

Article

Children’s Perspectives of Play and Learning for Educational Practice

Maryanne Theobald ^{1,*}, Susan Danby ¹, Jóhanna Einarsdóttir ², Jane Bourne ³,
Desley Jones ³, Sharon Ross ³, Helen Knaggs ³ and Claire Carter-Jones ³

¹ School of Early Childhood, Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Victoria Park Road, Brisbane, Queensland 4159, Australia; E-Mail: s.danby@qut.edu.au

² School of Education, University of Iceland, Sæmundargata 2, Reykjavík 101, Iceland; E-Mail: joein@hi.is

³ Lady Gowrie QLD Inc., 7 Mallon Street, Bowen Hills, Brisbane, Queensland 4006, Australia; E-Mails: jane.bourne@ladygowrie.com.au (J.B.); desley@ballymorekindy.com.au (D.J.); admin@hillsdonkindergarten.com.au (S.R.); helen@hyderoad.qld.edu.au (H.K.); kindyb@campuskindergarten.org.au (C.C.J.)

* Author to whom correspondence should be addressed; E-Mail: m.theobald@qut.edu.au; Tel.: +61-731-383-178; Fax: +61-731-383-989.

Academic Editor: Marianne Knauss

Received: 31 August 2015 / Accepted: 17 November 2015 / Published: 25 November 2015

Abstract: Play as a learning practice increasingly is under challenge as a valued component of early childhood education. Views held in parallel include confirmation of the place of play in early childhood education and, at the same time, a denigration of the role of play in favor for more teacher-structured and formal activities. As a consequence, pedagogical approaches towards play, the curriculum activities that constitute play, and the appropriateness of play in educational settings, have come under scrutiny in recent years. In this context, this study investigates children’s perspectives of play and how they understand the role of play and learning in their everyday activities. This article reports on an Australian study where teacher-researchers investigated child-led insights into what counts as play in their everyday classroom activities. Children (aged 3–4 years) described play as an activity that involved their active participation in “doing” something, being with peers, and having agency and ownership of ideas. Children did not always characterize their activities as “play”, and not all activities in the preschool program were described as

play. The article highlights that play and learning are complex concepts that may be easily dismissed as separate, when rather they are deeply intertwined. The findings of this study generate opportunities for educators and academics to consider what counts as “play” for children, and to prompt further consideration of the role of play as an antidote to adult centric views of play.

Keywords: early childhood education; play and learning; children’s perspectives; researching with children; teacher-researchers; video-stimulated interactions; video-recorded interaction; ethnomethodology; conversation analysis; qualitative research

1. Introduction: Revisiting Play and Learning

While play is a universally known concept, observed as a fundamental requirement for children [1], play is notoriously difficult to define. Most often associated with young children, play is commonsensically recognized as an activity that extends over the life span, from early childhood to adulthood, and across cultures. To date, most understandings about play in educational settings have been informed through an educator’s lens. The benefits of play in stimulating children’s development in the areas of cognition, social development, interpersonally have been well documented [2–5]. Under scrutiny in recent years has been a focus on pedagogical approaches, teachers’ roles in play, the types of activities that constitute play, and the appropriateness of play as a learning resource [6]. Views held in parallel with each other include both a confirmation of the place of play in early childhood education and, simultaneously, a denigration of the role of play in favor for more teacher-structured and formal activities. These tug-rope tensions position teachers as agents of maintaining and valuing play in their classrooms while also promoting to parents and members of the broader school community the value of play as a learning resource, and dealing with broader issues about the role of play in early childhood education. It is within this context of uncertainty and change that this research study was envisioned and undertaken.

Pressure for children to meet national learning outcomes, and prescribed interpretations of how such outcomes should be reached, may reduce opportunities for teachers to implement a play-based pedagogy. In early childhood contexts, teachers are finding that play is more often an activity that is “scheduled” rather than integrated into the daily activities of the preschool [7]. Teachers face day-to-day tensions as they juggle the complex social organization of play within school contexts, curriculum documents and temporal constraints with their pedagogical intent [8]. For example, within a school timetable play can be subject to regulation due to the physical environment of the school, the selection of play resources available to children, and adult intervention that might include play being discarded in favor of “work” or “learning” tasks [6,9,10]. The availability of time and spaces for play, advancements in educational resources with increasing use of digital technologies, and restrictions due to safety and adult surveillance mean that children’s perspectives on play may have changed [11,12]. Through increased attention regarding the activities of a school day as a context that provides opportunities for learning, play itself has become a contested activity. Within changing social and learning contexts, an investigation of children’s perspectives on play at preschool is timely.

