play now?" Along with similar experiences, Tounnalina remarked: "I wish that play would be accepted and respected by everyone. How can we though with the increasing expectations being placed on children? What is a good balance then?" (Focus group discussion, March 25, 2013).

#### **5.6.1 Memories with play and its impact**

As a young girl, Tounnalina was fascinated by people. She was curious about who people were and what they were about. She people watched for hours and then



went home and role played what she saw. Tounnalina remembered going to the market with her mom and she recalled watching people chew betel leaves as they weaved in and out of the busy market. Not knowing what it was back then, she saw the mouths of people get redder and redder as they chewed the betel leaves. How fascinating she thought and naturally she wondered what it was like. One day Tounnalina decided to find out. There was a coffee tree at the back of her house and she plucked a leaf off the tree and ate it. Her mouth did not turn red, nor did she try another leaf thereafter.

From her many hours of watching people at the market, Tounnalina also remembered how fascinating it was to listen to the way the stall keepers spoke. Though the stall keepers would shout at the passerby, the louder they shouted the more customers they seemed to have attracted. She watched carefully as the stall keepers weighed the produce on an old, dirty balance scale and made their sale. It was so fascinating for her to see how the stall keepers then stored the money from their sale as they haphazardly tucked the crumbled bills under a selected gunny sack full of goods and coins were carelessly thrown into some small form of unglazed pottery. Captivated by the whole market scene, Tounnalina role played the market experience during her visits to her grandparents' home. She filled gunny sacks full of vegetables from their refrigerator and then she collected leaves that she later used for her money. Using coconut shells balancing on a stick for her balance scale, Tounnalina shouted to her customers and then load a bunch of vegetables into the coconut shells to weigh the produce. As she made her sales, she shoved the leaves which were collected under the gunny sacks that she filled with her grandparents' vegetables.

However, the role play experiences which Tounnalina remembered the most were the ones involving trees. She had a love for trees and she could use trees for anything. Often, Tounnalina climbed up to the top of a tree and pretended it was her bus. In Sri Lanka there are old private buses where the conductor hangs half way out of the back door shouting to all the passersby where the bus is going. So at the top of this tree, Tounnalina hugged the trunk with one arm and she swayed her head from left to right as she shouted as loudly as she could "Battaramulla, Battaramulla, Battaramulla". She then jumped off the bus and started to collect leaves. She weaved the leaves in between her fingers just the way she saw the conductors do as they categorised the rupees by denominations as it is collected from the passengers getting

onto the bus. Tounnalina then climbed back up the tree again and continued with her journey, shouting out the different destinations to possible passengers that were interested in taking a ride. Switching between roles, Tounnalina changed from being a conductor of the bus to being a passenger riding on the bus. The branches of the tree represented the other people on the bus. She turned to a branch and spark up a conversation with this lovely passenger. She turned to another branch and had another conversation with another passenger. There were so many passengers on her bus who were willing to talk. They had so much to say and she had so much to say in return.

Tounnalina summarised:

*learning therefore does not always have to be about achieving certain objectives by the end of the year so that the teacher can mark it onto their record sheets. Though my play experiences as a child did not follow planned and structured classroom activities, I nevertheless was exposed and practiced mathematical skills and concepts in addition to developing other important areas. By creating a balance scale using coconut shells, I was finding out about weight. As I imagined money being categorised by denominations, I was practicing sorting. As I climbed trees, jumped off trees and balanced on the branches I was developing my gross motor skills and my coordination.*

(Interview, April 5, 2013)

So for Tounnalina, experiences through play are far more important for her students than having them struggle each morning through a mandatory writing activity in their reading journals. Tounnalina believes that her students will achieve what they need to achieve with time. She knows that the children are learning and growing. As Tounnalina repeatedly concluded, her wish is to have more opportunities to arrange her classroom into different centers and observe the children at play, much like how she watched people at the market when she was a child. She knows that play will take her students to different levels just like she did through her own play experiences. The question that remains for her though: *Is that enough?* Is that meeting the expectations of the curriculum according to the points of view of others?

## **5.7 Meet Nayana**

Nayana has been at The International School for almost fifteen years as a kindergarten teacher. She is proud to announce that her three daughters graduated from the school and their memories of the school are primarily based on their experiences in preschool and kindergarten. However, as her daughters have seen Nayana throughout the years in her kindergarten classroom they sadly remark on how things have changed. Learning is less fun and the daughters perceive learning to involve play less.

Nayana remembered a time where sewing, carpentry and gardening were a part of the curriculum. The early childhood teachers used to teach children how to sew hankies and then table cloths and teapot covers. The school also had a carpentry shop where the early childhood teachers would bring the children's ideas for wooden toys to Mr. P who worked in the carpentry shop. The students also had opportunities to work with Mr. P on making simple repairs to tables or chairs. The children enjoyed learning from Mr. P about his shop, the tools he used and helping him make their toy idea or repair a classroom item. Gardening was also built into the timetable since agriculture is an important sector to the Sri Lankan economy. The International School used to have a plot of land on the preschool playground and the kindergarten classes would tend to the vegetables including carrots and cabbage. The plot diminished because the area was needed for other purposes, which meant they had to downsize to a small herb garden. That area was also needed and now gardening is no longer a part of the curriculum.

For Nayana, she perceived children like her daughters were able to express their artistic talents and recreational interests through sewing, carpentry and gardening. However, now children can express themselves through reading, adding and subtracting.

### **5.7.1 Memories with play and its impact**

Throughout her childhood, Nayana remembered her mother cooking. Her mother was a good cook and she got Nayana interested in cooking too. Nayana recalled making coconut rocks, milk toffee and roti. She also enjoyed making fruit punches using lemon, orange, passion fruit and thambili (king coconut). She always tried and her mother would support her by saying "that was really good darling".

Nayana's mother further encouraged her to continue cooking, making suggestions on adding something or doing something differently next time.

The play memory in which Nayana shares most with her friends surrounds a cooking party. One day, she was eager to do some real-life cooking during her playdate. She was excited about making pancakes for her family. Nayana recalled there being a group of five, the three sisters from her family and her two very good friends whom she still keeps in touch with. They organised themselves to make pancakes and syrup. They also planned to invite Nayana's parents to eat with them after they finished cooking.

So the girls began to prepare the pancake mixture. Nayana carefully measured out the flour, the sugar and the oil. She remembered that long ago they did not have salt powder so her friend made the last ingredient of salt water by dissolving salt crystals into a cup of water. Nayana then happily mixed all the ingredients together and began to cook her pancakes.

Meanwhile, the others built a house using bamboo mats. They had set up a table in this house and they served up the pancakes when they were ready. Her sisters then called for their mommy and daddy. Nayana remembered how proud she felt to serve her parents. However, her delight quickly turned to horror as Nayana recollected:

*as daddy cuts into his pancake I waited for his response. What does he think? Is it good? Does he like it? Daddy brought a piece of pancake very close to his mouth and remarked "Mmm, super! This is the best pancake I have ever had." He then smiled at me and continued to say "But only thing is a little bit of extra kerosene oil." Kerosene oil? Now I was wondering what this kerosene oil was all about. Daddy gingerly continued to explain "You have put a little bit too much of the kerosene oil." I covered my face and started to cry. Why kerosene oil? Mommy asked what I added into the pancake mixture. I showed her the ingredients and the little bottle of what I believed to be cooking oil. mommy replied "Sweetheart that is kerosene oil!" (Interview, April 9, 2013)*

What she learnt from that experience was that her mother had kept kerosene oil in a small bottle next to the cooking oil. So instead of using cooking oil, Nayana

put kerosene oil into the mixture. Her father consoled her and ensured that it was an accident. He comforted her with gentle words and told her that they could make another batter together. So they threw away the pancakes and they started over. Nayana commented that cooking the second time was much more fun because her father joined in the second time. They mixed, they cooked and then they ate together. This time it was a success.

So for Nayana, cooking has been a major part of her childhood. Her earliest memory of her mother was the cooking of good foods and how much she supported and encouraged Nayana when she cooked. However, the play memory that has been the most unforgettable was the cooking playdate she had with her sisters and good friends. Her fond memories of cooking have influenced the way in which Nayana uses play in her own early childhood classroom. Where previously she used sewing, visits to the carpentry shop and gardening, she now uses cooking for everything.

Though the school has an actual kitchen that can be used by the teachers and students, since cooking is Nayana's personal priority, she ensures that the play in her classroom has an opportunity to develop through cooking. That is why, when you recognise how Nayana uses space in her classroom, a large area of her classroom is set up for kitchen play (see Figure 5.2).

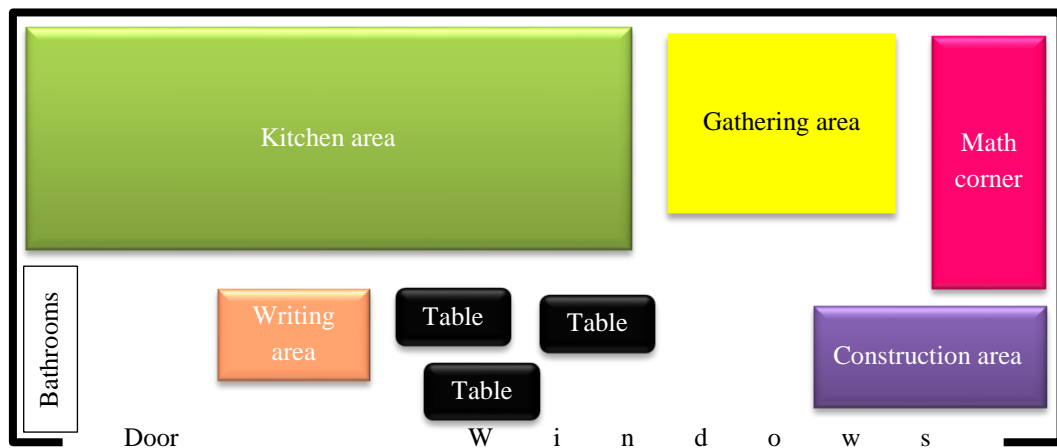


Figure 5.2 Nayana's organisation of her classroom

Cooking is how Nayana integrates host nation lessons. She uses cooking to teach different purposes for writing. Cooking is also used for learning mathematics in her class as children are practicing measurement. Children enjoy cooking and they

are learning through cooking. For Nayana, classroom cooking is a big part of her teaching.

## **5.8 My Own Reflection**

Where I work is where I do my research. I have been at The International School for four years. During my employment, I have been a kindergarten teacher and a preschool teacher. I also took one year away from employment at the school. The time away from full-time work enabled me to submerge myself into the data collection process, focusing on building and maintaining the rich interactions and relationships with the teacher participants.

Unlike the teacher participants, I do not have the residential knowledge to discuss historical moments or the major changes at The International School that has influenced my view about play and the use of play in my own classroom. Nor do I have the institutional history to make a connection between my experiences at The International School and my previous memories and experiences with play. Instead, I return to one of the motivations behind this study: my quest for self-discovery as a mother and as an early childhood teacher and the factors that influence my beliefs and use of play in my own classroom.

As Starr (2010) summarised, the process of self-exploration enables the teacher participants to situate themselves into their own lived experiences and contexts. My discovery into who I am as a mother and as an early childhood teacher extends beyond an inquiry into myself and the previous experiences which I perceive to shape my use and implementation of play. Rather, understanding who I am requires the creation of dialogue and working together with the teacher participants to construct and reconstruct meaning. Presenting my own reflections and narratives therefore has profound effects into who the teacher participants are and the circumstances and conditions that connect their past to the present and the lived with the living.

### **5.8.1 My memories with play and its impact**

The play memory which I share with my family is one that shapes the way I approach play, both as a mother of two young children and as an early childhood teacher. My parents immigrated to Canada about 40 years ago. I remember as a child, we used to take annual trips back to my mom's home in Hong Kong to visit her

extended family. On one very exciting day, mom told me we were soon going to go to Hong Kong for our yearly visit. Not being able to wait for the actual day, I began to scan the room for an empty suitcase. I quickly grabbed a tote bag and pretended it was my luggage. “I am going to Hong Kong! I am going to Hong Kong!” I chanted as I pranced around the room.

I continued my role play as I grabbed a fold-up chair and turned it outwards from the table and looped my legs through the space in the back. I cupped my hands over my mouth and mimicked the announcement before departure, “Please fasten your seatbelts. We are ready for takeoff.” Flying away, I shifted the chair back and forth imagining as if I was on my way to Kong Hong.

As the airplane reached its altitude, I hopped off the chair and started to push it around the house as if it were my food trolley. Role playing a flight attendant I offered my mom, dad, aunt and uncle their food trays. I asked them each what they would like to drink. Carefully pouring their drinks, I then gingerly placed their glasses onto their tabletops and happily chimed “Enjoy your meal.” As I continued to serve my passengers, the flight hits a little bit of turbulence. Returning back to my chair, I buckled up as the pilot announces that we need to fasten our seatbelts. I shook my chair vigorously back and forth as we went through the patch of turbulence. However, my airplane experienced some technical difficulties. SQUASH! My fold-up chair collapsed and I am sandwiched in between a hard metal back and the cushioned seat.

I remember seeing my mom rush towards me to help unfold my chair as I screamed for help. Though my play experience ended abruptly, I learnt an important lesson about the function of fold-up chairs. As I recall my most memorable play experience, I wonder how my memories influence who I am as a mother of two young children and as an early childhood teacher.

For me, it was about the tools that enabled, sustained and extended my play experience. Such tools included the time for play, the place to play and resources to help me play. Taking primacy were the people I was surrounded by and how my mom, dad as well as aunt and uncle helped to enhance and extend my play. For me, an enabling environment that provided me with opportunities for sustained, higher levels of play was of significance. The tools that enable play is therefore what is important for me as a mother of two young children and as an early childhood educator. Seen through my most memorable play experience, the tools not only

include time, space and materials for play. It is about the people. The people matter in helping children play. As an early childhood teacher, that is what I aspire for in my classroom and what I provide for my students. My role as an early childhood teacher takes primacy in creating and sustaining play experiences for my students.

## **5.9 Discussion**

### **5.9.1 Comparisons: Viewing and implementing play in different ways**

In my inquiry into the behaviours and actions of the teacher participants, a focus into the lived experiences of the early childhood teachers was foundational. The differences in contexts account for the diverse and rich meanings in which each of the early childhood teachers construct (Krauss, 2005). Investigating into the previous experiences with play involved a process of reflection which illuminated the filters which impact how each of the early childhood teachers perceive and approach play in their own teaching practices. Since filters influence the interpretation of information which shapes perceptions of realities, my inquiry into the previous experiences with play reveals how the diverse backgrounds with play possibly shape the view as well as approaches to play in early childhood classrooms.

Given the complexity of play, it is also necessary to focus on how The International School specifically views play and its place in early childhood education. As the Primary School Principal of The International School stated, play is the core philosophy of the early childhood program (Personal communication, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015). Teaching and learning in the early years takes place in the form of structured play-based activities. As one of the teacher participants further explained, play at The International School is not about letting the children go “berserk” or having “open sesame” where they chaotically go around and take things (Interview, April 5, 2013). Rather, play is about a structured play-based atmosphere with centers that are carefully planned and materials selected. An enabling environment is created to facilitate play with desired outcomes or objectives.

However, the meaning of play which was constructed with the teacher participants varied from how the core philosophy of The International School defines play and between each of the early childhood teachers. I therefore return to the importance of how lived experiences inform the process of meaning making for individuals, illuminating the distinctions between how the early childhood teachers perceive and approach play in their own classrooms.



For Punya, political filters were most significant to her view about play. Punya's memories with play and the historical moment of the attack on The International School primarily influenced what has become important for her: family, friends and relationships. What was a tragedy for the school became a priority for Punya. The childhood memories with play further contributed to the impact of her view on play as Punya identified the relationships that were developed through play to be of importance. For her, play was about enjoying activities with family and friends.

In the case of Tounnalina, institutional filters were of importance as she was challenged by her doubt about meeting the curriculum through play. Her memories of play involved freedom from boundaries as she observed the people around her and role played what she saw in order to make sense of her observations. However, with increasing pressures to keep records that evidenced meeting the increasing high expectations placed on the children, Tounnalina questioned whether her view on play that was free from structure was aligned to that of The International School.

For Nayana, through her years at The International School, the value and place for play had undergone changes where other priorities took precedence. The challenge to play became apparent when The International School took sewing out of the curriculum, the carpentry shop no longer became available and the plot for the gardening area was replaced by other projects that took on importance. Through her memorable childhood experiences with cooking as play, Nayana was able to maintain play in own her classroom in spite of the changes to the school beyond her classroom walls. For Nayana, cooking has been the tool for play in her teaching practice.

In my instance, my memories of play were about having an enabling environment including the time, space and materials that provoked my imagination and supported my interests. However, the people who joined in my play experiences were foundational. What was important to me during my childhood play is what is essential for my early childhood classroom now. I can offer the children an environment that will support play. However, my interaction with my students is fundamental in my implementation of play.

### **5.9.2 Categorisations: The significance of institutional and cultural influences**

In spite of the distinctions in lived experiences and play memories of the teacher participants, a pattern that did emerge from the descriptions was the perceived changes with how play has been implemented at The International School. What

became apparent were the changes that decreased play time and opportunities for young children at The International School. The early childhood teachers remarked that play is being valued less at the school through the decrease in opportunities for play.

Another pattern which emerged from the data was the effects of significant institutional experiences for each of the early childhood teachers and the connections the teacher participants made to their play memories. As the descriptions were being created with the inclusion of the teacher participants, the early childhood teachers perceived a link between their most significant childhood play experiences with their working experiences they perceived as having most impact. For Punya, her values towards relationships were shaped by the outcomes of the tragic attack on the school. For Tounnalina, her priority of arranging a playful environment was challenged by the school's increasing expectations being placed on her students. For Nayana, her commitment towards sewing, carpentry, gardening and cooking were minimised by the effects of the school's changing curriculum and facilities.

A final pattern that was identified was the significance of food. Food was resonated through Punya's cooking experience with her cousins, Tounnalina's observations made in the market and her role play with food at her grandparents' home as well as Nayana's most memorable cooking experience with kerosene oil. Food occupies an important part in Sri Lankan culture. As Shook and Upasena (2015) commented, experiences coming from the kitchen are at the heart of Sri Lankan identity.

### **5.10 Summary**

Through my inquiry into the memories and personal experiences with play, this chapter presented the descriptions of the filters impacting the perspectives and approaches to play of the early childhood teachers working at The International School. From a focus into the multiple realities of the teacher participants, the rich experiences captivate the diverse contexts that shape the beliefs and use of play in early childhood classrooms. The insights into the multiple realities of the early childhood teachers illuminate the complexities of play, acknowledging play is not a universal phenomenon. Filters including historical, institutional as well as cultural contexts impact the distinct meanings which individuals give to play and how play is used in the early childhood classrooms.

In spite of the distinctions, a pattern which emerged from the data was the perceived decrease in time and opportunities for play. The early childhood teachers also made a connection between their working experiences with their most significant play memories. Finally, narratives about food resonated throughout each of the early childhood teachers' descriptions.

Chapter 6 addresses my second research question. This chapter will provide another layer of interpretation where the implication of previous play experiences frame the current orientations and developed theories on play. Through this process of contextualisation, new complexions (Dey, 2005) in data are acquired as connections between the play memories of the teacher participants with their orientation and theory on play are constructed.

## CHAPTER 6

### FROM FILTERS TO FRAMES: THE IMPLICATION OF PLAY MEMORIES ON THE ORIENTATIONS AND DEVELOPED THEORIES ON PLAY

#### 6.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 focused on the personal experiences of the teacher participants with play that have been perceived to shape their thinking and approaches to play in their early childhood classrooms. The filters of the childhood memories with play were re-presented through narratives that were constructed with the involvement of the teacher participants. The descriptions illuminated the lived experiences of the early childhood teachers and how such diverse and rich backgrounds are the underlying motivation behind people's thoughts, actions and the manner in which individuals interpret information (Krauss, 2005). Though the experiences of the early childhood teachers illuminated the complexity of play, patterns in data did emerge including the impact of institutional influences on how the early childhood teachers approached play in their own classrooms and the significance of food in Sri Lanka.

In Chapter 6 I address my second research question: *How do previous play experiences of early childhood teachers affect their current orientations and developed theories on play as an effective teaching practice?* The chapter will focus on the impact of play experiences in the early childhood education of the teacher participants and how their childhood experiences as young learners impact the manner in which they now frame play in their own classrooms (Fives & Buehl, 2012). By analysing the connections between previous play experiences and the implications on the current orientations and developed theories on play, this process of contextualisation enables me to enrich the descriptions in Chapter 5 through the use of wider contexts.

#### 6.2 How Play is Conceptualised: Frames

The intention of my second research question is to provide insights into the previous experiences with play that are perceived to impact current beliefs and developed theories about play and the use of play in early childhood classrooms. The second research question is built upon the first. However, the question intends to provide a deeper level of interpretation by connecting the data to other contexts beyond the descriptions presented in Chapter 5.

The orientations and theories on play *frame* how play is conceptualised and realised into actual teacher practice (Five & Buehl, 2012). The sources of teacher beliefs, behaviours and actions may remain unaware to the teacher (Korthagen, 2010). It is therefore through the process of contextualisation the connections between previous play memories and the impact on current orientations and theories on play and the implementation of play in early childhood classrooms are developed.

In Figure 6.1 I use the concept of concentric circles to show the complexity of the relationships between factors shaping play in practice. The most outer circle is where the influential elements begin, from childhood memories with play. The personal play experiences shape the way in which an individual perceives and constructs information, resulting in a current orientation on play. The current orientation on play in turn forms an individual's constructions of developed theories on play. The multiple levels result in how play is used in early childhood classrooms.

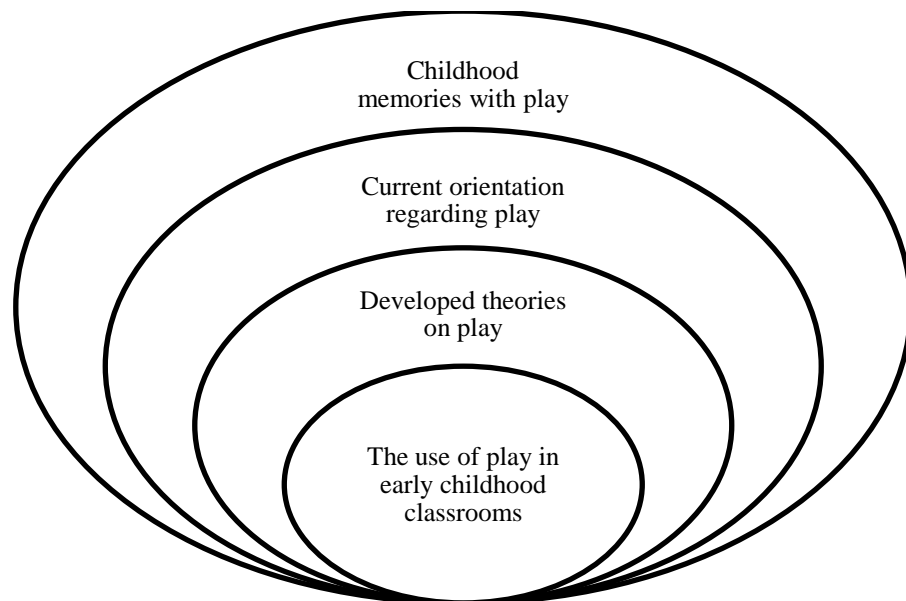


Figure 6.1 The relationship between various factors influencing play in practice

The concentric circles represent my inquiry into the lived experiences that are specific to the teacher participants. The childhood memories with play influence the frames affecting the use and implementation of play. In short, it is through the process of contextualisation that insights are gained into the rich and diverse factors influencing how play is realised in early childhood classrooms.

### **6.2.1 Play memories and the impact on immediate behaviours and actions: The story with watermelons**

By delving into the memories and personal experiences with play and its effect on current orientations and developed theories on play, my inquiry revealed the intricacies into the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms. Furthermore, my motivation towards the self-discovery of who I am as a mother and as an early childhood teacher illuminates the complexities into, not only the effects of multiple lived experiences on current orientations and developed theories on play, but the immediate behaviours and actions regarding play. As Starr (2010) suggested, self-understanding which necessitates investigation into the historical and cultural backgrounds is “a valuable tool in examining the complex, diverse and sometimes messy world of education” (p. 2). I therefore highlight a significant discovery about myself that was revealed during the research process. The story draws a connection between my childhood memories and my immediate behaviour during a particular play experience with my son and my family. It is my story about watermelons.

*Every summer I take my annual leave and return back to Canada for an extended visit. The summers are spent with my family and it is a time where my children enjoy playing with their grandparents. It is also a time where they indulge in foods unavailable the rest of the year being third culture kids.*

*I recall from last summer that my son began to enjoy eating watermelons. This summer as my son continuously requested for watermelons, my family obliged and it soon became our fruit of the evening. Being such a big part of our after dinner ritual, my mom and dad began to create number games surrounding eating watermelons. For instance, after they finished eating, they would try to guess how many watermelon pieces each person ate. They would then count leftover peels to find out how many pieces we each had. They would then discuss who ate more and who ate less. As the days continued, the watermelon game developed into predicting how many seeds were in a piece of sliced watermelon. The game then evolved into comparing black and white seeds, predicting which colour would have more and which colour would have less.*

*As much as I enjoy playing with the children, I was not willing to take part in these number games. There was something about these games that made me uninterested. What was it though? As I searched for the answer, I then came to an important realisation. It was not the games that I was disinterested in, but it was the idea of eating watermelon. Quite simply, I do not like to eat watermelon. I do not care for the taste.*

*My family was quite astonished and wanted to know why and how could my dislike for eating watermelon have such an impact on my desire to join in and play. As I began to reflect on my different experiences, I realised that it stemmed from a childhood memory with the flavour of watermelon.*

*As a child, I recall being in my kindergarten classroom and once a year we would have a visit from the dentist. We were reminded about good oral hygiene and then were made to swish with fluoride. I vividly remember the plastic tray that was located in the front of the classroom with tiny, white plastic cups neatly placed in a row. As we were individually invited to the front to pick up our cup of fluoride, I remember just how much I disliked the taste. I carefully picked up my cup and looked inside. The cup was filled with a bright pink bubbly liquid. As I walked it back to my desk I could feel my stomach turning. Our visiting dentist would then countdown and required us to swish for a minute. 3...2...1...swish! As I swished, I remember the fluoride getting warmer and warmer in my mouth. The taste was that of watermelon. Only, it was a disgusting artificial flavour of watermelon. As the liquid got warmer in my mouth, the flavour got worse. The swishing experience was horribly disgusting and I never thought about watermelon in a positive way.*

My childhood memory of swishing warm watermelon fluoride had such an impact that it affected my immediate behaviour and action during my children's play. The idea of play through eating watermelon was such a dreadful idea that I was not willing to be a participant during such games. This particular self-realisation has been significant to my research process as it illustrates the necessity to gain insights into the influences of previous experiences and the effects on play in practice as well as the behaviours and actions regarding play in later life.

As Korthagen (2010) suggested, it is pertinent to make meaning through a focus into the whole person and the impact of previous experiences on teacher practices. My disengagement with the watermelon games was not because I was disinterested in learning about numbers through play, but because of a previous encounter that has impacted my perception about watermelons and any activity where this fruit is involved.

### **6.3 Play Experiences in Education: Impact on Current Orientations and Developed Theories on Play**

The following sections will connect the previous experiences with play to the current orientations and develop theories on play of the teacher participants. Following the concentric circles I discussed in Figure 6.1, I begin with a childhood memory that has been perceived by each of the teacher participants as their most significant experience with play in their early childhood education. I then present the impact of the childhood memories to the current orientations on play that were constructed with the inclusion of the teacher participants' voices. The perspectives on play also shape the developed theories on play which inform how the teacher participants conceptualise and realise play in their own early childhood classrooms.

### **6.4 Punya's Story and Experiences**

#### **6.4.1 Punya's early childhood education: A is for apple. B is for boy. But what is V for?**

As a child, Punya remembered slowly walking up the stairs towards her kindergarten teacher's office. As she counted the steps to keep herself distracted, the fear began to set in as she got closer. She has done this walk many times before and yet again she is faced with the dreadful feeling of failure. As the fear increased, she frantically began to recite over and over to herself the letter names and a word that begins with each letter sound. *A for apple. B for boy. C for cat. D for dog. E for elephant.* This time, Punya was determined to not forget. Punya was determined to pass her kindergarten English assessment.

When she reached the top floor, she rounded the corner and saw several chairs neatly lined in a row outside the office door. No one was there. The corridor was dark. There was complete silence. Punya knocked on the door and was summoned to enter the room by her teacher. As she stood in front of her teacher, she closed her



eyes and began to methodically go through each letter name and a word that starts with each letter sound. As she recited her letters correctly, she could hear her teacher's pencil make a checkmark on the paper. With each correct connection between letter name, sound and word, Punya began to feel a sense of relief. However, her delight was rapidly interrupted and she abruptly stopped. She had hit the mental block yet again! *What is v for?* She repeated v, v, v, v, v, but she could not seem to remember a word that begins with v. Punya was stuck. Her teacher did not shout at her for not knowing, but Punya felt petrified. She had failed again. Her confidence diminished.

As Punya left the school, she was overwhelmed with feelings of failure. She arrived home in tears. She shared with her eldest brother what she just experienced, he is Punya's hero. He gently whispered to her "v is for van". Punya told her brother how much she hates her kindergarten. She hated the drilling. She hated the rote learning. However, she had to remember her letters, sounds and words for another attempt at the assessment. *V is for van.*

Similarly, she felt the same feeling of fear and failure in Grade 1. Punya recollected she had a horrible teacher who took every opportunity to belittle her and crush her confidence. She remembered one day after being absent from school for a few weeks because she was sick, she was asked by her teacher to say some prayers. Knowing that she had been away from school for quite some time and subsequently not knowing her lines, her teacher demanded that she stand up and recite some prayers to the class. It was a terrible feeling because Punya did not know what to say. She was ridiculed and she got a good scolding. Her confidence diminished even more. Again, she felt like a failure.

Recalling letter names and letter sounds as well as reciting lines from various texts were not Punya's strengths as a young learner. Neither was she good at completing assessments which required her to recollect meaningless items based on memorisation. What she wanted to do was play sports. Playing sports was what she was good at. Playing sports allowed her to express herself creatively and that was what gave her the confidence as a young child.

As Punya summarised:

*so you can imagine when you say play, the concept was far from what I had experienced as a young child in my early childhood classrooms. I grew up in*

*a convent school and was exposed to drilling and rote learning. As a young child, I was not given the opportunity for meaningful learning experiences nor was I provided with tools to become a more successful, confident learner. In fact, my interests in playing sports were not acknowledged and thus not built upon. However, what was emphasised during my early childhood years were my weaknesses. When I could not remember and correctly recite what was taught, I was ridiculed in front of all my peers. After a good scolding I was sent out of the classroom in shame. (Focus group discussion, March 25, 2013)*

Punya's kindergarten and Grade 1 encounters therefore paint a picture of the kind of early childhood school experiences she had at school. Her confidence during her early years of education was completely destroyed. She felt disgraced. She felt fear. She was petrified.

#### **6.4.2 Punya's current orientation on play**

*The best classroom and the richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky*

– Margaret McMillan

Punya shares the way she views play through a story about one of her students, Ken. From her observations of Ken, he seemed like a student who was not interested in anything. He was a student who wandered the classroom, not really wanting to engage in anything alone or with his peers. She noted how miserable he looked and how unhappy he seemed. Whenever he attempted to engage in any activity, he lacked the confidence to continue or sustain what he was doing.

One day Punya noticed that Ken was engaged in something more long-term for the first time. As she approached him to take a closer look, he presented a treasure map to her with great confidence and enthusiasm. Pleased and relieved that Ken found something of interest to him, Punya began to discuss with him his complicated routes leading to the treasure. To her amazement, his confidence captured the other students and his excitement instantly inspired the other children in the classroom. Soon enough she found the whole class creating treasure maps.

The creation of maps soon developed into something more complex. After creating the treasure maps, the children would then set-off to find the treasure as they followed the maps. They weaved in and out of the classroom, as they battled with

pirates on their way. Great joy filled the classroom when they finally reached the treasure. The adventures extended into other scenarios as the children continued to create maps with further obstacles and more complicated routes. There was so much treasure that needed to be found.

From Punya's perspective, she did not underestimate the importance of self and peer motivation by stopping the children from what they wanted to do and what interested them. On the contrary, she thought to herself, *this is good*. Soon, there were maps everywhere. Taking the lead from Ken, his interest in maps led her to do lots of other things through maps. Everything was based on maps. What she noticed was that the level of laughter in her classroom increased through Ken's introduction of maps. Through her experience with Ken, she learnt that if you give the freedom students would develop the confidence and love for school. The rest including letters and numbers would eventually develop.

Punya's experience with Ken has a close connection to her own early childhood classroom experiences. Different from Ken's positive experience with maps, Punya was not given the opportunity to develop a love for school nor did her lack of confidence as a learner matter. She was also not given the freedom to explore what really mattered to her, playing sports. Furthermore, when she thought back to her early childhood teachers who made her recite letter names and sounds in addition to her prayers, Punya remembered how petrified she felt as a young learner.

Observing the success of responding to Ken's interests in combination with her memories of the fear which she felt going into her early childhood classrooms as a child, Punya therefore prioritises for her students the need to support the growth of confident learners and develop learners who enjoy and love school. Punya believes that through play, children explore their interests and they build upon what excites them. Playing is important and the children should be given the freedom of their choice of learning and how they should learn. Without it, they develop into *robot learners* and teachers are trying to force them to learn things that are not meaningful. As seen through her early childhood experience with learning, this method does not work.

*This is what I feel because over the years I realised from the past, pre-nursery and all those, if you give that freedom, if the child has the confidence, if the child loves the school, the rest of it will fall into place. That's what I always*

*feel. If you push a child and if you demolish the child's enthusiasm, you have lost the battle.* (Interview, April 5, 2013)

Play for Punya therefore builds a child's confidence and responds to their interests. As a child, she did not get this and so this is what she promises and provides for her young learners.

#### **6.4.3 Punya's developed theory on play**

When I think about Punya's classroom, I think about the story of Max from Maurice Sendak's (1963) *Where the Wild Things Are*. The story is about Max who longs to escape one evening to have an adventure. Max imagines a forest growing in his bedroom and an ocean tumbling by. In search for new possibilities, Max jumps into a sailboat and floats off to an island filled with wild creatures. Together, Max and the wild creatures play in the forest.

Punya's classroom reflects the adventures of Max. Much like his imagined experiences with the wild creatures in the forest, the possibilities occurring in Punya's classroom are only bounded by the imaginations of her students. As illustrated with the example of Ken, Punya's classroom soon became a world map filled with pirates and treasures. As she engaged with and responded to the children's creativity, their imagination influenced the manner in which Punya set-up her classroom.

For Punya, the purpose of her classroom is to provide the "stage" for her students that work to further provoke their curiosity and inquiry. The theory on play which guides her teaching practice therefore aligns to the cultural-historical model of play that follows Schousboe's (2012) spheres of play including:

1. the sphere of imagination;
2. the sphere of staging; and
3. the sphere of reality.

Returning to the example of Ken's interest in maps, Punya constructed what meaning she makes using the spheres of play theory. She suggested that in the first sphere, the students engaged in the sphere of imagination where an imaginary situation and actors in make-believe events emerged, that being the treasure hunters. On entering the sphere of staging, themes and roles began to be played out. As the treasure hunters followed their map, they came across pirates which they needed to

overcome. The sphere of reality enabled children to remain connected to reality where they did not hurt or harm each other as the treasure hunters battled the pirates.

Punya's students inspire her and the creative work which she brings to her own classroom depends on the interests of the children because this is what truly matters to her. Shaped by her childhood experiences that damaged her confidence as a young learner, building an interest towards and love for school has become the priority for her students.

Punya continued to make sense of the sphere of play theory to support her use of play in the classroom using another play vignette as a further example. In their unit of inquiry on animals, the children entered the stage of imagination as they role played a barnyard scenario. Children engaged in the sphere of staging as they took on farmer characters and animal roles. During this particular experience, Punya also set-up a large 3D cow with a rubber glove for the udder. The udder was filled with white paint and it was ready for the farmers to milk. The students enjoyed milking the cow, creating foods out of the milk and eating the food which they cooked. Though they used the paint to cook with, all the children were aware of reality as they did not eat what was made (sphere of reality).

And so, just the way Max transformed his bedroom into a jungle environment to have his adventure with the wild creatures, Punya's classroom is used as a provocation for children to enter into the spheres of play. She uses her classroom not only as a response to student interests, but she responds to what her students want. Thus, their love for school and confidence as learners are developed through play.

## **6.5 Tounnalina's Story and Experiences**

### **6.5.1 Tounnalina's early childhood education: At one with nature**

One morning Tounnalina entered her preschool classroom feeling particularly happy. She was received by her teacher with smiles, warmth and an openness that made her feel safe and good about herself. Her teacher reached out for Tounnalina and gave her a big hug to start off the day. The welcoming behaviour of her teacher gave Tounnalina a sense of comfort. Her preschool teacher had a gentle, approachable demeanour.

Going to school for Tounnalina was fun. She particularly liked the little yellow notes which her teacher left for the children all around the classroom. As the children played throughout the day, they would find these notes hidden all around.

Everyday Tounnalina wondered what the notes were about. The teacher's notes were encouraging. Her notes invited the children to wonder. Her notes reflected the learning about to happen that day. Tounnalina enjoyed finding and reading her teacher's notes. Her teacher always tried to involve the children and she always tried to get the children to interact with their classroom environment in a way that was appropriate to what they needed and wanted as young learners.

On this particular morning, Tounnalina decided to play outside. In fact, outside was where she enjoyed spending her time as a young child. Tounnalina loved being outdoors. The swing was where Tounnalina chose to go first as it gave her the opportunity to have special time alone. As she began to swing, Tounnalina recalled starting to recite all the nursery rhymes they had been practicing in class. She sat there swinging for a very long time and singing so loudly. However, nobody disturbed her or told her to stop or asked her to be quiet.

From the swing Tounnalina freely moved to the sand and water area. She loved playing in the sand and water, but knew mother would disapprove because she would go home dirty and soaking wet. Tounnalina did not mind though because mixing water into the sand to make mud was so much fun for her. She also loved experimenting with the little bottles and different sponges which her teacher purposefully left out for play.

From the water and sand area, Tounnalina went to play in the trees. Her teacher made the area safe where the children could climb up the trees and sit on the stronger branches. Tounnalina loved talking to trees. She pretended the branches were different people. She had different conversations with these people. It felt so good that she could talk to them. It was even better that the branches did not talk back. Tounnalina's experience with the trees gave her a sense of control. The conversations with the branches allowed her to take ownership and expand her thinking. Tounnalina was able to freely express herself.

Tounnalina's childhood experience in her preschool classroom was a place where she felt safe. It was a place where she could have immense freedom and choices to follow her needs and interests. As a young learner, in her classroom she was able to think without borders. Her preschool teacher did not judge her. Rather, her teacher supported her. Her teacher made Tounnalina feel like it was safe enough to express herself in different ways. She could sing as loudly as she wanted to. She could be as messy as she wanted to be. Tounnalina had the freedom. Her preschool

classroom was a place where she enjoyed being and where she felt most happy. It was the place where she felt like she was in control. Her preschool classroom was where she could play to learn.

### **6.5.2 Tounnalina's current orientation on play**

*Childhood has its own way of seeing, thinking, and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to try to substitute ours for theirs*

– Jean Jacques Rousseau

Tounnalina's previous experiences with the opportunities to explore her preschool classroom in a free and safe way inspire her to offer similar possibilities for her students. Not only is providing an environment where her students are willing to take risks important for Tounnalina, she also wants to make the learning engagements more child-initiated. She wants the children to move freely, to use their imaginations and to be as creative as they want to be. Tounnalina therefore makes it a priority to know her students in order to see where the needs and interests are so that her classroom environment can reflect who her students are and to support who they want to be.

Take for example the preschool unit of inquiry on animals, focusing on the idea that animals and people interact in different ways in different contexts. Not knowing the prior knowledge and interests in animals before beginning this unit, Tounnalina set-up an open-ended environment to find out. She carefully chose the resources that would provide her with a chance to observe the children as they engaged with the materials. Related to the unit, her classroom was set-up to include:

- fiction and non-fiction picture books about animals to provoke conversations amongst the children;
- plastic and stuffed animals that represent animals in different contexts including pets, farm animals and wild animals;
- plastic figurines of different community helpers;
- playmats illustrating different settings; and
- blocks to be used open-endedly.

As Tounnalina watched the children engage with the materials, she took specific notice of Victor. Victor began with the blocks. He built a rather large structure using the blocks and then reached for the dinosaurs. Placing the dinosaurs purposefully, she noticed that Victor had sorted the dinosaurs by size. He placed the smaller dinosaurs at the top levels of his structure and the larger dinosaurs were on the floor. Victor then took some figurines to add to his creation. As Tounnalina listened to the dialogue which Victor was having, he indicated that it was a farm full of dinosaurs. When he thought that dinosaurs did not belong in a farm, he recreated his structure and made it into a dinosaur zoo instead. As she watched and listened to Victor play, Tounnalina was able to note his prior knowledge about dinosaurs and the connections he was making.

Tounnalina's view on play has been shaped by her own experiences as a young child and the result from Victor's engagement with the resources she had openly set out in her classroom confirms what she prioritises for her students. Important for Tounnalina is to step back and observe where the thinking of the children is at. What are the students thinking as they go about their own learning? What do the students know as they use their imaginations? What can the students achieve as they use their creativity in whatever they are doing? As an early childhood teacher, Tounnalina believes she can grasp the information from children's play and then go forward using what they have already initiated. Her focus is on the opportunities that enable child-initiated learning. Using their interests, Tounnalina can then help to build new concepts and skills in a playful environment.

Therefore what matters a lot for Tounnalina is the planning and setting up of the classroom environment. Much like how her preschool teacher carefully placed notes around the classroom to motivate and engage the students throughout the day, Tounnalina now uses her own classroom environment to provoke her students. Her environment invites students to try out different things in their own way and in their own time. The children feel safe enough to explore and she can step back and watch the magic happen.

### **6.5.3 Tounnalina's developed theory on play**

When I think about Tounnalina's classroom, I use Peggy Christian's (2008) *If You Find a Rock* to place her classroom into context. The book is about the different uses and hidden possibilities of rocks. When I read the book, it stimulates my natural



curiosity and it invites me to discover the world around. Similarly, Tounnalina's classroom inspires the sense of wonder of her students and her classroom captures everyday life into extraordinary experiences.

As Christian maintained, "you might find a rock sitting in a grassy field. Push it over. You have found a hiding rock, and in the cool, dark underside live all kinds of things that creep and crawl and hide out of sight" (p. 16). Tounnalina's classroom environment is about discovering what is under that hiding rock. Much like a rock that can be a skipping rock, a resting rock, a wishing rock, a worry rock, a chalk rock or a fossil rock, her classroom reflects the endless possibilities for rocks. The uses of rocks are grounded in the imagination of the person. As in the example of Victor, the classroom environment, much like a rock, provoked his natural wonder and curiosity. Tounnalina's classroom environment is not limiting, but provides opportunities for exploration and investigation.

A developmental view of play therefore frames how Tounnalina approaches play in her own classroom (Papatheodorou, 2010). What Tounnalina has taken from the developmental view of play is the emphasis on a naturalistic approach where play is initiated and driven by the children themselves. The meaning in which children make is through their free expression during play.

The developmental view of play also advocates for a playful learning environment that is influenced and determined through the interests and ideas generated by the children. A playful learning environment enables "children to transform it from a space into a place, where they can exercise and realize their abilities, capabilities and reach their potential" (p. 146). For Tounnalina, she sees her role as an early childhood teacher as one that facilitates. An early childhood teacher is one that plans and creates the provisions for the play to happen.

The playful learning environment also captures Tounnalina's childhood experiences in education that were marked by the freedom to explore, the openness to ask questions and the support to make her investigations to find out about the world around.