Seeking children's views on matters that involve them, such as play and learning, is being valued increasingly in research and in practice contexts [13–16]. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), at a global level, is highly influential in recognizing children's rights to influence, speak and explain on matters relevant to their everyday lives [1]. Similarly contributing to recognizing and promoting children's views to speak on matters of importance to them is research that draws on the "new" sociologies of childhood. This paradigm works from a theoretical premise that children actively influence their social settings and that their opinions should be listened to [17–20]. Another growing area of influence is the understanding that children and families are consumers [21]. Children have rights to influence their setting because they are users of early childhood settings.

Children have strongly formed views about play [22] although they share no single shared and dominant perspective [23]. In their North American study that interviewed 98 children (aged 3–17 years) about play, Nicholson, Kurnik, Jevgiovikj and Ufoegbune [24] found the children valued relationships, being outdoors and interacting with objects that allowed them to pretend and play in multiple ways. Einarsdóttir's [23] Icelandic study of children's experiences in preschool showed that children preferred outdoor play and building relationships with others over indoor activities. Overall, studies of children's play show consensus in how children enjoy an activity, their sense of freedom within the activity, the casualness of the activity and the lack of adult involvement that constitutes play from a child's perspective [21].

Children involve teachers in their play activities for a variety of reasons. In their observational study of children's play activities in Swedish preschools and primary schools, Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson [9] found that children proposed five main reasons for approaching teachers: (1) to seek help with obtaining resources or completing tasks, including writing their name; (2) to be noticed and heard; (3) to tell tales about peer digressions (4) to seek clarification or instructions about activities; and (5) to involve adults in the play [9]. Children, however, do not always seek the teacher's involvement in play. Some children had different views of play to those of adults. For example, Glenn, Knight, Holt and Spence's [25] study of Canadian children's perspectives reported that children found that the presence of adults limited their play activities. Similarly, Rogers and Evans' [22] study of children's views of role-play in preschool found that children were upset when teachers interrupted their play and asked them to complete a separate task. The children identified strategies of delaying or averting attention in order to avoid teacher-designed and requested tasks. These studies show that children have varying views and responses regarding the teacher's role in play and whether the teacher is a welcome participant or observer.

2. The Study

The study investigated young children's own perspectives of play and learning. Inviting children's perspectives regarding their everyday experiences offered them opportunities to interpret and analyze their own social worlds and highlighted the complexities of their understandings of their preschool experiences. The study was initiated through discussions that involved Queensland University of Technology (QUT) academics, Susan Danby and Maryanne Theobald, and University of Iceland academic, Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, with Jane Bourne, Chief Executive Officer of *Lady Gowrie Queensland (Qld)*. Jane was interested in building professional knowledge and renewal by involving her senior early childhood teachers in research. Located within the wider *Lady Gowrie Australia*

network of early childhood programs, the organization is a key provider of a range of non-profit community-based early childhood education services (such as child care, preschool, family day care) across Queensland, including preschools for children aged three to four years [26].

The research team of four teachers and academics met initially to discuss matters of professional interest. The topic of play and learning surfaced as worthy of further exploration, particularly as there were Australian curriculum documents recently introduced at that time. Australia's first national prior-to-school curriculum for children aged birth to five years, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* [27] outlined an holistic approach that embraced children's participation and relationships through recognizing their life experiences in diverse contexts, and teachers' curriculum planning and use of pedagogies such as intentional teaching [27]. Also around the same time was the ongoing implementation of the Australian national curriculum for formal schooling, *The Australian Curriculum* [28], which focused on subject and discipline knowledge. Given this changed curriculum landscape, there were consequences for how play was considered and practiced in early childhood classrooms. Our interest was in how the children themselves engaged in, and provided reflective accounts of, their play and learning. In so doing, the aim of the article is to highlight that play and learning are complex concepts that may be easily dismissed as separate, when rather they are deeply intertwined.

2.1. Research Participants and Methods

The research team participated in a series of workshops that involved teachers and academics to design and plan the phases of the study, a video-ethnography in their own classrooms. Agenda items included interview techniques with young children and how to use the video-recording equipment. Members of the research team were academics, the CEO of the preschool organization, and four preschool teachers, each with a minimum of a four-year university qualification. Each teacher had the dual roles of classroom teacher and director of a preschool centre. There were 20 children in each class setting, approximately 80 children in total.