*One thing I always took away because I think I am a visual and kinesthetic learner is what my environment provided for me. I depended a lot on my environment. If I saw it and could manipulate it, it would transfer into my mind. I would live and breathe whatever the environment offered me. So that*

*is why I believe in using the setting to support learning.* (Interview, October 1, 2013)

In addition, a playful learning environment reflects the opportunities which Tounnalina now provides for her students as illustrated through Victor's experience with dinosaurs.

Taken from *If You Find a Rock*, Tounnalina's classroom is about stimulating curiosity as well as encouraging exploration and discovery. Tounnalina used the conclusion of the book about rocks to summarise how she interprets and realises play in her own early childhood classroom.

*If you find a rock—  
a rock that's not a skipping rock,  
or a chalk rock,  
or a wishing rock...  
but you like it anyway  
because it reminds you of a place,  
or a feeling,  
or someone important—  
then you have found a memory rock,  
and sometimes  
those are the best  
rocks of all (p. 25).*

The playful learning environment which she provides is about the world of possibilities where everyday life is created into remarkable experiences. Such experiences, as with her own early childhood memories with play are the extraordinary moments.

## **6.6 Nayana's Story and Experiences**

### **6.6.1 Nayana's early childhood education: Every day is a festive day**

Nayana remembered that when she went home from school each evening, she was ready to share her day's learning with her family. Nayana lived with her sisters in one apartment and every evening they would share with one another everything

they did at school that day. The evenings were meaningful and important to Nayana. It was a special time where the three sisters were together and they shared with each other their laughter, happiness, sadness and worries. The evenings with her sisters were so significant because the girls were at a boarding school. That meant the sisters did not go home every evening and share with their mommy and daddy. So each evening with her sisters was a valued moment.

Nayana commented that every evening was like having a big performance. Before the sisters began sharing with one another, they prepared the stage by using all the furniture in the apartment. The girls took turns being on stage as they showed each other what had happened at school that day. They had a lot to share with one another because at school they played so much. Nayana shared with her sisters what she did in her home science class by modeling the woodwork she carved during the lesson. She showed them the steps she followed in her sewing class in making hankies, table cloths, teapot covers and pillowcases. She role played what she did in cooking class as she demonstrated the process of making tea, making a pancake mix and how to cook little puddings. Nayana remembered it being so much fun playing “school” during the evenings. She also enjoyed watching her sisters take turns on stage as they shared with her what they had experienced during their school day.

There were also family friends that were close in distance to the boarding school. On the weekends, the family friends would take Nayana and her sisters back to their home. The family friends would ask about the girls’ learning. So again, the sisters took the moments as invitations to have performances and share what they did at school. As they previously had opportunities to share with each other as sisters at the boarding school, the presentations got bigger and soon grand performances were taking place.

Then the sisters got to go home to see mommy and daddy. They got to go home once every two months. These moments were especially valuable because it was not every day they got to share with their parents. When Nayana and her sisters returned home, they also shared what they did at school. It was another chance at another big performance. Only, it was better because Nayana’s cousins and aunties were invited. Not only did the sisters show everyone everything they had shared as sisters in their apartment at the boarding school and then to their family friends, but they also had concert time afterwards. Together, they sang and danced. These were the moments that Nayana truly felt were meaningful and memorable.

At school Nayana played. At home Nayana played. It is through play that Nayana remembers the good times. Such fantastic moments were about sharing, laughing, enjoying and learning. Nayana's memories are filled with feelings of joy, both at school as a young learner and especially going home. Her sisters joined in with her play and her mommy and daddy also took part in her play. These were the times that made Nayana feel good.

### **6.6.2 Nayana's current orientation on play**

*It is a happy talent to know how to play*

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

The International School prides themselves in providing their students with academic excellence where international and intercultural understanding as well as the development of the whole child is at the heart of teaching and learning. As a result, Nayana is confident that if her students move onto another school, they would be at the top of their grade level. However, this means that the school sets high expectations for all of their students. In fact, this means that competitive standards are set for the children at an increasingly younger age.

Nayana wonders how she can find a balance between meeting the high expectations of the school's curriculum and allowing her students to explore and learn more freely through play. She sees the importance of play especially through the units of inquiry where the students role-play to explore and make sense of concepts as well as demonstrate their learning. Furthermore, her English as a Second Language Learners really benefit from play as they are invited to express their understanding through different ways which they are comfortable with.

While play is definitely a plus, Nayana's commitment is also towards providing her students with academic excellence as defined by the school. She therefore feels the need to better understand and apply an appropriate balance between achieving the school's curriculum expectations with the outcomes and benefits of learning through play. Nayana suggested the school first needs to develop a common understanding of what play is and the necessity for play in early childhood education. Then, an alignment between the expectations of the school's curriculum and learning through play could be addressed.

Without this, at the moment, Nayana views play that is happening in her classroom as careful planning and deliberate demonstrations. She often leads the play activities because she does not want to see the children “idling, doing nothing or maybe just rolling down or having temper tantrums” (Interview, April 9, 2013). Nayana’s childhood experiences with play also emphasise play activities that were more guided by procedures including sewing, carpentry, gardening and cooking. Her memories with play in during her early years have shaped what she sees as important, fun and necessary in her own classroom now. Nayana sees the importance in providing play through play-based activities which are guided by her because there is a predetermined purpose and set objective to achieve.

For instance, her kindergarten class started their unit about sharing the planet where they inquired into the different roles plants play in their lives. Nayana wanted to provoke her students to begin thinking about possible plant resources. She did this through what she has identified as a play-based activity where she hid herself behind a bulletin board with a plate full of edible fruits and vegetables. From there, she picked one item from her plate, described to the students what she saw and smelt, took a bite and verbalised what she tasted. The children then tried to guess what it was she was eating. This is an example of the types of play-based activities happening in Nayana’s classroom.

Nayana therefore feels that the early childhood teachers at The International School need to do more research into play-based activities. The school has their units of inquiry that enable teachers to integrate play as the inquiry process invites students to explore, investigate and find out. At the same time, there is a perceived need to gain a stronger background about play-based activities that would enable the early childhood teachers to achieve the grade level expectations. According to Nayana, in her previous experiences with play as a young learner, the structure and guidance was necessary to accomplish what was in the curriculum. At the same time, she sees there is a need for play to be a freer activity in the learning and development of her own kindergarten students.

Nayana’s current understanding of play is therefore confused by finding a balance between how she can integrate play into all subjects to meet the school’s high expectations with the need for play that is more student-directed. While the early childhood teachers are clear about the goals and where they hope their students to be, what is now needed is the knowledge on achieving the set targets through more child-

directed play. Play is important and play is a must. The question that remains for Nayana though is “how?” given the school’s curriculum.

### **6.6.3 Nayana’s developed theory on play**

When I think about Nayana’s classroom, I therefore see her environment as the *deep dark woods* in Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler’s (2004) *The Gruffalo’s Child*. Despite her father’s cautions about the deep dark woods, the Gruffalo’s Child nevertheless roams the deep dark woods when her father is asleep to search for the very thing her father is afraid of: the big bad mouse. As the Gruffalo’s Child goes further into the woods, she stumbles across different experiences and encounters with various animals who eventually lead her to the big bad mouse. During her meeting with the big bad mouse, she is tricked into believing in the terribly long tail and whiskers, enormous ears and strength that permits the mouse to carry a nut as big as a boulder. The Gruffalo’s Child quickly runs back to her father who keeps her comforted and safe from the big bad mouse and the dangers of the deep dark woods.

Nayana’s classroom similarly resembles the sequence of the story of the Gruffalo’s child. Much like the Gruffalo, Nayana provides her students with the input necessary to invite questions and provoke their natural curiosity. As expected, much like the Gruffalo’s Child, her students begin to freely roam the classroom to explore and encounter different experiences. When they come across an obstacle or difficulty in their learning like the big bad mouse, the students know they can run back to their teacher for help, much like the way the Gruffalo’s Child ran back to her father for comfort.

The story of the Gruffalo’s Child can be used as an illustration of Nayana’s attempt in finding the balance between the school’s competitive curriculum and learning through play. Students need the deliberate demonstration to gain the knowledge and skills as outlined in the school’s curriculum and it is through play where her students wander to construct meaning about their world. When the students experience a difficult moment that requires intervention, the students return to their teachers for help.

Nayana’s developed theory on play therefore reflects what Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) refer to as naturally produced play. Her beliefs “are shaped not simply by things natural but by theories of teaching and learning that claim to replicate nature, while insisting on certain ways of thinking, speaking and acting (p.

40). In this way, Nayana can acknowledge that it is the right of children to play and it is through the environment that she can provide the opportunities for play. However, as an early childhood teacher, it is through her careful planning and actions that she can fulfill the school's curriculum.

From how she remembered play in her early childhood in combination to how she uses play in her own classroom now, Nayana understood her theory on play through the metaphor of a garden (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). The garden is a natural and organic place, much like her classroom where meaning and relevance is at the heart. As the gardener Nayana tends to the plants, observes them and provides the plants with what is necessary to further their growth. In this instance, whilst the plants are confronted with the omniscient presence of the gardener, the balance between meeting the school's curriculum and the children's need for play is possible.

## 6.7 My Own Story and Experiences

### 6.7.1 My early childhood education: Follow along and you will know

I look back at mom and wave good-bye to her as I cross the street. At that moment, though my school is literally across the street from my home, I am filled with great anxiety. School seems like a cold place. It is a place where I do not fit in, I lack understanding and I am confronted by feelings of failure.

The motto that best encapsulates my kindergarten experience is: *One size fits all*. My teacher's expectation is that I will learn like the rest of the children in my class. I will speak English, I will sing the letters of the alphabet song clearly and I will know how to count correctly. The idea is I will, I will, I will and the expectation is everything will be in English. However, as I sit on the carpet of my kindergarten classroom, I watch the other children. I see the teacher talking to the children and I see the children saying something in return. The children happily move to the tables and sit quietly working. I wonder what did they say and I further wonder what they are doing.

In this instance, I am four years old. Though I am born and raised in Canada, I have only been exposed to Cantonese Chinese at home. So when mom and dad enroll me in a Canadian public school when I am of kindergarten age, I am at a loss. What the teacher and children do, I am not so sure. I try to follow along. I observe carefully. However, without any English I have great difficulties. Subsequently my

peers move onto another class the following year, but I remain in the same classroom with the same teacher.

The classroom which I am in has very little toys. The classroom I am in has no art center, block area, dress-up corner nor sand and water play. We have a carpet where we meet for whole group instruction. We are surrounded by tables and chairs arranged in a neat row where we sit diligently and quietly to do our independent work after our meeting together. That is what I understand from my three hours at school: from group activity on the carpet, to work at the table and then meeting on the carpet again.

So when you ask me about what this thing called play is, I am unsure. Is play about listening to the teacher talk? Is it about repeating what the teacher asks you to repeat? Is it about answering questions that require one or two words? Maybe play is about following the rules. Maybe it is about writing quietly in your individual notebook. Maybe it is about doing the same thing at the same time. This is how I would understand play if it was based on my childhood experiences with play at school.

From my previous experiences with play, I have no memories of hands-on activities that allow me to manipulate materials and freely explore the environment around me. I am a product of traditional, textbook education. If I cannot say the right thing at the right time than I probably do not know the answer. If I am unable to write down the correct answer than I also probably do not know. Consequently without any English to help me say or write the correct thing, I have been told I just do not know. Following the rules, saying the right thing and showing the correct answer is what play is in my childhood kindergarten.

### **6.7.2 My current orientation on play**

*Life must be lived by play*

– Plato

I return back to the question of what is this thing we call play. Through my own childhood experiences, readings of play literature and my interactions with the teacher participants, I feel somewhat confused about my view on play. Play can look so differently depending on one's experiences and contexts.



I therefore highlight what I believe play to be through a narrative from my observations of my just then fifteen month old daughter during a short period of time.

*The house is filled with all sorts of toys from trains, to a kitchen set, to an art easel, to a racing track, to a ball gym, to blocks, to stuffed dolls, to dress up clothes, to playdough – the list goes on. As my daughter walks around the house, her journey seems ceaseless. At first she wanders over to the basket of stuffed dolls, rummages through the objects and walks away. She walks over to the ball gym, rolls a few balls out of the structure and wanders off. I watch her approach several areas, shuffling things around and then finding a new play area that yet again she interacts with minimal interest and commitment.*

*I decide to encourage her by pushing a container of blocks in her direction. She sees the container and the colourful blocks inside catches her eye. She vigorously shoves her hand in the container and it looks as though she is going to play with the blocks much like she did with the dolls and balls, briefly and with little passion. However, as I watch her, I realise that she is trying to pull out all the blue blocks from the container. When she seemingly picks out enough of the blue blocks, she pushes the other colours aside and she deeply engages with only the selected blocks. She tries to place one blue block onto another but with no luck. However, she is adamant and persists on placing the blocks on top of one another. Little by little, one by one I watch her succeed after several attempts. After minutes of uninterrupted play, she looks up and smiles a smile that demonstrates her satisfaction with her self-driven achievement.*

In this instance, play is the freedom to explore, inquire and problem solve. However, when the play seemed to have required some support as I watched my daughter's disengagement with her environment, I encouraged her by introducing a new possibility by presenting the colourful blocks to her. From there, I enabled my daughter to continue her play experience as she gradually took over the activity of block play and created her own game. For me, this is my view on play.

However, my childhood experiences with play drastically differ from what I see as play for my two young children at home and in my own early childhood classroom. Furthermore, the teacher participants have challenged me to consider

what play can be. From Punya's story, the significance of using play in early childhood education is to build confidence for students and foster a love for school. In Tounnalina's case, the provision of an enabling environment is fundamental to the quality of play experiences. For Nayana, play that is facilitated by the teacher takes on a significant role.

From my orientation on play and from my interaction with the teacher participants, the complexity of understanding the different orientations on play is therefore illuminated. The questions that have also been highlighted also involve the role of the teacher during children's play. Can play truly be without boundaries? Is play really as free as we claim it to be? Or can play be a little more structured? Can play be guided by rules? Could play encompass an end goal in mind?

My experiences working at The International School where the programme emphasises the role of inquiry as the way young children respond to their natural curiosity has further provoked me to consider my questions about play. Inquiry reflects the characteristics of play (as I have discussed in Chapter 4) as children are actively involved in their learning as they organise themselves into learning engagements that enable them to make connections, solve problems and therefore construct meaning about their world. However, inquiry is not entirely free. Inquiry is set by parameters as teachers provide students with provocations in order to promote and guide student inquiry. Provocations are used as learning invitations to tune students into the concepts of a unit, creating a foundation where students can anchor their new knowledge around.

Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) further challenge me to consider a darker side of play. Play may not be as free and universal as we might think it to be. The authors suggest that it is rarely the case where students genuinely set the rules for play. In fact, "rules are at the heart of what happens in early childhood classrooms and are templates for what gets challenged and negotiated; the ebb and flow of what plays out in the complexity of daily life in early childhood contexts" (p. 74). Therefore from the experiences of the teacher participants, my own teaching practices and my encounters through literature, it brings me back to my initial question about my orientation on play: what is this thing we call play?

### 6.7.3 My developed theory on play

The story of *Not a Box* by Antoinette Portis (2007) captures how I see my classroom. Taken from the insight of a small rabbit that shows its reader that a box can go as far as the imagination will take it, a box is everything and anything but a box. Similarly, I view my classroom in this way: when the imagination of my students takes over, the children can transform the classroom from the here and now to the anytime and anywhere.

From a racing car to a robot, the rabbit's transformation of a box represents my fond memories of the way my preschool students transformed my classroom. In our focus on community helpers, I had been reading stories and using self-created stories about different people who help in the community. One day, huddled around one of the corners of the classroom were chairs arranged into a half circle facing away from the corner and out towards the class. It was a ship in which the students had created. Its final destination: Candy Land! Amazingly, the children were not so far off in their destination since there is a large central city in Sri Lanka called Kandy. Kandy is not known for its candy, but for its tea plantation and biodiverse rainforest.

Regardless of the destination, I began to see a complicated plot emerge. Inside the half circle, the students each had taken on a different role. There was a ticket collector who was shouting out the final destination, a mother gently holding her baby rocking it back and forth, a man quietly reading the newspaper, another man who was fast asleep on the cushions, other passengers who played a game with colourful beads and the captain who was in control. It was a play experience that involved most of the students in my class. As the ship sailed away, I waved good-bye and the children began their journey towards Candy Land.

The next day, the ship became an airplane. On the airplane were two pilots and a large family including aunts and uncles and two dogs that were traveling together to Candy Land. At this point the children wanted to engage me and my assistant teacher in their play. So, the pilots had to make an emergency landing as they forgot to pick up the two passengers. The pilots safely landed the plane and quickly grabbed me and my assistant teacher who were then quickly assigned the role of the two previously missing passengers. The two passengers were welcomed onboard and they were given healthy snacks to pass the time. The airplane once again happily set off and flew to its intended destination.

Then there was the third day as the initial idea of a ship changed from an airplane and now to a restaurant. There were many people who served a single customer. It was a rather busy restaurant, not with customers eating there, but with servers who wanted to please their customer. The customer had a healthy spread of food from burgers, to sushi, to fruits and all kinds of desserts from around the world. After happily eating all the food that was served to him, he laid down and fell fast asleep in the restaurant. He slept until the restaurant was cleaned up and ready for the next service.

What frames my theory on play is Bredikyte's (2011) narrative play pedagogy. The environment is the source for children's learning and the role of the teacher is to guide children to higher levels of play by playing with them in order to construct new knowledge together and provide new ideas that will help open new doors. Play is purposeful and children learn about the roles and scripts of their immediate world through play.

In the instance of the transformation of my preschool classroom, after reading and sharing stories about community helpers, the children began to investigate different roles including the captain of a ship and ticket collector, a pilot of an airplane and passengers as well as servers and customers at a restaurant. My role as the teacher who was invited into the children's play was to further the dialogue about the story in which my students had initially created. Much like the experience with my daughter in search for something that interested her, I was needed initially to further guide the script of my students' airplane narration. However, like with my daughter, I later got off the airplane and watched my students gradually regain increasing responsibility for the creation and re-creation of the narrative as they continued the plot independently.

Returning to the story of *Not a Box*, I think about my classroom in a similar manner to the small rabbit who concludes his box as his "Not-a-Box". I see my classroom as my "Not-a-Classroom". It is a place where children wander; it is a place where children wonder. It is a place where children explore; it is a place where children experience. It is a place where children use their imaginations; it is a place where children have ideas. However, when the need arises, my role as an early childhood teacher is to provoke thinking and introduce new ideas. Much like when the small rabbit claims the box is "NOT, NOT, NOT, NOT a box!" the narrator further prompts him by asking "Well what is it then?" In short, "the environment is

planned and constructed carefully. Interesting environments and thought-provoking situations create opportunities and possibilities for the children to take up and develop” (Fleer, 2013, p.124). It is my “Not-a-Classroom”.

## 6.8 Discussion

### 6.8.1 Contextualisation: Enriching the descriptions, comparisons and categorisations

The process of connecting the previous play memories with other contexts provides a further level of interpretation beyond the descriptions of the most significant early childhood play experiences of the teacher participants presented in Chapter 5. Interpreting the data using a wider context enabled the early childhood teachers and I to gain deeper understandings by connecting the previous memories with play and direct impact the experiences have on how the teacher participants conceptualise and actually realise play in their own early childhood classrooms.

The connections to the current orientations and developed theories on play continued to illuminate the complexities into play, revealing that play is not only a historically and culturally constructed and embedded phenomenon (Fleer, 2013). Rather, play is also impacted by institutional, social and individual influences. The process of contextualisation therefore enabled me, with the inclusion of the early childhood teachers’ input and voices to present the intricate interplay between different contextual elements (van den Burg, 2005). As Tounnalina concluded during my interview with her:

*we need to go back to our own childhood at certain times and reflect on certain incidences, certain episodes that either took us into a different level of understanding, what we are doing in our schools and what we are doing in our preschools. It really makes you realise what you are doing and why you are doing it. If you can reflect back and think what are the things that really hinders you and then put that context into your children as parents or as teachers, you understand whether you’re going in the right direction. This is a form of self-evaluation you should be doing for yourself as well as for your own child and for your students. I think that’s something that we should always do. Have time to reflect and connect certain things and put things into context. (Interview, April 5, 2013)*

In short, As Henricks (2015) suggested in his article on play as experience, we can “identify play with the context in which it occurs” (p. 20). Viewing play in its context therefore leads to a discussion about the challenges, changes and reconceptualisation in the approaches to play (Dockett, 2011). Interpretation therefore requires the process of continually exploring the phenomenon under study in various contexts (Andersen & Risør, 2014). By constructing connections between different contexts, only then are the “complex intertwinements of incidents, factors and histories” achieved (p. 353).

### **6.9 Summary**

In order to understand individual teachers and the process of teaching, we must examine the rich and diverse contexts of teachers (Fleer, 2010). In this chapter I have elaborated on the descriptions in Chapter 5 by constructing with the teacher participants connections between their previous play experiences with their current orientation and developed theories on play as well as the implementation of play in their classrooms.

The previous experiences of the teacher participants with play in their early childhood education ranged from little time and chances for play to an enabling environment which invited child-initiated play opportunities. Where Punya’s and my experiences with play during our early childhood education were limited, in Tounnalina’s case, play at school was defined as freedom from restrictions where her preschool teacher created enabling situations for play. Though Nayana’s experiences with play were not as limited as Punya’s and my encounters, her play was nevertheless guided by some boundaries and parameters put into place by her teachers. In all instances, the teacher participants and I used the process of contextualisation to construct connections between our previous experiences and its implications to our orientation and implementation of play in our own classrooms.

In Chapter 7 I will further examine the implications of contexts on play by presenting new explanations on the impact of previous play experiences. In this chapter, I will present the construction of meanings from the self-discoveries of the teacher participants and its impact on the new priorities for play. Chapter 7 will therefore address my third research question where the intention is to reposition play

from a universal phenomenon to a concept that is situated in multiple realities and situations. As Rogers (2011) summarised, a global perspective on play will enable the construction of meaning that is specific to situational contexts and conditions that acknowledge the multiple dimensions of play.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **THE ROLE OF GUIDES: REFRAMING PLAY AS A SITUATIONALLY-BASED CONCEPT**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter I focused on how the childhood experiences with play in education impact the current orientations and developed theories on play of the teacher participants. Chapter 6 aimed to enrich and elaborate on the descriptions presented in Chapter 5 as it emphasised the rich and diverse backgrounds of the early childhood teachers and the multiple realities and contexts which influence their perspectives as well as the construction of play and the use and implementation of play in their classrooms.

Chapter 7 will answer my third research question: *What are the implications of culture and context on play as the leading activity to the learning and development of young children?* The chapter will present new explanations by weaving together the play memories of the teacher participants, their teacher training and the impact of working at The International School. The role of guides is addressed in this chapter as Andersen and Risør (2014) suggest as the process of contextualisation reveals specific outcomes for particular contexts. Contextualisation is therefore an essential element for explanation. Specific to my inquiry into play, constructing the connections between the previous play experiences with the current orientations and developed theories on play has resulted in new understandings of what is now the priority for the teacher participants.

#### **7.2 The Plurality and Complexity of Play in Early Childhood Classrooms: Guides to Immediate Action**

The intricacies of play necessitate an examination into its multi-layered complexities of diverse historical and cultural contexts (Gupta, 2011). Since play is historically and culturally embedded, “research should reflect local understandings and values of play, rather than be viewed as a universal construct” (Fleer, 2013, p. 128). The intention of my third research question is therefore to reposition the context of play to a concept that is situationally-based. Research into play requires an inquiry into the experiences of early childhood teachers, not only including an



investigation into the previous memories with play impacting teaching practices, but explanations of what informs immediate classroom behaviours and actions.

How play has been defined and interpreted by the teacher participants is grounded in the meanings in which we have constructed together. The diverse childhood experiences of the early childhood teachers with play shape their varying perceptions about play and developed theories on play as well as how play is differently implemented into their actual teaching practices. The lived experiences of the early childhood teachers guide how and what the teacher participants do in their early childhood classrooms (Five & Buehl, 2012). However, a focus into what guides the immediate behaviours and actions of the teacher participants needs to extend beyond the filters and frames that shape their views and use of play. Through the process of making comparisons, categorisations and contextualisation, new explanations which are perceived to further guide the implementation of play in the early childhood classrooms of the teacher participants have been revealed. The influencing factors further impacting play includes culture and temporal contexts which the early childhood teachers perceive to additionally guide their implementation of play in their classrooms.

Research into play suggests that inquiry into play should be responsive to contexts that illuminate the complexity, diversity, subjectivity and multiple perspectives on making meaning (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Farmer & Dockett, 2015; Dockett, 2011; Fler, 2010; Fler, 2013). As van Oers (2010) indicated, “the conception of play changes across history and cultures in compliance with specific historical, ideological and economic conditions. From this point of view, we can see play indeed as a cultural invention” (p. 196). Therefore meaning making regarding play focuses on individual choice, perception, interpretation and construction of the lived experiences in addition to the temporal situations that impact how play is regarded and realised in early childhood classrooms.

### **7.3 A Dichotomous Effect: Building an Understanding into the Impact of Play Experiences and the Challenges to Play**

Where in the preceding chapters I examined the impact of play memories on teaching practices and the effects of the play memories on the perspectives and developed theories on play, in this section of this chapter, the temporal factors and contexts which the early childhood teachers have identified to be challenging play are

presented. Thus far, the factors impacting the views and use of play in early childhood classrooms have been expressed through rhetoric. By focusing on the temporal contexts, my examination moves from rhetoric into the actual teaching practices of the early childhood teachers. This is a significant point. What are the factors that influence how the early childhood teachers actually organise and realise play in practice?

It is necessary to draw the interactive relationship between the previous experiences with play and the temporal contexts. What the teacher participants perceived to be the effects on immediate teaching behaviours and actions regarding play inescapably are influenced by their play memories as well as the current orientations and developed theories on play which have been constructed. Such an examination into the childhood memories with play shows the underlying factors that impact children's contemporary play in early childhood education (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2010). Interpretation and implementation of children's play today therefore reflect a longer period of time that has passed.

However, for the teacher participants, though previous experiences with play have been perceived to have a foundational impact on the approaches and uses of play in their classrooms, the constraints placed on the early childhood teachers by The International School has become increasingly significant and profound in shaping their current teaching practices. The teachers recognised themselves that the immediate factors have more impact on their use and implementation of play in their own classrooms. What was revealed was a misalignment between the orientations and developed theories on play grounded in historical and cultural experiences of the early childhood teachers with the challenges placed on the teacher participants by the pressures from the workplace. On one hand, the impact of childhood experiences of play has inspired the participants to advocate for and implement play in their classrooms. On the other hand, the pressures placed on the early childhood teachers have become more significant in shaping their use and implementation of play in practice.

### **7.3.1 Presenting Punya's Interpretations**

*When I was small, I had to sit at the table. When the teacher called, we had to do whatever it was she demanded of us. We were not allowed to move around. We were not allowed to talk to our friends. Everybody had to do the same*

*thing at the same time. It was very monotonous. There was a lot of rote learning.*

*As I sit in silence, diligently completing my work, the one thing I continue to go back on is how I struggled with one letter during my kindergarten year. It was a frustrating thing and a terrible feeling. I still remember the fear I experienced every time I had to work with my letters. Will I remember this time? Will I disappoint again? (Interview, October 1, 2013)*

A devastating childhood experience in education developed into a need for support to rebuild Punya's confidence and her desire to follow her own interests and passions as a young learner. Such needs also took primacy later on after kindergarten during her childhood play experiences outside of school. The memories with play which have been the most influential to Punya are the moments where she had the freedom to pluck mangoes whenever she wanted or create games that were based on her interests along the Pannipitiya Wall. Punya's childhood memories which she cherishes the most were the precious moments where she was with her close friends and her family. Camaraderie, friendship and a cooperative learning environment are significant components for Punya, both in her personal life and as a professional. This is what has been important to Punya and what she promises to bring to her own early childhood classroom.

The attack on The International School further confirms Punya's values towards building and maintaining friendships. The meaning behind relationships that was ever so important to Punya in her childhood years and her play outside school also became apparent when the school experienced the tragic attack and the staff had to work together to rebuild who they were. From early on in her life, the relationships that helped Punya grow and become confident have been of great importance.

*So when I am planning in my classroom, I am always thinking and making sure that I am not hindering what the children want to do. It is not about making the children feel miserable so that they can achieve something you have in mind for them. From my experience, I will not try to do this. Learning is about teamwork, cooperation and support for one another. But before anything else, it is about letting the children be happy with school. Happy to*

*come to school...that is what school should be about.* (Interview, October 1, 2013)

Furthermore, Punya's teacher training at the Open University supported what she prioritises for her students. She was taught by her professors that even with a small seed, the learning could extend across subjects from science to language and mathematics. Then when she joined The International School, the programme of inquiry further helped her to understand how language and mathematics could be integrated into the units. What Punya has also taken away from her teacher training and the introduction of an inquiry approach to teaching and learning was that teaching and learning are not about the teacher's direction and instruction only. Teachers have to notice the interests of their students as well as how the students are approaching their interests. However again, the most significant point in her teacher training experiences has been the importance of building a learning community. The programme of inquiry states that "students' learning and their attempts to understand the world around them are essentially social acts of communication and collaboration" (IBO, 2009b, p. 14). The programme of inquiry further supports Punya's priority for relationships in developing confidence and making meaning about the world.

All the elements including her most influential play memories with her cousins and brothers, the effects of her childhood experiences at school with learning her letters and reciting prayers, her teacher training and her beginning experiences at The International School have shaped Punya's position on play and how she approaches play in her own early childhood classroom today. However, as time has passed over the 30 years she has been working at The International School, Punya wonders if there is an increasing gap between her continued priority for responding to the needs and interests of her students and what the school sees as important nowadays for their young learners.

Now there is a felt pressure from all the requirements to meet the growing expectations in the school's curriculum. One term the teachers are required to cover additional language and number concepts beyond what is integrate into the units of inquiry. The next term the teachers are required to cover another set of language and mathematical skills in combination with a new set of units of inquiry. By April, the teachers asked to revisit all the concepts and skills covered throughout the year. Then

before the end of the academic year, the completion of assessments and paperwork take place. Punya remarks:

*this is too much for my preschool students. They are too young to face that type of pressure. Where do we have the opportunities for play if my time is spent on showing the school on paper that the students have met the curriculum?* (Interview, April 5, 2013)

Using one set of standards after another, the feeling is that there are too many expectations being placed on the students to prepare them for the next level. There may be those students who require more challenges and other students who require more support, but it is up to the teachers to stretch them or guide them so that every student reaches the determined level by the end of the year. The students are not given the freedom of their choice in learning. There are increasingly more activities completed through rote learning where the students are expected to learn certain concepts and skills and teachers are required to check them off in their records as the learning takes place. It is becoming a more rigid curriculum where a more formal approach to teaching and learning is taking place.

The increasing expectations and the need for evidence of learning are illustrated through Punya's reflection about the teaching and learning occurring in her classroom.

*By the time the students leave preschool, they need to be able to hold a pencil correctly. They need to know all the letters of the alphabet. They need to know their numbers to 100. However, this is never enough: there are the assessments. We need to do the writing assessments, the reading assessments and the assessments for mathematics. We do this in the beginning of the year, mid-year and again at the end of the year. The school wants more from the students each year and the teachers are required to show and evidence more. Have we however checked in to see what kind of learning community we have fostered for our students? Have we taken the time to help the students develop friendships? Do the children feel supported and confident enough to become independent learners?* (Interview, April 5, 2013)

So in practice, where does play come in? Punya spends a lot of time formally meeting the expectations of the curriculum. There is also a lot of time spent on completing assessments. Time is also dedicated to filling out paperwork. When is there the time and opportunities for children to develop enjoyment and a learning community through play? As Punya responded:

*can I say that I truly give the time and place for my students to freely explore, ask questions and build up their interests? Can I say that I have given my students the opportunity to support each other in their learning and develop friendships that they will later remember and appreciate in their adulthood?*

Through the research process, it has become quite clear for Punya whether her priorities of responding to her students' needs and interests in addition to building a learning community has been met. The answer is *no*.

### **7.3.2 Presenting Tounnalina's Interpretations**

*My preschool teacher was fantastic in many ways. I remember her being a very warm person. I felt the genuine love from her, not only from what she said but through her facial expressions and her body language. What I also liked about her was the soft, colourful sarees she wore. The feel of the cloth and the bright colours also added to her warm character. My connection to her was very, very important to me at that age because I was able to let go of all my fears as a young child. (Interview, April 5, 2013)*

The comfortable atmosphere which Tounnalina's preschool teacher created for her helped her to develop her confidence as a learner at a very early age. The comfort which she developed with the world around her enabled Tounnalina to engage in a high level of risk-taking where she felt the courage to engage in free exploration and play with whatever the environment provided her with. The feeling of safety so that she could discover what was around her was important because Tounnalina's most prominent play experiences during her childhood was about observing the people around her and later on role playing what she saw.

The importance of using the environment to support teaching and learning was resonated during her teacher training years and throughout her continual professional

development. For Tounnalina, she believes that it is a must that children's brains are stimulated by what the classroom environment has to offer. Not to have clutter around the classroom, but to have some specific things that children would look at and wonder about. The environment would provoke the students to begin their inquiries and ask their questions. For Tounnalina, the classroom should be about "a learning environment that has the most potential for creating anomaly or tension for learners" (Short, 2009, p. 17) where the problems posed would lead children to make investigations. The classroom should be used to support the students' wonderings done alone and quietly or in a group and with friends.

Taken from my observations of Tounnalina's classroom environment, when someone would walk into her classroom, they may observe that

*large painted trees are hanging from the ceiling to floor. Each student is given one side of the tree. Covering from top to bottom is the work of each student. Green vines are also strung from corner to corner of the classroom. There are also raindrops hanging randomly to give an effect that it is a showery day. The classroom displays in its entirety give a feel that you are in a rainforest.* (Wong-Powell, field notes, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

Tounnalina depends a lot on the environment she sets up. How she plans, how she arranges and how she uses her classroom matter. It may be as simple as putting out three plastic butterflies in the middle of the carpet to encourage her students to begin an inquiry or it could be about colouring the water to get them interested in another area of the classroom. The significance in what Tounnalina does is much like what she experienced when she entered her preschool classroom as a young child, finding little notes purposefully placed around the classroom by her teacher to provoke student thinking and curiosities. Tounnalina's priority is to create an environment where her students want to be in and just want to go and explore. This is what being an early childhood teacher means for Tounnalina, so she supports that and she lets that happen.

However, as the research process continued, Tounnalina began to wonder and question her priorities. There are the weekly planners and the early childhood teachers have their yearly planners which indicate concepts and skills that the students should acquire. With the expectations in mind, the question which emerged was how

Tounnalina could use her classroom environment to teach the curriculum through play and to evidence the learning of concepts and skills through play? Also, how could she use her classroom environment in different contexts so that she could meet more of the needs and interests of her students yet simultaneously speaking to the school's written and assessed curriculum?

Throughout the research process, Tounnalina repeatedly wondered if she is truly allocating her students enough time and opportunities to play. More than that, she wondered if she provides her students with the classroom environment that allows them to play at a higher level and whether they are able to work out things within their own pace. As Tounnalina reflected:

*so I ask myself: is my classroom environment actually organised in a way that my students want or is the classroom setting according to what my planners dictate? (Interview, April 5, 2013)*

The perception is that sometimes she plans too many things because that is what is expected of her. Tounnalina feels that she is ending up organising her classroom environment that will guide her students to make inquiry into specific directions as determined by what is on her planners. Every day the students are required to write. Every day the students are required to read. Every day the early childhood teachers have to begin their school day with calendar time. How she prepares and arranges her classroom environment therefore leads the students to what they eventually need to achieve. Tounnalina's commitment towards providing an enabling environment for her students increasingly seems to be controlled by what is indicated in her planners.

Furthermore, because so much content needs to be covered, the time for play and the time for doing something that is really interesting for her students cannot be adequately addressed. Tounnalina feels at a loss at certain times because she wants to spend more time covering something that is really interesting for her students and she can see that her students are motivated to take the learning down another path. However, because the expectation is to cover numbers from one to ten on a given day, Tounnalina does not end up setting up her classroom environment so that her students can go deeper with what they previously initiated or are truly interested in. She feels that she needs to cover the concepts and skills in her planners first. So Tounnalina



does different “shades” of things. One time she might touch upon a specific skill like counting to ten for a short moment, then she might cover a little of another concept like adding and subtracting and then she might move onto reading activities.

Hence, the continual wondering regarding whether she truly sets up her classroom to respond to the needs and interests of her students. There are so many things happening at different levels and at different times. Tounnalina wants to provide her students with the time and opportunities to play purposefully. She wants her students to be engaged in higher levels of play where they can gain more in-depth understanding of the concepts and skills. She wants the learning that takes place to go according to what her students have defined as what interests them and where their curiosities are. Yet at the same time, Tounnalina has become aware of the realities of meeting the expectations stated on her weekly and yearly planners. How she actually organises her classroom environment is based on what her planners indicate and what is expected of her as an early childhood teacher. With this in mind, a new question yet to be answered for Tounnalina has emerged: *where does the playful environment fit into this or does it at all?*

### 7.3.3 Presenting Nayana’s Interpretations

*As a child, I had a lot of play-based activities at school. I had the blocks, the home corners, a lot of painting and free water play. Home science was my favorite because I was learning through play. There was the sewing, the gardening and the carpentry work. However, I will always remember the cooking. We cooked for everything. In those days we did not have pizzas, but we had pancakes and little puddings. We would make our pancakes and do number stories using our pancakes. We even made tea and it taught us about process. Cook, cook, cook is what we did. (Interview, April 9, 2013)*

Cooking was a large part of what Nayana did at school as a young child. Language was developed through cooking as the students could focus on procedural writing and they could build their vocabulary. Mathematics was done through cooking as the students learnt about sequencing and measurement. The students also strengthened their motor skills through chopping and mixing. Most basically, Nayana’s teachers attempted to gain the interests of their students and involve them

through the process of cooking something. Cooking was the way her teachers provoked student curiosities, thinking and problem solving strategies.

In fact, food takes a vital role in the day-to-day lives of Sri Lankans (Shook & Upasena, 2015). It is not about the food itself, but its significance. Relationships are built and maintained through food. Food is about laughter and harmony with family, friends and neighbours. Thus the daily activities surround breakfast, lunch, dinner and teatime. Inescapably, the most significant childhood play memories for Nayana surrounded cooking: not only cooking at school, but cooking for her parents as well as cooking during her playdates.

Not only is food important for her as a Sri Lankan, but cooking has been a significant part of her childhood both at school and at home and her favourite play memories have included cooking. As an adult, cooking remains an important part of who she is. Incidentally Nayana's teacher training also supported the significance of cooking in her life. Her teacher training emphasised learning through hands-on activities and she had a lot of exposure to cooking as a way to capture the interests and meet the needs of students. During her teacher training, Nayana learnt to use the local environment too by using local ingredients for their cooking activities. For instance, bananas grow freely in Sri Lanka. There is an abundance of bananas that are big, small, yellow, red, sweet and salty and some that are used only in cooking. One of Nayana's best memories during her teacher training involved the different lessons she could have using bananas only. Through using bananas, she was able to create lessons about size, colour, taste and the different uses of a single ingredient. This is what Nayana tries to bring to her students: hands-on activities that use the local environment to support the teaching and learning occurring in her classroom.

In spite of her memories with cooking, during the research process, Nayana revealed that the time she uses for cooking as learning invitations for her students has decreased over the years. She connected this to the school's curriculum. Each grade has different goals and it is the responsibility of teachers to go by the grade level expectations to see that every student achieves those goals. As a teacher the feeling is that she has to prepare and get her students ready for the next grade level which has become an extra target for Nayana. So with great difficulties, she has perceived that it is her responsibility to, not only meet the grade level expectations, but to also prepare her students to start first grade.

With a curriculum that expects a lot from the students, Nayana feels she has become very driven by learning goals. She sometimes forgets about finding a balance between the high expectations placed on her students and their need for play. She knows that her students need play as it is an opportunity for them to explore and learn. However, the school's curriculum does not seem to support this framework, saying it is too much of play. As teachers, it is therefore important for them to find a balance so that they can keep the learning goals in mind but honour the children's need for play.

The feeling is that times have changed and the early childhood teachers tend to neglect the necessity for developing the life experiences for their students. For Nayana, she has forgotten the significance of food and cooking where fun and harmony are vital both in the development of young children and what it means to be in Sri Lanka. Nayana's daughters even observed how school in the early years has changed. Her daughters remembered preschool and kindergarten marked by games and great joy. Her daughters remembered the times where sewing, carpentry, gardening and cooking were an essential part of the early childhood curriculum. They related these early years of education filled with opportunities to explore in order to learn. These were years that Nayana's daughters remembered because they were allowed to play. Now the learning is through textbooks, completing written assignments, getting assessed and preparing for the next grade level. Given the pressures, Nayana is challenged by the questions: *how can I support the need to play? What can be done?*

### **7.3.4 Presenting My Interpretations**

*As I sit on the carpet, I watch the other children nodding to the teacher. They are very polite, yet at the same time almost controlled. When asked a question, I see the hands of my peers raised and they wait patiently to be called upon. After some discussion they move quickly to their chairs, waiting for the teacher to pass out a piece of paper. I follow along shortly. When the paper comes around to me, I see pictures neatly divided row by row. Under the pictures are letters and under the letters are small bubbles. What am I to do here? I think I need to colour the pictures and all the small bubbles below the letters. As I am diligently colouring my pictures and bubbles, my teacher comes around with her red pen and puts a red mark on my page. As she walks*

*around the classroom quietly, I see some other papers get a red check. Where the papers received a red mark like I have, I see the student quickly reach for an eraser. Well, what now? What am I to do?*

My memories about my kindergarten class mainly surround experiences where I am unsure of what to do because I did not speak or understand English. The discussions on the carpet were marked by terrible confusion and the worksheets further added to my uncertainty of what to do and what was expected of me. It was not necessarily that I did not know the content, but perhaps it was because I did not have the tools, strategies nor teacher who guided or supported me in making sense of what was happening. I remember I would spend my mornings at school confused and not knowing what to do.

My childhood play memories at home were remarkably different from my kindergarten experience. At home, I had control of what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it. My play was further sustained when the adults around guided me when I was feeling lost or needed help to make sense of the world around me. I learnt from my childhood play experiences at home, that people like my mom and dad took primary roles in supporting me during play so that I could gain the knowledge, strategies and skills to take my play experiences to higher levels.

Similarly, my teacher training and ongoing professional development emphasises the need for time, space and resources for purposeful play. However, it is my role as an early childhood teacher to provide the materials and guide my students so that they can develop the knowledge, tools and strategies to create more complex play experiences (Biddle, Garcia-Nevarez, Henderson & Valero-Kerrick, 2014). As a kindergarten teacher, this is what I want for my students.

When I reflect on my previous memories with play at school and at home in combination with my use and implementation of play in my own early childhood classroom, I am able to see that I need to construct a greater understanding about play and the use of play in early childhood classrooms. Therefore inquiry into the multiple views and uses of play has been my commitment and learning journey in order to improve my own play practices. What guides me in how I actually realise play in my own classroom are not the external challenges being placed on me by temporal factors like what the teacher participants have increasingly experienced at The International

School. Rather, it is about improving my support for children's play by better understanding play in its multiple contexts. What is important for me is that

children need advocates for play, while teachers need a village to support their role as play-based early childhood education advocates. Moreover, teachers need the support of a village to empower and nurture their ongoing efforts to provide developmentally appropriate play experiences. (Wood, 2015, p. 89)

The impact of my previous play memories, my play experiences in my own early childhood education and from my teacher training is therefore the motivation behind an inquiry to better understand play. Play is complicated and the influences from my experiences and encounters with play shape my commitment towards researching into play. In the following section, I detail my learnings about play in its multiple contexts.

#### **7.4 The Realisation of Play in its Multiple Contexts**

As I think about my inquiry into the rich and diverse factors that shape play practices, my example of reflection into the previous experiences with play has encapsulated the significance of reflection on practice. Taken from Moyles (2010), the process of reflection has:

- helped me gain personal knowledge and professional thinking about play and learning;
- enabled me to understand my own practice and those of other early childhood teachers at a deeper level;
- encouraged me to analyse, evaluate and critique my own play practices; and
- led me to more value-driven approaches to play and learning.