The project followed the guidelines for low risk human research and gained QUT Ethics (approval number 1,200,000,705). Before the video-recording occurred, parents and children were invited to provide written consent for their children to be involved in the study. The parents were asked to read a child-friendly explanation of the study to their children, and children were asked to indicate if they chose to be involved by signing their name on the consent form. Each teacher talked with the children in their class about the study, and directly addressed any questions that parents and children had. The teachers reported that the children were interested in the project, and that the parents felt comfortable because the teachers were conducting the study.

Teachers video-recorded the children in their class as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities. Teachers aimed to video-record up to two hours of video-recordings in their classroom and in total approximately seven hours of video-recordings of children's classroom engagement were collected across the four classrooms. Each teacher video-recorded episodes over several days, with each episode ranging in length from 5–25 min. Each teacher selected fragments of video-recordings based on showing a range of play settings in their classroom. The video-stimulated sessions, where the children viewed what they had been doing in the classroom, occurred on the same day that the actual episode had taken place. The video-stimulated sessions were conducted in slightly different ways. One

teacher let the video-recording run while she discussed with the children their activities. The three other teachers selected and showed shorter extracts that were of approximately three minute's duration and then they asked the children about their activities. Each video-stimulated session ran for approximately 10–15 minutes and was conducted in a quiet area of the classroom.

These sessions, where the teachers showed to the children their own video-recorded activities, are named “video-stimulated sessions” because the aim was to encourage or stimulate children to talk about their observations of video-recordings of what they had been doing in the classroom [29]. The video-stimulated sessions were also video-recorded. Using this method to gain video-stimulated accounts, we followed Pomerantz's [30] and Theobald's [29] aim to highlight matters of interest to the participants themselves. Only children who were captured in the original video-recording of their activities participated in the video-stimulated sessions. In total, 17 video-stimulated sessions were conducted. In classroom A, six groups of children from the whole cohort watched the recordings; in classrooms B and C, five groups of children participated; while in classroom D, two groups of children from the whole cohort were involved in watching the video-recordings.

Teachers are effective researchers of their own practice as they are “insiders” [31], which makes available understanding, from an insider's perspective, what is happening in the classroom [32]. When interviewing the children, however, the teachers presented themselves as “outsiders” [33] to the children's activities. They asked questions to encourage the children's perspectives about what they had been doing. The research team developed a set of prompting questions to guide and instigate the conversations with children. These included:

Tell me about your experiences at preschool. How would you describe the activities you are doing there? What name would you give to those activities? What do the teachers do in your activities? Tell me about learning. How do you think we learn things?

2.2. Data Analysis

The study is informed by the theoretical understandings of Childhood Studies that value a child's standpoint [18–20]. From this perspective, children are understood as having their own constructions of play and learning from their own standpoints. Data analysis was informed by a social interactional analytic approach that drew on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis [34,35], focused on describing how members understand and made sense of talk and actions, and how they produced and managed their social interactions. It is through such close examination of everyday activities that one can find out something that previously may go unnoticed and shed light on how local social orders are produced.

Conversation involves specific structural features of language, such as taking turns to participate in conversation, which is often taken-for-granted by members [36]. The setting shapes the members' talk and actions; for example, an interview determines how actions and responses are comprehended and organized [36] so that the context of an interview guides the taking of turns—the interviewer asks questions and the interviewee responds.

Analysis was undertaken in three stages. The first stage involved collaborative workshops held where the teacher and academics met to share and discuss the video-recorded data, to undertake initial collaborative analysis of the video-recordings of the children's activities and the children's accounts of

what they had been doing. The second stage involved transcribing the video-recorded conversations verbatim. Pseudonyms were used for participants. In the third stage of analysis, the transcripts were treated as one corpus of data as our intention was not to highlight differences across classrooms but to seek some understandings of the range of children's responses. During this stage, the first two authors followed Pomerantz and Fehr's [37] five-step analytical model to closely examine the children's accounts. The five steps included (1) selecting a video-recorded and transcribed sequence of talk and interaction; (2) identifying the actions of the talk for example, a request or a sharing of news; (3) reflecting on the way that the talk was "packaged" for example, a request for help might be in the form of a question or a complaint; (4) considering how turns are taken, and (5) thinking about the implications for the identities and interaction of the participants [37]. The fragments selected for this analysis were those where the children and teachers talked about play and learning. All authors reviewed, provided comment and contributed to the analysis presented in this article. The fragments selected for this article are ones where play and learning were talked about, and those that show the complexities facing the children when asked to name their activities, and how the teacher and children talked the topics of play and learning into being.