For me, play is the way children construct meaning about their world, learn and develop. The balance of play opportunities and experiences in my classroom vary from what I refer to as open play that is child-directed and child-initiated to guided play that involves teacher initiation but child direction. However, I struggle to conceptualise play as a completely free, unstructured activity that is not bound by some teacher influence or rules. Can we refer to play as truly free from teacher

influence when the classroom environment is set-up by the teacher to invite inquiry and promote play? Can we refer to play as truly free from rules when we model behaviours that demonstrate characteristics of care, empathy and practices that involve the safety of all students?

Furthermore, as I continued my interaction with the teacher participants, my conceptualisation of play was further challenged as the use of play in the early childhood classrooms ranged from more guided to structured play both in how play is perceived and how play is realised in practice. Table 7.1 helps to make the distinction between the varying views and practices of the teacher participants. In some instances the classroom was set-up and staged so that children could initiate and direct their play opportunities. The role of the early childhood teachers concerned the provision of time and an open environment where careful observation by the teachers to understand the intention of the play was essential. In other cases the teacher took the role in setting up, beginning and leading the play experiences. There was a lesser scope for students to choose or direct what they wanted and how they wanted to play. The play experiences were prepared by the early childhood teachers and specific learning outcomes informed the nature of the play. Though the early childhood teachers provided an array of play experiences and opportunities, the teacher participants have perceived a dominant view and use of play in their own teaching practice that are presented in the below table.

	<b>Student-initiated</b>	<b>Teacher-initiated</b>
<b>Student-directed</b>	Tounnalina's view and practice	Nayana's view and practice
<b>Teacher-directed</b>	Punya's view and practice	

Table 7.1 Distinction between play views and practices

I further reflected on my conceptualisation of play and how I approached my interpretations of the stories of the teacher participants when I came across a continuum for play (Kelman & Lauchlan, 2010). The continuum as presented in Figure 7.1 has helped me understand play and the use of play in a new way. Where the original model focuses on balancing between adult and student-led play activities, my adaptation of the continuum incorporates the voices of the teacher participants and

their views about the multiple ways in which play occurs, detailing both the student and teacher roles in play.

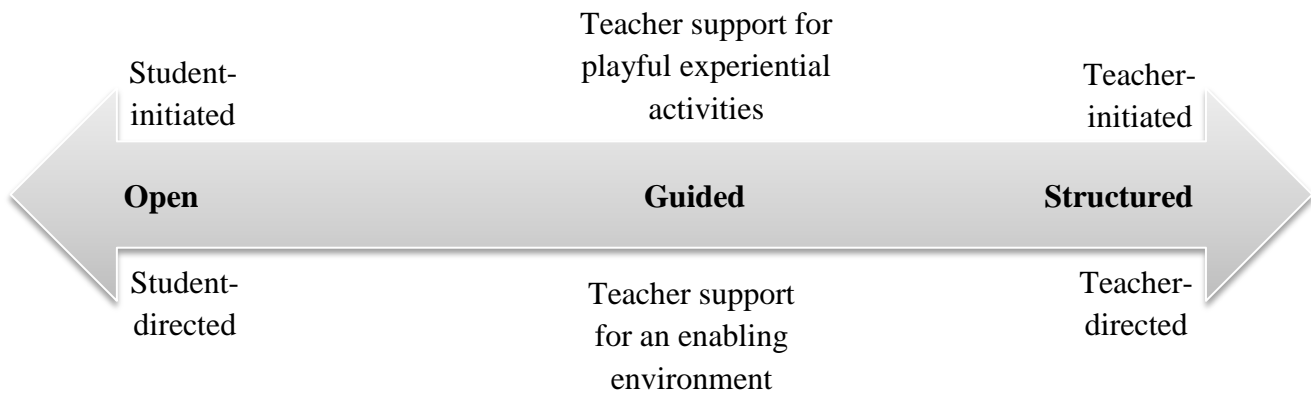


Figure 7.1 Continuum of play (adapted from Kelman & Lauchlan, 2010)

As Luff (2014) suggested, attempting a universal way of viewing play “is analogous to seizing bubbles” (p. 130). An investigation into play can be recognised and valued without the need for a precise and universal way of viewing play and its implementation in early childhood classrooms. Rather, play should be a co-constructed concept and should depend on what play looks like for the individuals involved (Howard & McInnes, 2010).

As I examined the teacher participants individually and the context of the early childhood teachers, the diversity in play perspectives and views as well as the way play is used and implemented in early childhood classrooms began to emerge for me. I therefore approached play differently, both with my own perspective of what I previously thought play to be and from the perspectives of the teacher participants.

My adapted version of the continuum for play has enabled me to further conceptualise the impact of the diverse historical and cultural elements that can influence how we might view play and how we might implement play in our early childhood classrooms differently. As Ridgway, Quinones and Li (2015) suggested, thoughts and ideas are continuously being created and re-created “through a process that can only be described as cultural and historical alchemy that crystallized into new conceptualisations” (pp. 1-2). This necessitates a clear understanding of what drives our perspectives on play and the ways we use play in practice.

Therefore the manner in which we perceive and position ourselves as early childhood teachers in children’s play is shaped by who we are and where we come

from. This requires an investigation into how our previous experiences with play influence how we behave and act in our early childhood classrooms. Our rich and diverse backgrounds in turn influence our conceptualisation, approach as well as use and implementation of play in practice.

### **7.5 The Significance of Temporal Factors: Institutional Constraints**

Understanding not only the historical, but the cultural and temporal factors that impact play in early childhood classrooms provide a renewable and expansive interpretation on play. Challenging are the multiple views and developed theories on play and how play takes on different forms in each of the classrooms of the teacher participants. What became apparent and took on significance throughout the interpretive inquiry into the impact on the use of play was the complexity of what play is and how play is used in the early childhood classrooms. As Fler (2013) stated,

the term ‘play’ should not be thought of as a static, unchanging concept for explaining ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’ play...how we define play has evolved over time, with strong arguments being put forward for play being dynamic and culturally defined. (p. 6)

My inquiry into the previous experiences with play of the teacher participants has therefore provided a journey which has enabled the early childhood teachers and I a reflective process to “re-shape, change, enhance, extend and even transform thinking about pedagogical play in its multi-cultural, multi-layered contexts and complexities” (Ridgway et al., 2015, p. 8).

As I return to Fives and Buehl’s (2012) framework for inquiry into teacher thinking and its function on teacher practice as discussed in Chapter 3, the effects of guides on the way teachers face and manage cultural and temporal factors is of significance. Revealed through the re-presentations of the stories of the teacher participants in the earlier chapters of my thesis, previous experiences with play both at home and in school shape the current orientations and developed theories on play. However, new explanations are presented as teacher training in addition to teaching experiences have supported the early childhood teachers to re-define their perceptions on play. My interpretations which have been constructed by working together with



the early childhood teachers of how play is actually realised in the classrooms highlights the local and school culture as being the more dominant factors impacting the use and implementation of play in the classrooms of the teacher participants.

While Punya prioritised developing confident learners through supportive relationships, the presence of high expectations and assessments in addition to completing the paperwork required of her took precedence. My observations into her classroom captured the divide Punya was experiencing.

*Students are weaving in and out of activities by choice. Children are initiating their own play as they freely choose to engage with different activities without direction from the teacher. The children are also regulating themselves as they move from one activity to the next with no input from the teacher. The children are working in pairs or in small groups, supporting each other in choosing activities to do or helping each other organise their next play experience. The teacher is circulating the classroom and where a child engages with her, she takes the lead from the children as she follows their requests.*

*20 minutes into my observation, several chairs were moved around. The chairs are brought from one section of the room to another. The teacher gathers a few students and engages with them through what Hyvonen (2011) refers to as educational play. The play is related to the curriculum and is teacher-led as she asks the children to form sight words using magnetic letters. As the children work through a few words, she has her checklist and marks off the words that the children form correctly. After the children attempt all the words on her checklist, they are sent off to resume their play.*  
(Wong-Powell, observation notes, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

In the case with Tounnalina, her time and opportunities for play decreased because of the pressures to meet the requirements as set by her weekly planners. The way she organised her classroom environment therefore was not necessarily in response to the interests and needs of her students, but as a result of what she needed to achieve according to her planners. In one of my observations into her classroom, I noted:

*the classroom is purposefully set-up with centers where children are either working independently or with teacher guidance. One group is doing research into different animals as they browse through books set out about animals around the world. Another group is working in their journals, drawing about the different animals they have researched into. These two centers are completed with independence as the children browse through the books at the first center at their own pace and then move to the next center to respond into their journals when they are ready to do so. The teacher is circulating between the two centers, asking children open-ended questions to provoke their thinking and curiosity.*

*On the other side of the classroom, there are three centers set-up. There are some children playing at the water table with different manipulatives that relate to the animal unit. There is another group of children playing at the block center. They have built a zoo using different constructive materials and are engaged in a scenario where they are acting out roles for the different animals. There is also a zookeeper working to take care of the animals and maintaining the zoo. The third group of children is completing animal puzzles. Occasionally the teacher joins in the children's play for short periods while the children are moving in and out of the activities at their own leisure. The activities are what Hyvonen (2011) suggest to be cheering play as the learning engagements motivate the students into the curriculum-based learning that is happening on the side of the classroom where the students are researching with the teacher's support. (Wong-Powell, observation notes, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013)*

For Nayana, her connection with gardening, sewing, carpentry and especially food and cooking were minimised because she became driven by meeting the high expectations increasingly being placed on her students. As I noted in one of my class observations, though foods are used as a resource for the learning engagement, the process of real-life preparation and cooking is minimised as the activities with the food relate to the concepts needed to be taught as dictated by the school's curriculum.

*In this lesson, the teacher has set out to focus on introducing the concept of weight. A balance scale is set on the table as the students sit in the audience. The students are shown different foods which will be weighed: a papaya, a pickle, an ambarella fruit and an apple. The papaya is placed first on one side of the scale and then the students are asked to estimate how many cubes would be needed to balance out the scale. On a T-chart with the title 'Papaya', the students each write down their estimations on one side. Once all the students' estimations are recorded, the teacher one-by-one places cubes onto the other side of the scale while the children count aloud in unison. When the scale is balanced, the final count of cubes is recorded on the other side of the chart.*

*The activity is repeated with the pickle following. However, this time the students are asked to estimate how many cubes are needed to make the side with the cubes heavier and one student is invited to place the cubes onto the scale. The ambarella fruit comes next with the students having to estimate how many cubes could be used to make the side with the cubes show lighter. The students are then asked what they want to do with the apple.*

*In this type of educational play (Hyvonen, 2011), the activity connects directly to the curriculum and the teacher is leading the activity. While the concept of weight is being introduced and practiced, the lesson incorporated additional mathematical concepts including counting and estimating. (Wong-Powell, observation notes, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013)*

The examples taken from the teacher participants in combination with my classroom observations emphasise the curriculum as a constraint that dominates in its impact on the use and implementation of play in their early childhood classrooms. As Punya concluded,

*the desire is more of an open sesame approach as children should choose their own activities and what they want to play. But really, sometimes it's rigid. It can look like some kind of formal approach where you have the*

*expectations and you have to make sure that you are trying to cover those standards. We try, but sometimes it's rigid.* (Interview, October 1, 2013)

Though the childhood memories and experiences with play impact the manner in which the teacher participants approach play theoretically, in practice, temporal influences specific to the pressures from the school's curriculum were viewed as more significant.

## 7.6 Discussion

### 7.61 Explanations: Re-examination and new questions

As Moyles (2010) responded to a range of reasons provided by practitioners for not including play opportunities, she writes "so why aren't [early childhood teachers] showing and explaining to [school administration] why play is so important?" (p. 14). Early childhood teachers need to feel empowered to be ambassadors for quality teaching practices and play as the appropriate way for children to learn and develop. As Tounnalina described though,

*actually the issue of respecting play is not so sweet. Children's play is not what [administration and parents] think it to be. For me, play is more than just play. Play is important. Play is learning. Play is children's education. So, we have to take it seriously and we have to respect the opinions of each other. But something I find is that some people are not ready to buy into it exactly. Some are not ready to take it.* (Interview, April 5, 2013)

As play is not readily accepted by administration and parents, being an ambassador for play means underscoring the learning and development of young children through play and that the requirements of the curriculum can be fulfilled (Moyles, 2010). As Punya explained,

*administration and sometimes parents do not realise that play is the main thing. Ok then. So I start talking to them about multiplication and division. I am playing with eight beads and I want to make sure it is fair for me and my friend. So I give myself one and then my friend one. I do this until I have made two sets of four beads. What is that I ask administration and my*

*parents? Is that not division or multiplication? As early childhood teachers we are providing the foundation. We are doing exactly what they will be doing as older students. (Interview, April 5, 2013)*

However, the teacher participants began to recognise that it is not enough to only advocate for children's play in early childhood classrooms. At The International School, being an ambassador for play also means taking action.

*The issue of respecting play stems deeply where the onus should not only be on the school to allow for the space, time and materials for play. Early childhood teachers need to also take responsibility. As a teacher, I can take the high expectations for mathematics and language as set by the school. However, I need to make a genuine effort to sit down together with my colleagues as an early childhood team and make conscious decisions to meet the grade level expectations through play. The decision can be supported by what research says about play and learning. We need to consider that it is ultimately the teachers who make the decisions about using teacher-based activities or play-based activities. (Focus group discussion, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013)*

My interpretive inquiry revealed the significant previous experiences with play and the impact of childhood memories on the current orientations and developed theories on play as well as how play is realised in the early childhood classrooms. The research process has also revealed the constraints to play that take precedence for the early childhood teachers. The impact of high expectations which are increasingly being placed on the young learners at The International School are left unchallenged and my work with the teacher participants encouraged the early childhood teachers to revisit the significant factors impacting play beyond the temporal, institutional constraints.

For Punya, the inquiry into the impact of childhood memories on play made her feel supported. The research process "validated my experiences and uncovered how much [my] negative childhood experiences effect [me] and why I want to make sure my students don't experience the same thing" (Focus group discussion, November 14, 2013). For Punya, our work together inspired her to re-prioritise what

is important for her as an early childhood teacher in spite of the growing requirements being placed on her with the increasing expectations of the school's curriculum.

*It should be my way of doing things. I am always thinking of the child's mind. I'm with the child's mind. What they are thinking and how they are thinking and that's how it should be done. If we are in the drama center and I see a child doing the drama scene differently, I would be following them. The children need to be given the chance of doing and exploring on their own.*  
(Interview, October 1, 2013)

The research process therefore re-emphasised Punya's priority for friendship and support in her early childhood classroom and the "warmth, care, love and happiness" she felt throughout our interaction during the inquiry encouraged her to move play forward at the school and put the importance of building a learning community and presence of play back into her own classroom.

In Tounnalina's case, she used a boomerang as the metaphor (see Figure 7.2) to examine her experience. The challenges placed on her by the curriculum's high expectations made her feel failure in what she previously prioritised for children's play in her early childhood classroom. However, the interpretive inquiry into her childhood experiences with play and the impact of such memories on play as practice has given her the guidance, hope and positive thinking to challenge the high expectations placed on her young learners at the expense of her classroom environment and the time and opportunities for play.

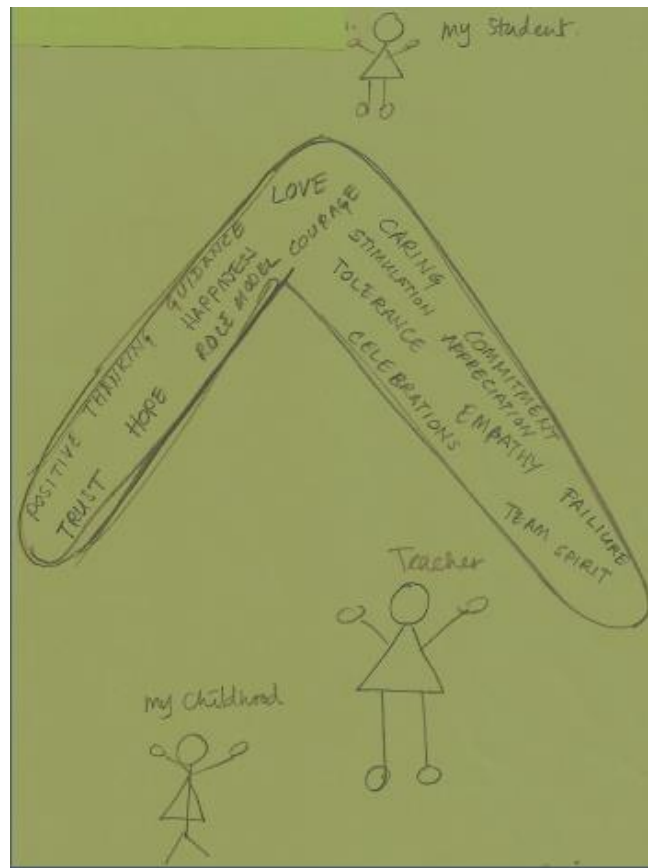


Figure 7.2 Tounnalina's reflection about the research process

As Tounnalina stated, "I always knew it, but the research process helped me to make the direct connections" (Focus group discussion, November 14, 2013). As shown through another reflection piece by Tounnalina (as shown in Figure 7.3) regarding her experiences with the research process, the feelings of trust, partnership and team spirit were felt throughout the inquiry into children's play. The positive experiences gave Tounnalina the courage to revisit her classroom environment through another lens so that she continued to question whether she was genuinely embracing the views and developed theories on play she previously constructed and valued.



Figure 7.3 Another reflection about the research process from Tounnalina

As for Nayana, her experience with the inquiry into her childhood memories with play revealed why she approaches her students and play in the way she does as well as what she wants to provide for her students. Through the years though, she felt herself become more driven by the pressures of the curriculum. However, the research process helped Nayana “remember to give the students in the early years what they always want in order to enjoy the learning and not demand too many things” (Focus group discussion, November 14, 2013). Our work together reminded Nayana that gardening, sewing, carpentry work and especially cooking had a place during her childhood experiences at school as well as her own classroom when she first joined The International School. The research process was an opportunity for Nayana to reflect on her childhood experiences and what she prioritised for her students as well as how she uses play experiences like cooking that was previously significant to her. Cooking enables “the students to bloom one day with colours” and through the research process, Nayana began to reposition her views about cooking and its significance in her early childhood classroom.

In conclusion, for the early childhood teachers, the research process encouraged the teacher participants to revisit their views and how they valued the



place for play in their own classrooms. For the early childhood teachers, though their memories with play impacted the way they perceive play and implement play into their teaching practices, the institutional constraints nevertheless took increasing significance. The pressures felt from the high expectations of the school's curriculum minimised the time and place for play. As Punya revealed,

*I would say the saddest part in our school is that administration doesn't realise that playing is important and that the children should be given the freedom of their choice of learning, how they should learn. Without, it's becoming like robot learning where teachers are trying to force them to learn things. I'm not happy about it, but when the pressure comes, it comes to that. I am trying to avoid it and I'm trying, but the paperwork. Yes, it's challenging for me, but still I have accepted it. I am able to deliver things to the administration, but I cannot understand. I feel that we are given too much paperwork, too many assessments, too many things. (Interview, April 5, 2013)*

However, the research process provided a reflective opportunity for the teacher participants to revisit what is genuinely important to them as early childhood teachers. The interpretive inquiry into the impact of childhood memories with play to teaching practices enabled the teacher participants to re-construct and re-prioritise what is truly of importance to them and encouraged them to rethink and perhaps challenge the institutional constraints placed on them. Tounnalina summarised,

*if we go back to our own childhood at certain times and reflect on certain incidences, certain episodes that either took us into a different level of understanding and what we are doing in our schools, it makes you realise what you are doing, why you are doing it, and it makes you think what are the things that really hinders you. Then you put that context into your students and you ask whether you're going in the right direction. This is a self-evaluation you should be doing for yourself and for your students. (Interview, April 5, 2013)*

My interpretive inquiry into the effects of previous experiences with play and the use of play in early childhood classrooms has therefore provided a framework for the

teacher participants to reflect into where they come from and how their backgrounds shape who they are and what they do as early childhood teachers.

What began as a journey for self-discovery extended to supporting other early childhood teachers in their interests to engage in reflection about the factors influencing their views and use of play. As Stremmel (2012) indicated, “it is up to teachers themselves to wonder and write about something that no one else understands-their life in the classroom, their experiences with children, and those things that perplex and astonish them” (p. 109). This has been my commitment during my inquiry into children’s play.

However, my research into play is not only about gaining the insights into the rich and diverse factors influencing play practices. The opportunity to engage in reflection about teaching practices has also been about using the self-knowledge create new explanations about the factors shaping play and to make decisions about play that impact student learning more positively. Given the challenges to play in a time where high expectations are being placed at an increasingly young age, “instead of implementing prescribed curriculum or following the methodologies of others, teachers become the source and creator of the theoretical basis of their own implementation techniques” (Stremmel, 2012, p. 109). Though the institutional constraints began take a more profound impact on play practices, the teacher participants were able to rethink their priorities as new explanations developed and become more optimistic about the place and time for play in their own classrooms.

### **7.7 Summary**

Chapter 7 has provided new explanations using the cultural and temporal, institutional effects on the immediate behaviours and actions of the teacher participants. In my focus into the early childhood classrooms and the actual use of play, the teacher participants perceived the constraints placed by the school’s curriculum as the dominant factor impacting how they actually realised play, placing profound limitations to the time and opportunities for play. Through reflection into the complex influences on their teaching practices, the research process enabled the early childhood teachers to re-prioritise what was important to them when it comes to play in early childhood education.

Through my interpretations of the lived experiences of the teacher participants and the construction of new explanations, this chapter has revisited the question: is

play as universal as we think it is? What became clear throughout this chapter are the multiple contexts that determine the factors for play and the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms. Since play depends on contextual influences that are situationally based, play may not fit into a mold and be as simply understood from a universal point of view. As Edwards and Brooker (2010) suggested, “instead of focusing on endless definitions of play and pedagogy, we are able to think about engaging with the many ways play is understood, experienced and theorized” (p. 225).