As Docket and Perry [38] (p. 48) suggest, applying positivist understandings of validity and reliability to research that draws upon children's accounts is "problematic". From this perspective, validity assumes "one accurate interpretation of results" that can be "applied across populations" [38] (p. 48). On the other hand, qualitative methodology recognizes that it is not possible to bring a positivist approach. Rather, a qualitative approach recognizes the diverse views of children as individuals and that these views are not static, but rather reflective of the specific contexts and situations in which they are interacting [39]. Similarly, reliability within qualitative research differs from a positivist approach. Reliability, within a qualitative methodology, refers to the quality of the field notes and data, such as video recordings, so that others who also view these data may also come to similar analytic conclusions [33]. Because talk is contextually oriented, conversation analysis employs a "next turn proof procedure" to ensure that interpretations are valid [40] (p. 378). This form of validity check means that analysis is proofed or double-checked by referring to a participant's next turn in response to another's prior turn in order to understand how the participants understood and made sense of what was said.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section we explore how the children accounted for their activities in the classroom. In Fragment 1 below, the teacher's conversation with two children (Michael and Rita) followed after they had just viewed a video recording of themselves playing "vets".

Fragment 1: Participation: What do you like about play?

13 Teacher: Are there other times when you're playing at kindy?

14 And if they were making rabbits, would they be playing?

15 Or is it only play when you're in a game like this?

16 Michael: It's play too when...you're making things.

...(lines omitted)

17 Teacher: What do you like about play?

- 18 Michael: Because I get to play with the other people.
 19 Teacher: What do you like about it, Rita?
 20 Rita: Because I never did a rabbit game.
 21 Teacher: Because you never did a rabbit game before? No, it was.
 22 the first time, wasn't it?

In this interaction, the teacher asks Michael three questions about play in quick succession. The first asks Michael to name other play activities at kindy (line 13). The teacher's second question asks whether Michael considers if making rabbits in the making area could be play (line 14). The third question alludes to the vet game that they had been playing in the video recording that they had just watched (line 15). The teacher's latter two questions are more focused than her first, and thus more straightforward to answer. Matthew responds by answering the second question, that it would be play when "you're making things" (line 16). His response indicated that play was associated with the activity of preparing props for the activity.

While the teacher's next question is open-ended, it assumes that play is an enjoyable activity (line 17). Michael identifies the social aspect of play as important as he enjoys playing with others. Rita provides another perspective that the activity offered her the opportunity to participate in something new for her. Rita had never played a rabbit game and found it an enjoyable experience. The upshot of Rita's observation, and the teacher's acknowledgment of this, suggests that play exposes children to ideas and activities that they might not have before experienced.

The next fragment (2) shows two children's responses after they viewed a video-recording of themselves involved in pretend game of 'families'. This fragment highlights how the children valued agency and decision-making in play.

Fragment 2: Observing agency and decision-making

- 15 Teacher: What else do you play at kindy? What else is played?
 16 Do you play anything outside?
 17 Janet: Yes, we do play on those, um, obstacle courses.
 18 Maisy: And do you know what Lisa always says, can we play the
 19 animal game, can we play the animal game when we first
 20 come here.
 21 Teacher: She does say it first thing, doesn't she?
 22 Maisy: Yes.
 23 Teacher: And what did—what do you say to her then when you don't
 24 want to play the animal game? What words are you using,
 25 now we've talked about it?
 26 Janet: We say Lisa, we're going to play another game because
 27 we're too tired to play that animal game again.
 28 Maisy: Yeah, and then we're going to come back.
 29 Teacher: Oh, alright. I think that sounds a good way to solve the
 30 problem.

The teacher asks a series of three questions about play and where it occurs in other spaces of the preschool, such as "outside" (line 16). While the first two questions are open-ended, the third question

was constructed for a yes/no response. Maisy takes the opportunity, however, to introduce an interactional problem of being asked by another child to play the same game often (lines 18–20). In response to the teacher question of how they respond (lines 23–25), Janet and then Maisy use reported speech (lines 26–27) to display what they say. Evident in their responses is that agency and making decisions is important to what they do in their activities. This example is very similar to one identified in Theobald and Danby’s [41] study of preschool-aged girls’ accounts of their activities. That study found that children took the opportunity in a video-stimulated interview to complain about a girl who always took the lead as teacher in the game of pretend school. These accounts highlight the outsider role of adults in children’s activities, so, what may look like play to an outsider such as a teacher or parent, to the children something else is happening.

The next examples show how children categorized their activities as working and being active, but not as playing. Fragment 3 shows a conversation between two children and the teacher after the children had watched a video-recording of themselves in the art and craft area of the preschool.