Chapter 8, the final chapter of my thesis summarises my epistemological and personal learnings from my interpretive inquiry into the past experiences with play. The chapter also details how my research into children’s play contributes to current play literature and research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of suggestions for further inquiry that could be built on this research project.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **THE RESEARCH JOURNEY WITH THREE EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS: OUR RE-INTERPRETATION OF PLAY**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

Chapter 7 presented the cultural and temporal factors including the felt institutional constraints being placed on the teacher participants by The International School that were perceived to impact the use and implementation of play in practice. Through interpretive inquiry, the early childhood teachers also identified a growing misalignment between their views and developed theories on play grounded in their rich and diverse previous experiences with play and the pressures to meet the increasingly high expectations of the school's curriculum. The new explanations on the influences to play practices revealed the increasing challenges to play that were being felt by the early childhood teachers. By making explicit the factors impacting play, the teacher participants were able to “move from an intuitive to a conscious understanding of the social, psychological and critical value of play” (Fleer, 2013, p. 2). The research process therefore empowered the early childhood teachers to re-prioritise what was important to them regarding play in spite of the impact of institutional pressures being experienced.

Chapter 8 will bring my thesis to a close. I will begin this chapter by returning to the motivations behind my interpretive inquiry into play and my self-discoveries throughout the research journey. I will also revisit the previous chapters of my thesis. Presented also are the epistemological and personal learnings. The contributions of my inquiry into play in addition to the impact on play practices will follow. This chapter concludes with further questions built on my provision of a possible framework for reflection into the impact on the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms.

#### **8.2 Returning to the Beginning of My Interpretive Inquiry into Play**

It seems almost unnecessary to inquire into play as much has been thought, said, argued and shared about the significance, value and place for play in early childhood education (Cheng & Johnson, 2009; Smidt, 2011). However, in spite of the presence of literature and research on play, play continues to be a misunderstood concept and thus its presence in early childhood education remains challenged (Santer

& Griffiths, 2007; Swarbrick, 2013). As Woodside (2010) indicated, research needs to engage teachers in the process of reflection, making investigations into the misalignment between the views of early childhood teachers on play and play in practice.

When I first began teaching in 2004, I did not recognise the challenges in thinking about play as well as the complexity in the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms. After teaching for several years and only after I began to read about being a good parent after the birth of my first child in 2010, did I come to realise how complex a concept play to be both at home and in education. In fact, as Howard and McInnes (2010) suggest, “the story is far less simple and while the idea of play-based curriculum might evoke a romantic vision, the play activity that occurs in settings and classrooms must be reconciled” (p. 31).

My inquiry into play therefore originated from a genuine interest both from my role as a mother during children’s play and from an early childhood teacher’s perspective. My interest developed into a series of questions including:

1. How can play be defined?
2. What are the factors that impact how we think about play?
3. What influences shape how we put play into practice?
4. Are the values and beliefs about play actually put into practice?

In searching for sophisticated responses and more informed understandings, I came to the realisation that I myself did not know how to respond to these questions. My inquiry thus began as a journey to gain an understanding into who I am as a mother as well as an early childhood teacher and my perspectives on play in theory and applied in practice.

Understanding the thinking as well as behaviours and actions of individuals requires reflecting and collecting data about one’s thoughts and feelings that are grounded in rich and diverse experiences and contexts (Leauepe, 2011; Woodside, 2010). The process of reflection enables personal knowledge and professional thinking to surface (Moyle, 2010). Reflection not only leads to a deeper understanding of one’s own practices, but the practices of others. The motivation behind my inquiry into children’s play began as a journey for self-understanding however led into a possible framework for other researchers and early childhood

teachers to inquire into their questions about who they are as early childhood teachers as well as their thoughts, behaviours and actions regarding play.

### **8.3 Blurring of Boundaries: Becoming a Participant**

What began as a journey for self-understanding into who I am as a mother and as an early childhood teacher became an inquiry into play and the factors influencing the perspectives on play as well as the use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms. My inquiry necessitated a dynamic process of negotiation, construction, sharing and re-presentation between myself as a researcher and the early childhood teachers participating in my investigation (Andrade, 2009). My interpretive approach to research therefore underscored the assumption that reality is socially constructed and is characterised by the interactions between myself and the teacher participants where my role as an interpretive inquirer became just as constructive in the field as the participants. As Taylor and Medina (2013) defined, “the interpretive fisherman enters the water, establishes rapport with the fish, and swims with them, striving to understand their experience of being in the water” (p. 3).

Thus what began to emerge was my position as an inside researcher where my identity as an early childhood teacher in search for self-understanding was shared amongst the teacher participants of my inquiry into play. My initial journey of engaging in reflection to discover who I am as a mother and as an early childhood teacher also became an inquiry for the teacher participants who were interested and equally as passionate as I into the effects on their use of play in practice that encompassed a process of gaining self-understanding. As Greene (2014) stated, as an inside researcher the borders become blurred between the researcher and the researched.

However, as I proceeded with my inquiry into play, I began to wonder how my experiences and subjective influences would affect the collection and analysis of data. In fact, “it is impossible to separate oneself as a researcher from the historical and cultural that defines one’s interpretive frame since both the subject and the object of research are located in pre-understood worlds” (Scott & Usher, 2011, p. 30). Thus I was challenged by the question of how my position as an inside researcher affected the manner in which I approached my research journey and my interpretation and re-presentation of data.

Being an interpretive inquirer therefore involved an intimate awareness about my own perspectives and biases (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). My role as an inside researcher then, was to be self-conscious about my position as a researcher and to acknowledge the intertextuality that was characteristic in the gathering, interpreting and re-presenting of data (Taylor, 2011). The significance of my position as an inside researcher therefore was about an open and honest interaction between myself and the teacher participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Furthermore, my position as an inside researcher was about my interest in the experiences of the teacher participants and my commitment to accurately and deeply represent the experiences of the early childhood teachers.

#### **8.4 Revisiting the Chapters**

**Chapter 1** introduced my study and the focus of my inquiry into play. The chapter began with a background into how my experiences as a new mother and as an early childhood teacher shaped the beginnings of my interpretive inquiry. My purpose of doing research was detailed in this chapter as I intended to:

1. offer a possible framework where early childhood teachers could engage in reflection about their use and implementation of play in practice that is grounded in their experiences that are rich and diverse in contexts;
2. provide insights into the previous experiences with play that have been perceived to impact current theories and developed theories on play and the use of play in early childhood classrooms; and
3. reposition the context of play from a universal phenomenon to a concept situated in historical and cultural significance.

In Chapter 1, I also presented my three research questions of:

1. *What memories and personal experiences of teachers with play shape the implementation of play in their early childhood classrooms?*
2. *How do previous play experiences of early childhood teachers affect their current orientations and developed theories on play as an effective teaching practice?*
3. *What are the implications of culture and context on play as the leading activity to the learning and development of young children?*

**Chapter 2** was a review of empirical, peer-reviewed literature and research into play. Information and conclusions drawn by other researchers were presented through major themes which emerged from the review. The key themes as shown in Table 8.1 organised Chapter 2 into three major sections including the learning expectations in multiple contexts, a misalignment between play in theory and play in practice and a narrow context of research into play.

<p><b>Learning expectations</b></p>	<p>The challenge to play time and opportunities as a possible consequence to the increasing emphasis on learning standards placed on young learners and the felt pressures by early childhood teachers to achieve increasing expectations.</p> <p>(Ackermann et al., 2013; Adams et al., 2004; Almon &amp; Miller, 2011; Ginsburg, 2007; Gray, 2013; Hyvonen; 2011; Leaupepe, 2011; Lester &amp; Russell, 2010; Lynch, 2015; Milteer &amp; Ginsburg, 2012; Opeyemi, 2015; Santer &amp; Griffiths, 2007; Whitebread, 2012; Wong, 2008; Wong et al., 2011)</p>
<p><b>A misalignment</b></p>	<p>A misalignment between the constructed values and stated benefits of play to the learning and development of young children with the actual use and implementation of play in early childhood classrooms.</p> <p>(Adams, et al., 2004; Curtis &amp; Carter, 2008; Fung &amp; Cheng, 2012; Ginsburg, 2007; Leaupepe, 2011; Moyles, 2010; Rogers, 2011; Rogers &amp; Evans, 2007; Sandberg &amp; Samuelsson, 2006; Santer &amp; Griffiths, 2007; Vera &amp; Geneser, 2012; Vong, 2012; Wohlwend, 2009)</p>
<p><b>A narrow context</b></p>	<p>Play literature is dominated by Western contexts and views which necessitates further research into the diverse contexts with regards to play.</p> <p>(Blaise, 2014; Dockett, 2011; Flear, 2009; Gosso &amp; Carvalho, 2013; Grieshaber &amp; McArdle, 2010; Gupta, 2011; Izumi-Taylor et al, 2010; Leaupepe, 2010; Li et al., 2011; Rogers, 2011; Woodhead, 2006)</p>

Table 8.1 Major themes from literature review on play

In **Chapter 3**, I discussed my ontological, epistemological and theoretical perspectives. I examined how the methodology of interpretive inquiry aligns to:

- how I view reality through a constructivist lens;
- my ways of knowing, using language to capture the situational realities of early childhood teachers;



- my use of interpretive methods and tools which allowed me to negotiate, construct and share the rich and diverse backgrounds of the teacher participants; and
- my use of thick descriptions in re-presenting the stories of the early childhood teachers.

The chapter also highlighted the components to my interpretive inquiry, emphasising the social construction of realities and the perceptions and meanings in which individuals assign to their lived experiences. Using an adapted model into teacher thinking, the functions of filters, frames and guides that shape the use and implementation of play practices were detailed. Finally, a discussion about how I positioned myself as a researcher concluded the chapter.

**Chapter 4** focused on the contexts for my interpretive inquiry, introducing The International School and the teacher participants. The data collection methods which emphasised the characteristics of flexibility and an iterative approach to my investigation into play were presented. A discussion on the data analysis process of dismantling, segmenting and reassembling data followed. Issues of credibility, trustworthiness and authenticity were outlined. The chapter concluded with a discussion about the ethical considerations and the possible limitations to an inquiry into the lived experience of early childhood teachers.

**Chapters 5, 6 and 7** were the data chapters as I presented the descriptions, nuances and patterns as well as new explanations of the perceived past experiences that influence the play practices of the teacher participants. The chapters addressed my research questions and intentions and integrated the filters-frames-guides framework. *Chapter 5* was dedicated to the descriptions as the filters of experiences and information including the previous play memories and experiences of the early childhood teachers that were recognised to impact play in practice were presented. This chapter also used the descriptions to detail the comparisons and categorisations in the lived experiences of the early childhood teachers. *Chapter 6* presented the effects of previous experiences with play in the early childhood education of the teacher participants and how such influences frame their current orientations and developed theories on play. This chapter provided a deeper level of interpretation, using wider contexts which enriched the descriptions presented in Chapter 5. *Chapter*

7 focused on the new explanations constructed with the teacher participants, presenting the guides to intention and action. The factors including cultural and institutional influences were perceived as being increasingly significant in shaping the immediate behaviours and actions of the early childhood teachers. The new explanations provided an opportunity for the teacher participants to make reflections into their current play practices and to re-prioritise what is important for them. The data chapters illuminated the intricacies of play as the chapters demonstrate how play is a historically, culturally and institutionally constructed and embedded concept.

### **8.5 Learnings from My Interpretive Inquiry into Play**

My inquiry into play provided insights into the factors influencing play practices of early childhood teachers. Through reflections with the teacher participants, the complexities of play were illuminated. Play is entrenched in historical and cultural contexts, necessitating a focus into the rich and diverse contexts that are situationally-bound (Gupta, 2011). My research into play has been responsive to the multiple, diverse, complex and subjective perspectives of the teacher participants. However, the thick descriptions and interpretations were richer as I personally and professionally gained a better understanding into play. Here I discuss both my epistemological and personal learnings from my interpretive inquiry.

#### **8.5.1 Epistemological learnings**

My research into the impacts on play, rooted in the rich and diverse historical and cultural experiences of the teacher participants has provided a possible framework for other researchers and early childhood teachers to investigate the intricate factors that shape their perspectives and use of play in practice. However, as the research process continued, I needed a place to present the data in addition to a space where additions and modifications were possible as I responded to new findings as well as the results of sharing and negotiation with the teacher participants in our construction of meaning.

Through a concept map format adapted from Fleer (2013), in Figure 8.1 I was able to capture the iterative process of inquiring into the multiple contexts that influence how play is viewed and implemented. In Fleer's original map, the multiple contexts are defined as *key ideas*. However, I expanded the key ideas to fit into my components to my interpretive inquiry including filters, frames and guides (adapted

from Fives & Buehl, 2012). I then linked the components to childhood play memories, current orientations on play, developed theories on play and actual teaching practices.

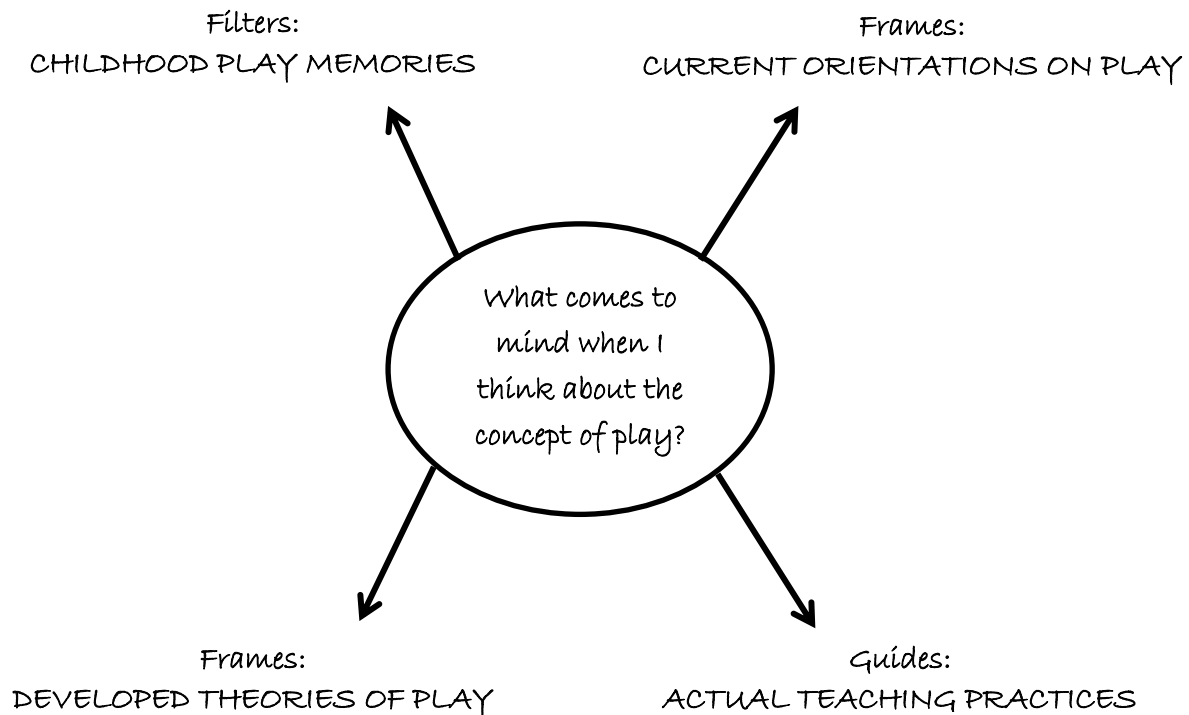


Figure 8.1 Constructing the complexity of play (adapted from Fleer, 2013)

Using a concept map format to construct the complexity of play, as I interacted with the teacher participants I was able to input my emerging descriptions and interpretations throughout my research process. Additions were continuously included as new discoveries were revealed and as new descriptions and interpretations were constructed. The concept map format provided me with a comprehensive approach to describe and interpret a range of perspectives on play and the multiple factors perceived to impact play in practice.

### 8.5.2 My personal learnings

In my search for self-awareness into why I have come to value play at home as well as my approach and inclusion of play time and opportunities into my own teaching practices as an early childhood teacher, the process encompassed an inquiry into my thoughts associated with my observable behaviours and actions as well as my deep-rooted beliefs (Woodside, 2010). The research journey thus necessitated an

inquiry beyond personal introspection and into the complexities of human life where greater sensitivity and understanding towards my historical, cultural, social and emotional backgrounds and experiences were described, interpreted and constructed (Trahar, 2009).

Though I had a close awareness about my own experiences and subjectivity influencing how I collected and analysed data, there were times throughout my inquiry where I did not foresee the influences of the research process on myself as an early childhood teacher. From the start of my inquiry into play to the end, my position on how I understood and perceived play had been challenged and has been modified. Play is not as straightforward a concept as I previously believed it to be. Furthermore, how play is perceived and implemented into early childhood classrooms may not be as universal as I previously thought.

At the conclusion of my research journey, when I think about play, I think about it as a culturally constructed and institutionally enacted phenomenon. An inquiry into play requires reflection into rich and diverse contexts as play is defined in the situation in which it occurs. Play is “a form of cultural expression, with multiple interpretations and multiple perspectives” (Fleer, 2013, p. 25).

What began as a genuine investigation into who I am as a mother and who I am as an early childhood teacher developed into an inquiry into the complexities of play. Therefore what started from my very narrow perspective on what is play and how play is practiced in early childhood classrooms, my research into play has enabled me to develop my perceptions about play now from a cultural-historical point of view (Fleer, 2013; van Oers, 2010). The concept of play is related to the situationally-based experiences of individuals and the ways in which we talk about and do play is interconnected to our historical and cultural backgrounds.

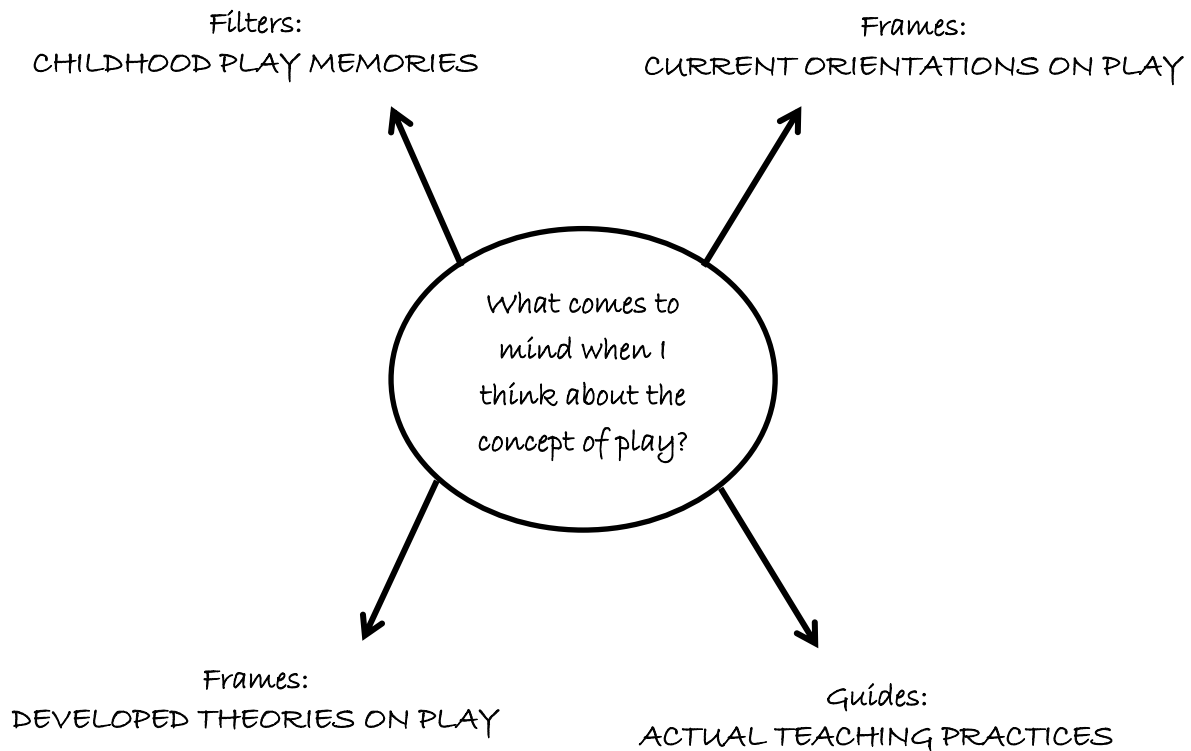
I use the concept map format presented in Figure 8.1, to summarise my personal learnings in what initially began as a self-discovery into who I am as a mother and as an early childhood teacher (refer to Figure 8.2).

-Play at home is supported: adults model play behaviours and extend play experiences by providing new opportunities and provoking thinking

-Play is something that is structured at school: from whole group discussions to independent worksheet activities

-New possibilities are provided by teachers to further children's exploration and inquiry as well as extend problem solving strategies and skills

-Play is the freedom to explore, inquire and problem solve



-The teacher's role is to offer a classroom that will guide children to develop higher levels of play

-Narrative play pedagogy (Bredikyte, 2011): the environment is the source of children's development (Fleer, 2013, p. 122)

-Based on my previous experiences with play, my approach to play is value-driven, not directed by institutional constraints

-I prioritise time and opportunities for play because I perceive play as the way children learn and develop

-Curriculum standards and expectations are achieved through play: as early childhood teachers we need to emphasise this and we need to demonstrate the learning possibilities through play

Figure 8.2 Summarising my personal learnings

My inquiry into play has therefore emphasised the factors influencing play beyond personal introspection. My thick descriptions and interpretations of my own childhood memories into play has allowed me to see the interactive and intricate dynamics of my upbringing as well as educational background and teacher training on my current orientations and developed theories on play. The multiple factors in turn shape how I see play happening in my own classroom and how I actually implement play into my own teaching practices.

### **8.6 Contributions of the Study to Play Literature**

What was revealed from my review of literature regarding the effects on play in practice is that research predominantly examines how teacher belief systems inform teaching practices (Fives & Buehl, 2008; Fives & Buehl, 2012; Leaupepe, 2011; Lehrer & Stathopoulos, 2008; Quance, Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004; Sosu & Gray, 2012). An inquiry into the possible effects on the use and implementation of play therefore requires a focus into the factors beyond the influences of teacher belief systems (Armstrong, 2006; Five & Buehl, 2012; Leaupepe, 2011). This necessitates an investigation not only into a teacher's professional life but their personal life which begins with an individual's early childhood memories and experiences (Rust, 2010). However, as I discussed in Chapter 1, my interactions with early childhood teachers working at various international schools had illuminated the need for the space and time as well as a framework to begin engaging in the profound thinking process about the influences on their teaching practices. My purpose in doing research is therefore to satisfy my interest and curiosity in an area that is under-investigated.

My research into play has therefore contributed to the current body of play literature by offering a possible framework for a way to inquire into play. Through the use of my framework, what my research has made visible are the multiple as well as rich and diverse factors that impact how individuals view and realise play in their early childhood classrooms. My research into play has demonstrated that:

1. the construction of current orientations and developed theories on play originates beyond personal introspection and
2. while historical and cultural contexts contribute to the intricacies of play, the temporal, institutional influences also significantly shapes how play is actually used and implemented in practice.

It is through the reflections into the lived experiences of people that are grounded in historical and cultural contexts that 1) the motivation behind how people perceive play, 2) how the place for play in early childhood education is viewed and 3) how play is used in early childhood classrooms is fully known (Meier & Stremmel, 2010). Revealing where we come from illuminates the “subjective teacher experiences in social and historical contexts [that] has made it probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the postmodern world” (Goodson & Choi, 2008, p. 5).

My study should not be viewed as an archetype, but a possible framework for other researchers and early childhood teachers to make further inquiry and reflections into play grounded in historical and cultural significance that effect play in practice. While the intention is to provide a possible framework to investigate play, different approaches and methods should be considered as this would reflect the emergent approach to research which I have embraced. Flexibility in data collection should therefore be a response to the new discoveries, descriptions and interpretations constructed throughout the research process.

### **8.7 Making Further Impact on Play Practices**

When I began the research journey, my intention was to provide a framework where I could begin to gain a self-understanding into who I am as a young mother in addition to an early childhood teacher. The journey then led to providing a context to other early childhood teachers, specifically my colleagues who were also genuinely interested in understanding the factors affecting their view and use of play in their own classrooms. As the early childhood teachers at The International School revealed there was no time and space nor the framework to inquire into play in practice.

As my study offered a way to make an inquiry into play, through reflections the complexities of play began to emerge. Unleashing the intricacies of play has repositioned play from a previously universally defined concept with common characteristics (Smidt, 2010) to a phenomenon that is understood through the lens of individuals who define play that is grounded in rich and diverse lived experiences and backgrounds (Fleer, 2013; Fleer, 2010; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). As Rust (2010) claimed, the experiences of early childhood teachers range from their first

memories that begin and shape the teaching behaviours and actions to the immediate contexts that influence practice.

Such an in-depth examination into the childhood memories with play shows underlying attitudes towards children's play today. In the educational context, analysis of the experience of play gives teachers and students concepts and models which enable them to reflect on the phenomenon of play in a conscious way. This can form the basis for new understanding and knowledge. (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2010, p. 56)

The impact of my study therefore provides opportunities for more reflective practitioners effecting changes in early childhood classrooms (Henderson et al., 2012). When we reflect on our practices, we make an attempt at “moving away from uncritical, routinized or standardized forms of practice towards more informed, imaginative and value-driven approaches” (Thompson & Thompson, 2008, p. 107). As an early childhood teacher doing research, this has been my hope: where my inquiry into play has enabled opportunities to reflect on our early childhood practices and get better at what we are doing.

My inquiry into play has provided the teacher participants and myself opportunities to reflect on what has been important to us. What we prioritise in our early childhood classrooms are grounded in our beliefs and values that are rooted in our previous experiences. In short, taken from the reflections of the teacher participants, the ongoing impact of an inquiry into play is about:

- bringing together colleagues,
- providing the space and time for reflection on practice,
- developing a positive environment to voice opinions,
- hope for letting children enjoy childhood,
- guidance for helping children's play and finally,
- an opportunity for looking forward.

### **8.8 What is the Future for Play?**

An inquiry into the rich and diverse influences that impact teaching practices enables early childhood teachers to better understand their views about play and the



position of play in their classrooms. Though belief systems shape how play is used, it is through thick descriptions and interpretations about the lived experiences of individuals that are grounded in historical and cultural contexts that result in a deeper understanding of the multiple impacts on play in practice. How an early childhood teacher perceives play as well as uses and implements play into their classrooms therefore reflects their situational experiences.

However, as I searched for self-understanding as a young mother and an early childhood teacher and provided a framework for other early childhood teachers to inquire into the rich and diverse contexts that impact their views and use of play in their classrooms, new questions arose which are worthy of further investigation. The questions are based on the limitations of my study which I discussed in Chapter 4. Further investigation beyond the scope of my research includes:

*Further investigation: Inquiry #1.* My research was delimited to early childhood teachers of three, four and five year old children. Further insights would be gained if the inquiry expanded to the internationally accepted definition of *early childhood* which entails children from birth through eight years (AEU, 2007; NAEYC, 2009). Expanding the group of teacher participants to the internationally accepted definition of early childhood would therefore develop the scope of this research.

*Further investigation: Inquiry #2.* Since research into the perspectives of teachers is challenging, it is important to acknowledge the difficulty to express and discuss thoughts that are at an unconscious level. While I used multiple research methods to expand on the collection of data and to strengthen my descriptions and interpretations, it would be beneficial if further inquiry was made in different contexts. This would add richness and depth into the lived experiences of early childhood teachers and the impact of historical and cultural backgrounds on how play is viewed, used and implemented.

*Further investigation: Inquiry #3.* As an interpretive inquirer, how I approached the research was inescapably influenced by my ontological and epistemological perspectives. While researcher bias was not eliminated, an awareness and recognition of my subjectivity as well as understanding the effects of my values and beliefs enhanced the research process. By acknowledging the impact of my lived experiences, this necessitates further research to build on this research as it will

increase greater variance and deeper understanding from different and multiple perspectives.

While significant advances are made in attempt to understand play, there remains more to be explored. It has been my intention to provide a possible framework to inquire into play and it is my hope that the framework can guide other early childhood teachers and researchers to further investigate the complexities of play beyond the scope of this research.

### **8.9 A Conclusion**

As I explained in my introductory chapter, an individual engages in research to answer the whys and hows of human behaviours, actions and experiences (Guest et al., 2013). As Krauss (2005) explained, the search for the whys and hows is an attempt to gain new knowledge into the phenomenon under investigation.

What initially preoccupied me were questions about who I am as a mother and who I am as an early childhood teacher. As I searched for self-discovery, this necessitated an investigation into play and its importance in the development and learning of young children which soon evolved into a need for reflection into the influences on my beliefs, values and understanding about play in the early years and in early childhood education. My self-inquiry into play emerged into a study that provided a framework for other early childhood teachers to develop self-understanding into the effects on their views and implementation of play in their classrooms.

Through the provision of space, time and a framework to critically reflect upon the situational experiences that impact play, the descriptions and interpretations which were constructed with the involvement of the teacher participants provoked thinking and further conversations about play that illustrate play as a complex concept, acknowledging that play is not universal in how it is perceived and used in early childhood classrooms. As Göncü and Tuermer (2007) suggested, a focus into the different perspectives on how play is conceptualised reveals its intricacies and places play as a culturally constructed and enacted phenomenon (Fleer, 2013).

Knowing the impact of our individual lived experiences on how we perceive reality and the impact of our rich and diverse contexts in meaning making, the future of play remains under question as new meanings continue to be constructed and new features require further conceptualisation (Göncü & Tuermer, 2007). Thus, as play is

historically and culturally impacted, play continues to undergo transformation as “globalisation, urbanization, and connectivity will have a great influence” (Ackermann et al., 2013, p. 50). There are many different perspectives on what constitutes play and how play looks in early childhood classrooms (Fleer, 2010). Therefore there is no consistency since play is defined by the individuals who are concerned with play. As early childhood teachers develop their self-understanding into who they are as early childhood teachers, the multiple contexts that impact how play is viewed and what play looks like in practice will be revealed. With this, a new question about play will emerge.

## References

- Ackermann, E., Gauntlett, D., Whitebread, D., Wolbers, T. & Weckstrom, C. (2013). *The future of play. Defining the role and value of play in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.* Billund: The LEGO Foundation.
- Adams, S., Alexander, E. Drummond, M. J. & Moyles, J. (2004). *Inside the foundation stage: Recreating the reception year.* London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers. Retrieved from [http://217.35.77.12/research/england/education/Inside\\_the\\_foundation\\_stage.pdf](http://217.35.77.12/research/england/education/Inside_the_foundation_stage.pdf)
- Adams, A. & Cox, A. L. (2008). Questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus groups. In P. Cairns & A. Cox (Eds.), *Research methods for human computer interaction* (pp. 17-34). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alliance for Childhood (2010). *The Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Education Professionals on the Common Core Standards Initiative.* College Park: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/Joint%20Statement%20on%20Core%20Standards%20%28with%20101%20names%29.pdf>
- Alliance for High Quality Education in the Early Years of Schooling (2014). *Discussion paper 1: A call for high quality early childhood education in the early years of school in Western Australia.* Karrinyup: Author. Retrieved from <http://eyes.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Alliance-Discussion-Paper-No1v2.pdf>
- Almon, J. & Miller, E. (2011). The crisis in early education: A research-based case for more play and less pressure. Retrieved from [http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/crisis\\_in\\_early\\_ed.pdf](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/sites/allianceforchildhood.org/files/file/crisis_in_early_ed.pdf)
- Aluwihare-Samaranayake, D. (2012). Ethics in qualitative research: A view of the participants' and researchers' world from a critical standpoint. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(2), 64-81.
- Andersen, R. S. & Risør, M. B. (2014). The importance of contextualization. Anthropological reflections on descriptive analysis, its limitations and implications. *Anthropology & Medicine*, 21(3), 345-356.

- Andrade, A. D. (2009). Interpretive research aiming at theory building: Adopting and adapting the case study design. *The Qualitative Report*, 14(1), 42-60.
- Angrosino, M. V. (2005). Recontextualizing observation: Ethnography, pedagogy, and the prospects for a progressive political agenda. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 729-745). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Armstrong, T. (2006). *The best schools: How human development research should inform educational practice*. Alexandria: ASCD.
- Arthur, L. Beecher, B. Death, E. Farmer, S. & Dockett, S. (2015). *Programming and planning in early childhood settings* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). South Melbourne: Cengage Learning Australia.
- Atieno, O. P. (2009). An analysis of the strengths and limitation of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. *Problems of Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 13, 13-18.
- Axelrod, Y. (2015). “Todos vamos a jugar, even the teachers”-Everyone playing together. In H. Bohart, K. Charner & D. Koralek (Eds.), *Spotlight on young children: Exploring play* (pp.56-64). Washington: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Australian Education Union (2007). *Early childhood education policy 2007*. Southbank: Australian Education Union.
- Babbie, E. (2008). *The basics of social research*. Belmont: Thomas Higher Education.
- Barlas, R. & Wanasundera, N. P. (2009). *Culture shock! A survival guide to customs and etiquette Sri Lanka*. Tarrytown: Marshall Cavendish.
- Beard, C. & Wilson, J. P. (2013). *Experiential learning: A handbook for education, training and coaching* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed). London: Kogan Page.
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234.
- Biddle, K. A. G., Garcia-Nevarez, A., Henderson, W. J. R., & Valero-Kerrick, A. (2014). *Early childhood education: Becoming a professional*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Bishop, R. (2008). Freeing ourselves from neocolonial domination in research: A

- Kaupapa Māori approach to creating knowledge. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.). *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues* (pp. 145-184). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Blaise, M. (2014). Gender discourses and play. In E. Brooker, M. Blaise & S. Edwards (Eds.), *SAGE Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood* (pp. 115-127). London: SAGE Publications.
- Bodrova, E. (2008). Make-believe play versus academic skills: A Vygotskian approach to today's dilemma of early childhood education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, (16)3, 357-369.
- Bodrova, E. & Leong, D. J. (2003). Chopsticks and counting chips: Do play and foundational skills need to compete for teacher's attention in early childhood classrooms? *Young Children*, 58(3), 10-17.
- Bodrova, E. & Leong, D. J. (2006). *Tools of the mind: The Vygotskian approach to early childhood education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Columbus: Prentice Hall.
- Bredikyte, M. (2011). *The zones of proximal development in children's play* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://herkules.oulu.fi/isbn9789514296147/isbn9789514296147.pdf>
- Brock, A. (2010). The nature of practitioners' reflection on their reflections about play. In J. Moyles (Ed.), *Rethinking about play: Developing a reflective approach* (pp. 45-60). New York: Open University Press.
- Broderick, J. T. & Hong, S. B. (2007). Introducing the cycle of inquiry system: A reflective inquiry practice for early childhood teacher development. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 13(2), Retrieved from <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v13n2/broderick.html>
- Bruce, T. (2011). *Learning through play: For babies, toddlers and young children* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Milton Park: Hodder Education.
- Carlsson-Paige, N., McLaughlin, G. B. & Almon, J. W. (2015). *Reading instruction in kindergarten: Little to gain and too much to lose*. Retrieved from [https://deyproject.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/readinginkindergarten\\_online-1.pdf](https://deyproject.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/readinginkindergarten_online-1.pdf)
- Chang, H. (2007). *Autoethnography as methods*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Chang-Kredl, S. & Kingsley, S. (2014). Identity expectations in early childhood

- teacher education: Preservice teachers' memories of prior experiences and reasons for entry into the profession. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 43, 27-36.
- Cheng, M. & Johnson, J. E. (2010). Research on children's play: Analysis of developmental and early education journals from 2005 to 2007. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 37, 249-259.
- Christian, P. (2008). *If you find a rock*. New York: Houghton Mufflin Harcourt Publishing.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Florence: Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Critical Issues Affecting Childhood. (n.d.). Retrieved from [http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/our\\_work](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/our_work)
- Curtis, D. & Carter, M. (2008). *Learning together with young children: A curriculum framework for reflective teachers*. St. Paul: Redleaf Press.
- Daskon, C. D. (2010). One culture – Many perspectives. Understanding cultural diversity through rural livelihoods: A reflection from the rural craft communities in Kandy, Sri Lanka. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), 41-56.
- Davis, H. & Andrzejewski, C. (2009). *Teacher beliefs*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.com/reference/article/teacher-beliefs/>
- Dawson, J. (2010). Thick descriptions. In A. J. Mills, G. Durepos & E. Wiebe (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of case study research* (pp. 943-945). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Defending the Early Years. (2013). *Voices from the field*. Retrieved from <http://deyproject.org/voices-from-the-field/>
- Denham, M. A. & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2013). Beyond words: Using nonverbal communication data in research to enhance thick description and interpretation. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 12, 670-696.
- Dent, M. (2013). *Stop stealing childhood in the name of education: A plea to ask WHY?* Retrieved from [http://www.maggiedent.com/sites/default/files/articles/StopStealingChildhoodintheNameofEducation\\_BY\\_MAGGIE\\_DENT\\_1.pdf](http://www.maggiedent.com/sites/default/files/articles/StopStealingChildhoodintheNameofEducation_BY_MAGGIE_DENT_1.pdf)

- Dey, I. (2005). *Qualitative data analysis: A user-friendly guide for social scientists*. London: Routledge.
- Dockett, S. (2011). The challenge of play for early childhood educators. In S. Rogers (Ed.), *Rethinking play and pedagogy in early childhood education* (pp. 32-47). London: Routledge.
- Donaldson, J. & Scheffler, A. (2004). *The Gruffalo's child*. London: Macmillan Children's Books.
- Duncan, J. & Lockwood, M. (2008). *Learning through play: A work-based approach for the early years professional*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Dwyer, S. C. & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2009, 8(1), 54-63.
- Edwards, S. & Brooker, L. (2010). Afterword. In L. Brooker & S. Edwards (Eds.), *Engaging Play* (pp. 223-225). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Elkind, D. (2007). *The power of play: Learning what comes naturally*. Philadelphia: Da Capo Press.
- Elkonin, D. B. (2005). Chapter 3: Theories of play. *Journal of Russian & East European Psychology*, 43(2), 3-89.
- Elliot, R. & Timulak, L. (2005). *Descriptive and interpretive approach to qualitative research*. In G. Miles & P. Gilbert (Eds.), *A Handbook of Research Methods for Clinical and Health Psychology* (pp. 147-160). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, J., Marcris, V. & Marynowski, R. (2011). Using exploratory interviews to re-frame planned research on classroom issues. *Northwest Passage journal of Educational Practices*, 9(1), 11-18.
- Emslie, A. & Mesle, C. R. (2009). Play: The use of play in early childhood education. *Gyanodaya*, 2(2), 1-26.
- Fahey, J. (2012). *Ways to learn*. Cardiff: International Baccalaureate Organization.
- Fanning, R. M. & Gaba, D. M. (2007). The Role of Debriefing in Simulation-Based Learning. *Society for Simulation in Healthcare*, 2(2), 115-125.
- Fives, H. & Buehl, M. M. (2008). What do teachers believe? Developing a framework for examining beliefs about teachers' knowledge and ability. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 33, 134-176.



- Fives, H. & Buehl, M. M. (2012). Spring cleaning for the “messy” construct of teachers’ beliefs: What are they? Which have been examined? What can they tell us? In K. R. Harris, S. Graham & T. Urdan (Eds.), *APA educational psychology handbook, volume 2: Individual differences and cultural and contextual factors* (pp. 471-499). Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Fleer, M. (2013). *Play in the early years*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Fleer, M. (2009). A cultural-historical perspective on play: play as a leading activity across cultural communities. In I. P. Samuelsson & M. Fleer (Eds.), *Play and learning in early childhood settings: International perspectives* (pp. 1-18). New York: Springer.
- Fleer, M. & Richardson, C. (2004). *Observing & planning in early childhood settings; Using a sociocultural approach*. Watson: Early Childhood Australia.
- Flick, U. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). London: SAGE Publications.
- Fung, C. K. H. & Cheng, D. P. W. (2012). Consensus or dissensus? Stakeholders’ views on the role of play in learning. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 32(1), 17-33.
- Garner, B. P. & Bergen, D. (2006). Play development from birth to age four. In D. P. Fromberg & D. Bergen (Eds.), *Play from birth to twelve: Contexts, perspectives, and meanings* (pp. 3-12). New York: Routledge.
- Gentles, S. J., Jack, S. M., Nicholas, D. B. & McKibbin, K. A. (2014). A critical approach to reflexivity in grounded theory. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(25), 1-14.
- Ginsburg, K. R. (2007). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics*, 119(1), 182-191.
- Gleave, J. & Cole-Hamilton, I. (2012). *A world without play: A literature review*. Retrieved from <http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/371031/a-world-without-play-literature-review-2012.pdf>
- Goldin-Meadow, S. (2005). *Hearing gesture: How our hands help us think*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Goldkuhl, G. (2012). Pragmatism vs interpretivism in qualitative information systems

- research. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 21(2), 135-146.
- Göncü, A., Jain, J. & Tuermer, U. (2007) Children's play as cultural interpretation. In A. Göncü & S. Gaskins (Eds.), *Play and Development: Evolutionary, Sociocultural, and Functional Perspectives* (pp. 155-178). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Goodson, I. F. (2011). *Life politics: Conversations about culture and education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Goodson, I. & Choi, P. L. (2008). Life history and collective memory as methodological strategies: Studying teacher professionalism. *Educational Quarterly*, 35(2), 5-28.
- Gosso, Y. & Carvalho, A. M. A. (2013). Play and cultural context. In R. E. Tremblay, M. Boivin & R. V. Peters (Eds.), *Encyclopedia on early childhood development* (pp. 1-7). Montreal: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development and Strategic Knowledge Cluster on Early Childhood Development.
- Gray, P. (2013, September 13). The play deficit. *Aeon*.  
<http://aeon.co/magazine/culture/children-today-are-suffering-a-severe-deficit-of-play/>
- Greene, M. J. (2014). On the inside looking in: Methodological insights and challenges in conducting qualitative insider research. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(15), 1-13.
- Grieshaber, S. & McArdle, F. (2010). *The trouble with play*. Maidenhead: Open Press University.
- Guest, G., Namey, E. E. & Mitchell, M. L. (2013). *Collecting qualitative data: A field manual for applied research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Gupta, A. (2014). *Diverse early childhood education policies and practices: Voices and images from five countries in Asia*. New York: Routledge.
- Gupta, A. (2011). Play and pedagogy framed within India's historical, socio-cultural, pedagogical and postcolonial context. In S. Rogers (Ed.), *Rethinking play and pedagogy in early childhood education: Concepts, contexts and culture* (pp. 86-99). New York: Routledge.
- Hamdan, A. (2012). Autoethnography as a genre of qualitative research: A journey inside out. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(5), 585-606.

- Henderson, B., Meier, D. R., Perry, G. & Stremmel, A. J. (2012). The nature of teacher research. In G. Perry, B. Henderson & D. R. Meier (Eds.), *Our inquiry, our practice: Undertaking, supporting, and learning from early childhood teacher research(ers)* (pp. 3-10). Washington: The National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I. & Bailey, A. (2011). *Qualitative research methods*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Henricks, T. S. (2015). Play as experience. *American Journal of Play*, 8(1), 18-49.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. & Leavy, P. (2010). *The practice of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Hirsh-Pasek, K. & Golinkoff, R. M. (2015). Introduction. In H. Bohart, K. Charner & D. Koralek (Eds.), *Spotlight on young children: Exploring play* (pp 1-4). Washington: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Howard, J. & McInnes, K. (2010). Thinking through the challenge of a play-based curriculum. In J. Moyles (Ed.), *Rethinking about play: Developing a reflective approach* (pp. 30-44). New York: Open University Press.
- Hughes, P. (2010). Paradigms, methods and knowledge. In G. Mac Naughton, S. A. Rolfe & I. Siraj-Blatchford (Eds.), *Doing early childhood research: International perspectives on theory and practice* (pp. 35-61). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Hyvonen, P. T. (2011). Play in the school context? The perspectives of Finnish teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(8), 65-83.
- International Baccalaureate Organization (2009a). *The primary years programme: A basis for practice*. Cardiff: Author.
- International Baccalaureate Organization (2009b). *Making the PYP happen: A curriculum framework for international primary education*. Cardiff: Author.
- International Baccalaureate Organization. (2015). *Programmes*. Retrieved from <http://www.ibo.org/en/programmes/>
- Izumi-Taylor, S, Samuelsson, I. P. & Rogers, C. S. (2010). Perspectives of play in three nations: A comparative study in Japan, the United States, and Sweden. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 12(1). Retrieved from <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v12n1/izumi.html>
- Jackman, H. L. (2005). *Early education curriculum: A child's connection to the world* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Clifton Park: Thomson Delmar Learning.

- Jardine, D. W., Friesen, S. & Clifford, P. (2006). *Curriculum in abundance*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kelchtermans, G. (2009): Who I am in how I teach is the message: Self-understanding, vulnerability and reflection. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 15:2, 257-272.
- Kelman, K. & Lauchlan, L. (2010). Thinking through transition, pedagogy and play from early childhood education to primary. In J. Moyles (Ed.), *Rethinking about play: Developing a reflective approach* (pp. 230-250). New York: Open University Press.
- Khan, S. (2007). The case in case-based design of educational software: A methodological interrogation. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 55, 1-25.
- Klein, H. K. & Myers, M. D. (1999). A set of principles for conducting and evaluating interpretive field studies in information systems. *MIS Quarterly*, 23(1), 67-94.
- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2010). Situated learning theory and the pedagogy of teacher education: Towards an integrative view of teacher behavior and teacher learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26, 98-106.
- Kovacs, P. (2014). *An open letter to my son's kindergarten teacher*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/philip-kovacs/an-open-letter-to-my-sons\\_b\\_5621485.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=tw](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/philip-kovacs/an-open-letter-to-my-sons_b_5621485.html?utm_hp_ref=tw)
- Krauss, S. E. (2005). Research paradigms and meaning making: A primer. *The Qualitative Report* 10(4), 757-770.
- Lauckner, H., Paterson, M. & Krupa, T. (2012). Using constructivist case study methodology to understand community development processes: Proposed methodological questions to guide the research process. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(25), 1-22.
- Leaupepe, M. (2010). "Play...a waste of time"? Samoan and Tongan student teachers' views of play. *MAI Review*, 1, 12-23.
- Leaupepe, M. (2011). Professional development in the Cook Islands: Confronting and challenging Cook Islands early childhood teachers' understandings of play. *Pacific-Asian Education*, 23(2), 23-32.
- Leontiev, A. N. (2009). The psychological principles of preschool play. In M. Cole

- (Ed.), *Development of mind: Selected works* (pp. 331-345). Pacifica: Marxist Internet Archive.
- Lester, S. & Russell, W. (2010). *Children's right to Play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide*. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- Li, H. X., Wang, C. & Wong, J. M. S. (2011). Early childhood curriculum reform in China: Perspectives from examining teachers' beliefs and practices in Chinese literacy teaching. *Chinese Education and Society*, 44(6), 5–23.
- Lillemyr, O. F. (2009). *Taking play seriously: Children and play in early childhood education – An exciting challenge*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.
- Lim, C. (2010). Understanding Singaporean preschool teachers' beliefs about literacy and development: Four different perspectives. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26, 215-224.
- Lin, Y. (2012). Adopting creative pedagogy into Asian classrooms? – Case studies of primary school teachers' responses and dilemma. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 1(2), 205-216.
- Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1986). But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions for Program Evaluation*, 30, 73-84.
- Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (2013). *The constructivist credo*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Lodico, M., Spaulding, D. & Voegtler, K. (2010). *Methods in educational research: From theory to practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Luff, P. (2014). Play and creativity. In T. Waller & G. Davis (Eds.), *An introduction to early childhood* (pp. 129-145). London: SAGE Publications.
- Lynch, M. (2015). More play please: The perspective of kindergarten teachers on play in the classroom. *American Journal of Play*, 7(3), 347-370.
- Mac Naughton, G. & Hughes, P. (2009). *Doing action research in early childhood studies: A step-by-step guide*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Manning, M. L. (2006). Play development from ages eight to twelve. In D. P. Fromberg & D. Bergen (Eds.), *Play from birth to twelve: Contexts, perspectives, and meanings* (pp. 21-30). New York: Routledge.

- Macris, V. (2012). Pre-Interview Activities and the Art of Hermeneusis. *International Journal or Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education*, 3(2), 720-724.
- Markham, A. N. (2005). The methods, politics, and ethics of representation in online ethnography. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 793-820). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- McNaughton, M. J. (2009). Closing in on the picture: Analyzing interactions in video recordings. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(4), 27-48.
- Meier, D. & Stremmel, A. (2010). Narrative inquiry and stories – The value for early childhood teacher research. *Voices of Practitioners: Teacher Research in Early Childhood Education*, 5(4), 1-4.
- Merriam, S. B. & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mertens, D. M. (2015). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Miller, E. & Almon, J. (2009). *Crisis in the kindergarten: Why children need to play in school*. College Park: Alliance for Childhood.
- Milteer, R. M. & Ginsburg, K. R. (2012). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bond: Focus on children in poverty. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), 204-213.
- Mistrett, S. & Bickart, T. (2009). Child's play: The best way to learn. *Middle East Educator*, 5, 18-22.
- Morehouse, R.E. (2011). *Beginning interpretive inquiry: A step-by-step approach to research and evaluation*. Milton Park: Routledge.
- Morgan, D. L. (2008). Emergent design. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 246-249). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Moyles, J. (2010). Practitioner reflection on play and playful pedagogies. In J. Moyles (Ed.), *Rethinking about play: Developing a reflective approach* (pp. 13-29). New York: Open University Press.

- National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8*. Washington: Author.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington: U.S. Department of Education.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (2012). *The Common Core State Standards: Caution and Opportunity for Early Childhood Education*. Washington: Author.
- Nicolopoulou, A. (2010). The alarming disappearance of play from early childhood education. *Human Development*, 53, 1-4.
- Opeyemi, S. (2015). Play and learning: Inseparable dimensions to early childhood education. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 5(2), 185-192.
- Packer, M. (2010). *The science of qualitative research*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Pang, Y. & Richey, D. (2007). Preschool education in China and the United States: A personal perspective. *Early Child Development and Care*, 177(1), 1-13.
- Papatheodorou, T. (2010). The pedagogy of play(ful) learning environments. In J. Moyles (Ed.), *Rethinking about play: Developing a reflective approach* (pp. 145-163). New York: Open University Press.
- Park, P. (2006). Knowledge and participatory research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The handbook of action research* (pp. 83–93). London: Sage Publications.
- Pascale, C. (2011). *Cartographies of knowledge: Exploring Qualitative Epistemologies*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Peredaryenko, M. S. & Krauss, S. E. (2013). Calibrating the human instrument: Understanding the interviewing experience of novice qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(85), 1-17.
- Petit, S. C. & Huault, I. (2008). From practice-based knowledge to the practice of research: Revisiting constructivist research works on knowledge. *Management Learning*, 39, 73-91.
- Petty, N. J., Thomson, O. P. & Stew, G. (2012). Ready for a paradigm shift? Part 2:

- Introducing qualitative research methodologies and methods. *Manual Therapy*, xxx, 1-7.
- Piantanida, M. & Garman, N. B. (2009). Proposing the dissertation study. In M. Piantanida & N. B. Garman (Eds.), *The Qualitative Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty* (pp. 165-182). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2006). Brief note on the origins, evolution, and meaning of the qualitative research concept “thick description”. *The Qualitative Report*, 11(3), 538-549.
- Portis, A. (2007). *Not a box*. New York: Harper Collins Children’s Book.
- Pui-Wah, D. C. (2011). Learning through play in Hong Kong: Policy or practice? In S. Rogers (Ed.), *Rethinking play and pedagogy in early childhood education: Concepts, contexts and culture* (pp. 100-111). New York: Routledge.
- Pui-Wah, D. C. & Stimpson, P. (2004). Articulating contrasts in kindergarten teachers’ implicit knowledge on play-based learning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41, 339-352.
- Quance, A. Lehrer, J. S. & Stathopoulos, H. (2008). Play in the grade one classroom: An exploration of teacher beliefs, classroom organization, and obstacles to implementation in Quebec. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, 1(1), 1-18.
- Ridgway, A., Quinones, G. & Liang, L. (2015). *Early childhood pedagogical play: A cultural-historical interpretation using visual methodology*. New York: Springer.
- Rogers, S. (2011). Play and pedagogy: A conflict of interests? In S. Rogers (Ed.), *Rethinking Play and pedagogy in early childhood education: Concepts, contexts and cultures* (pp. 5-18). Milton Park: Routledge.
- Rogers, S. & Evans, J. (2007). Rethinking role play in the Reception class. *Educational Research*, 49(2), 153-167.
- Rolfe, S. A. & Emmett, S. (2010). Direct observation. In G. Mac Naughton, S. A. Rolfe & I. Siraj-Blatchford (Eds.), *Doing early childhood research: International perspectives on theory and practice* (pp. 309-325). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Rowlands B. (2005). Grounded in practice: Using interpretive research to build theory. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methodology*, 3(1), 81-92.
- Rust, F. O. (2010). Shaping new models for early childhood teacher education. *Voices*



- of Practitioners: Teacher Research in Early Childhood Education*, 12, 1-6.
- Said, S. B. (2013). 'A lighthouse on the beach' stories, metaphors, and anecdotes in teachers' personal recounts. *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature*, 6(4), 1-15.
- Sanagavarapu, P. & Wong, M. (2008): An exploratory study of early childhood educators' views on culture and play. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, 24(4), 303-309.
- Sandberg, A. & Samuelsson, I. P. (2006). Preschool teachers' play experiences then and now. In R. Parker-Rees & J. Willan (Eds.), *Early years education: policy and practice in early education and care* (pp. 373-395). Milton Park: Routledge.
- Sandberg, A. & Vuorinen, T. (2010). Reflecting the child Play memories and images of the child. In L. Brooker & S. Edwards (Eds.), *Engaging Play* (pp.54-66). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Santer, J. & Griffiths, C. (2007). *Free play in early childhood: A literature review*. London: National Children's Bureau.
- Save Childhood Movement Early Years Education Group. (2013). *Why We Need a Campaign*. Retrieved from <http://www.toomuchtoosoon.org/why-we-need-a-campaign.html>
- Schousboe, I. (2012). The structure of fantasy play and its implications for good and evil games. In I. Schousboe & D. Winther-Lindqvist (Eds.), *Children's play and development: Cultural-historical perspectives* (pp. 13-28). New York: Springer.
- Schwartz-Shea, P. & Yanow, D. (2012). *Interpretive research design: Concepts and process*. New York: Routledge.
- Scott, D. & Morrison, M. (2005). *Key ideas in educational research*. London: Continuum International Publishing.
- Scott, D. & Usher, R. (2011). *Researching education: Data methods and theory in educational enquiry* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Scott-Little, C., Lesko, J., Martella, J. & Millburn, P. (2007). Early learning standards: Results from a national survey to document trends in state-level policies and practices. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 9(1). Retrieved from <http://ecrp.illinois.edu/v9n1/little.html>

- Sendak, M. (1963). *Where the wild things are*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Shook, M. & Upasena, T. (2015). *Foray into the spicy world of Sri Lankan cuisine*. Retrieved from <http://www.colab-arts.org/blog/2015/6/2/foray-into-the-spicy-world-of-sri-lankan-cuisine>
- Short, K. (2009). Inquiry as a stance on curriculum. In S. Davidson & S. Carber (Eds.), *Taking the PYP Forward* (pp. 11-26). Melton: John Catt.
- Sin, S. (2010). Considerations of Quality in Phenomenographic Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 9(4), 305-19.
- Smidt, S. (2011). *Playing to learn: The role of play in the early years*. New York: Routledge.
- Sosu, E. M. & Gray, D. S. (2012). Investigating change in epistemic beliefs: An evaluation of the impact of student teachers' beliefs on instructional preference and teaching competence. *International Journal of Education*, 53, 80-92.
- Srivastava, P. & Hopwood, N. (2009). A practical iterative framework for qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 76-84.
- Starr, L. J. (2010). The use of autoethnography in educational research: Locating who we are in what we do. *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, 3(1), 1-9.
- Stewart, T. T. (2011). Transactional analysis: Conceptualizing a framework for illuminating human experience. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10(3), 282-295.
- Stremmel, A. J. (2012). Reshaping the landscape of early childhood teaching through teacher research. In G. Perry, B. Henderson & D. R. Meier (Eds.), *Our inquiry, our practice: Undertaking, supporting, and learning from early childhood teacher research(ers)* (pp. 107-116). Washington: The National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Strydom, H. (2013). An evaluation of the purpose of research in social work. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 49(2), 149-162.
- Suter, W. N. (2012). *Introduction to educational research: A critical thinking approach* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Swarbrick, N. (2013). The place of play in early years curriculum. In M. Wild & A. Street (Eds.), *Themes and Debates in Early Childhood* (pp. 76-90). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

- Tan, H., Wilson, A. & Olver, I. (2009). Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation: An Instrument for Data Interpretation in Hermeneutic Phenomenology. *International Journal of Qualitative Research*, 8(4), 1-15.
- Targowska, A. (2008). Recognising the power of play. *Every Child*, 14(2), 24-25.
- Taylor, J. (2011). The intimate insider: Negotiating the ethics of friendship when doing insider research. *Qualitative Research*, 11(1), 3-22.
- Taylor, P. C. & Medina, M. N. D. (2013). Educational research paradigms: From positivism to multiparadigmatic. *Journal of Meaning-Centered Education*, 1(2). Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/2635980/Educational\\_research\\_paradigms\\_From\\_positivism\\_to\\_multiparadigmatic](https://www.academia.edu/2635980/Educational_research_paradigms_From_positivism_to_multiparadigmatic)
- Thompson, S. & Thompson, N. (2008). *The critically reflective practitioner*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Thorne, S., Kirkham, S. R. & O'Flynn-Magee, K. (2004). The analytic challenge in interpretive description. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1), 1-11.
- Tobin, J. & Kurban, F. (2010). Preschool practitioners' and immigrant parents' beliefs about academics and play in the early childhood educational curriculum. *Orbis Scholae*, 4(2), 75-88.
- Trawick-Smith, J., Wolff, J., Koschel, M. & Vallarelli, J. (2015). Which toys promote high quality play? Reflections on the five-year anniversary of the TIMPANI study. In H. Bohart, K. Charner & D. Koralek (Eds.), *Spotlight on young children: Exploring play* (pp 66-74). Washington: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Trahar, S. (2009). Beyond the story itself: Narrative inquiry and autoethnography in intercultural research in higher education. *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, 10(1). Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1218/2653>
- Tuli, F. (2010). The basis of distinction between qualitative and quantitative research in social science: Reflection on ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives. *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Sciences*, 6(1), 97-108.
- Turner, D. S. (2003). Horizons revealed: From methodology to method. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2(1), 1-17.

- United Nations (1959). *Declaration of the rights of the child*. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/humanrights/resources/child.asp>
- Unluer, S. (2012). Being an insider researcher while conducting case study research. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(58), 1-14.
- U.S. Department of Education (2006). *Grow start, grow smart: A guide to grow start, grow smart and other federal early learning initiatives*. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/occ/initiatives/gsgs/fedpubs/GSGSBooklet.pdf>
- van den Burg (2005). Reanalyzing qualitative interviews from different angles: The risk of decontextualization and other problems of sharing qualitative data. *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, 6(30). Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/499/1074>
- van Oers, B. (2010). Children's enculturation through play. In L. Brooker & S. Edwards (Eds.), *Engaging Play* (pp. 195-209). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Van Wynsberghe, R. & Khan, S. (2007). Redefining case study. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 6(2), 80-94.
- Vera, D. J. & Geneser, V. L. (2012). Pre-service teacher perspectives on classroom play in field-based experiences. *National Forum of Teacher Education Journal*, 22(3), 1-15.
- Vesterinen, O., Toom, A. & Patrikainen, S. (2010). The stimulated recall method and ICTs in research on the reasoning of teachers. *International Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 33(2), 183-197.
- Voloder, L. (2008). Autoethnographic challenges: Confronting self, field and home. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 19(1), 27-40.
- Vong, K. (2012). Play – a multi-modal manifestation in kindergarten education in China. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 32(1), 35-48.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1966). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Voprosy Psikhologii*, 12(6), 62-76.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Wahyuni, D. (2012). The research design maze: Understanding paradigms, cases, methods and methodologies. *Journal of Applied Management Accounting Research*, 10(1), 69-80.

- Whitebread, D. (2012). *The importance of play: A report on the value of children's play with a series of policy recommendations*. Brussels: Toy Industries of Europe.
- Wien, C. A. (2011). Learning to document in Reggio-inspired education. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 13(2). Retrieved from <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v13n2/wien.html>
- Willis, J. W. (2007). *Foundations of qualitative research: Interpretive and critical approaches*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2009). Squeezed, stretched, and stuck: Teachers, play-based learning, and non-nonsense times. In G. M. Boldt, P. M. Salvio & P. Taubman (Eds.), *Classroom life in the age of accountability: Bank Street College Occasional Paper Series* (pp. 8-16). New York: Bank Street College.
- Wong, M. N. C. (2008). How preschool children learn in Hong Kong and Canada: A cross-cultural study. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 28(2), 115-133.
- Wong, S., Wang, Z. & Cheng, D. (2011). A play-based curriculum: Hong Kong children's perception of play and non-play. *The International Journal of Learning*, 17(10), 165-180.
- Wood, E. (2011). Developing integrated pedagogical approaches to play and learning. In P. Broadhead (Ed.) *Play and Learning in the Early Years* (pp. 9-26). London: SAGE Publications.
- Wood, L. (2015). Kindergarten through third grade. Holding on to play: Reflecting on experiences as a playful K-3 teacher. In H. Bohart, K. Charner & D. Koralek (Eds.) *Spotlight on Young Children Exploring Play* (87-97). Washington: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Wood, E. & Bennett, N. (2000). Changing theories, changing practice: Exploring early childhood teachers' professional learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 635-647.
- Woodhead, M. (2006). Changing perspectives on early childhood education: Theory, research and policy. *International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood* 4(2),5-48.
- Woodside, A. (2010). *Case study research: Theory, methods and practice*. Bradford: Emerald Group Publishing.

Wright, H. (2009). Trusting the process: Using an emergent design to study adult education [Special issue]. *Educate~The Journal of Doctoral Research in Education*, 62-73. Retrieved from

<http://www.educatejournal.org/index.php/educate/article/view/210/210>

Yanow, D. & Schwartz-Shea, P. (2006). Introduction. In D. Yanow & P. Schwartz-Shea (Ed.). *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn* (pp. xi-xxvii). Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.

## Appendix A: Focus Group Structure and Pre-determined Questions

### Preliminary

- Check that there are no objections to the use of a video-audio camera
- Provide a statement on confidentiality and review the right to withdrawal

### Introduction

- Discuss the overview of my study
- Identify the purpose and process of the focus group session

### Dissemination

- Introductory question
  - If you were to describe what play is, what would you say?
- Linking questions
  - What are your thoughts about the use of play in your own classroom?
  - Tell me what play might look like in your classroom.
- Key questions
  - Describe the factors that affect the use of play in your classroom.
  - Can you talk about the influences from your life that you believe to have led you to your position on play?
- Questions for further consideration
  - What would your ideal play classroom environment look like?
  - Describe other ways of using play that you have experienced.
  - Why do you think some people think differently about play? Have these views affected the way you now organise play in your own classroom?
- Strategies
  - Ask open-ended questions
  - Use probing questions for elaboration
    - Can you talk about that more?
    - Can you give an example?
    - Help me understand what you mean
  - Redirect the conversation if one tends to dominate the discussion
  - Pay close attention to non-verbal communication

### Conclusion

- Summarise the main points as a strategy for increasing accuracy in meaning making
- Give information about the next steps of the research process
- Invite participants to add further comments
- Acknowledge participants for their participation and contributions

## Appendix B: Classroom Observation Sheets

### Event-sequenced observation sheet

Date of observation:	Types of Play (Hyvonen, 2011)	Observation 1 (use tally marks to represent each occurrence)
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Educational Play</i></p> <p>Learning engagement relates to the curriculum and is teacher-led</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Cheering Play</i></p> <p>Learning engagement eases and relaxes the learning environment, motivating students into curriculum-based learning</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Physical Play</i></p> <p>Learning engagement develops motor skills</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Pretend Play</i></p> <p>Learning engagement requires imagination and students to act in different roles</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Authentic Play</i></p> <p>Learning engagement is child-initiated and involves imagination and creativity</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Traditional Play</i></p> <p>Learning engagement offers games that are popular among children</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Free Play</i></p> <p>Learning engagement is child-initiated and unstructured, focusing on emotional and social development</p>	
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Process Play</i></p> <p>Learning engagement focuses on development as a whole where teacher provides basic idea for play, modifies it with the students and children then takes main role</p>	



### Observational protocol guiding anecdotal records

Date of observation:		
Teacher/Classroom*:		
(Broderick & Hong, 2007)		
<b>TIMES</b>	<b>DESCRIBE ACTIONS:</b> what I see  <b>DESCRIBE WORDS:</b> what I hear	<b>WHAT DO I WONDER</b>
<b>PERSONAL FOCI OF ANALYSIS</b> (information about individual teachers):  <b>INTERPERSONAL FOCI OF ANALYSIS</b> (information about relationships):  <b>CULTURAL-INSTITUTIONAL FOCI OF ANALYSIS</b> (information about cultural and institutional processes):  <b>SOCIOCULTURAL ASSESSMENT</b> (meaning making):		
(Fleer & Richardson, 2004)		

\* Pseudonyms are used

**Running Record Form**

<b>Time</b> (observations by the minute)	<b>Description of what teacher is doing</b>	<b>Dialogue</b> (interaction between teacher and students)	<b>Notes for further inquiry</b>
Start time:			
At 1 minute			
At 2 minutes			
At 3 minutes			
Time finished:			

**Appendix C: Reference to play types for teacher participants**

Learning engagement relates to the curriculum and is teacher-led	Learning engagement eases and relaxes the learning environment, motivating students into curriculum-based learning	Learning engagement develops motor skills	Learning engagement requires imagination and students to act in different roles
Learning engagement is child-initiated and involves imagination and creativity	Learning engagement offers games that are popular among children	Learning engagement is child-initiated and unstructured, focusing on emotional and social development	Learning engagement focuses on development as a whole where teacher provides basic idea for play, modifies it with the students and children then takes main role

(Hyvonen, 2011)