Fragment 3: Accounting for activities as working

- 01 Teacher: Uh ha. So what—what do you call this when you’re—
 02 when you’re doing this sort of stuff at Kindy, what do you call
 03 this?
 04 Sophie: Um, ballroom.
 05 Teacher: Oh, the—the ballroom, yeah. Yeah, that’s a good name for it.
 06 So when you do these sorts of things um at Kindy is that
 07 Like working or is that—what sort of thing is it doing?
 08 Sophie: Um...Playing.
 09 Teacher: It’s playing is it? (Sophie nods) Yeah. (Helen shakes her head)
 10 What did you think Helen?
 11 Helen: Um working.
 12 Teacher: You think it’s working? Yeah, okay. That’s okay. That’s—
 13 whatever you think is fine.

The teacher initially describes the activity in a vague way “this sort of stuff” (line 2), attempting not to influence the children’s naming of the activity as play. The teacher further works to gain a collective name for the “sorts of things” and introduces a binary construction, “working or is that” (line 7). This binary sets up “playing” as the most likely candidate response, which is provided by Sophie (line 8). Sophie names the activity as play (line 8), to which Helen explicitly disagrees by describing the activity as “working” (line 10). This construction, however, picks up the teacher’s dispreferred construction provided in line 7 and demonstrates that individual children hold different views about their activities.

In the next fragment (4), a group of boys had just viewed a video-recording of themselves in the sandpit. They first described their actions as ‘working’ and being active, and then the topic of feelings came up.

Fragment 4: Accounting for activities as working hard and being active

- 01 Teacher: watching the film about being in the sandpit what was

- 02 going on?
- 03 Tom: We were working so hard.
- 04 Paddy: Yeah and we were, and...we were making some water and chips
- 05 for the dump trucks and make trucks and we're making food
- 06 for us, cake for everyone that was at the restaurant and
- 07 we were like putting it in the oven to heat it up to make
- 08 it be...
- 09 Billy: We called it digging show—
- 10 Teacher: Yes, okay.
- 11 Billy: —and digging show.
- 12 Tom: That's what I call it [as well]...
- 13 Teacher: Can I ask you another question and would you call it
- 14 playing?
- 15 Tom: Yes.
- 16 Teacher: What do you think play is? What would you say playing is?
- 17 Billy: Playing is running, playing and you get hurt and you get
- 18 hurt from that.
- 19 Teacher: Oh so running's like running, running, playing is running
- 20 and...
- 21 Billy: And hurting.
- 22 Teacher: And hurting? What do you think play is Paddy? What's
- 23 playing?
- 24 Paddy: And we have building.
- 25 Teacher: Building's playing?
- 26 Paddy: Yeah
- 27 Teacher: What about you James, what do you think playing is?
- 28 James: I think um, sport.

The teacher's initial question is open-ended and asks "what's going on" (lines 1–2). This seems successful in gaining a general description of their activities as "working so hard" (line 3). In lines 4–8, Paddy self-selects a turn and provides a detailed description of their activities that is activity specific, explicitly detailing the actions but did not give a name to these types of activities. Billy describes it as a "digging show" (line 11). In the absence of a collective name for the activities involved, the teacher introduces the category of "playing" as a collective category for the activities (lines 13–14), this turn framed for agreement. The children respond with the preferred response and agree with the construction of "playing" and, in the next lines, expand on what "playing" might be, using the descriptive verbs: "making", "running", and "building". These verbs suggest that the children's view of play is one of "action" and of "doing".

In line 21, Billy named "hurting" as playing. The teacher did not question Billy about his categorization, so we have no more insight into his view of play. Most often, play is referred to as a fun activity. Studies of children's peer groups, however, have shown that children's play is not always fun. A "discourse of play as fun", works to position play that is "not fun" as "invisible" [41–45]; [46] (p. 9). For some children activities that some might consider play are actually unhappy experiences for

the children. For example, Goodwin's [47] study of children's peer group highlighted the exclusion that one girl faced. Her peers did not let her join in the games, even when the game that was played had been her idea. Marginalization or disputes that arise during play contribute to understandings that play may not always be happy experiences for children.

The next fragment explores the activities that children consider are not play:

Fragment 5: What's not play: Getting all our stuff

- 01 Teacher: Can I ask you, is there anything that you do at kindy
 02 that's not playing? Do you have to do some things
 03 that you think to yourself, this isn't playing?
 04 Michael: Getting all our stuff.
 05 Teacher: When you're getting all your stuff?
 06 Michael: And not doing anything in the game.
 07 Teacher: Right, do you mean when you're just setting up the game?
 08 Michael: Yeah.
 09 Teacher: So that's not play?
 10 Michael: No.
 11 Teacher: Okay. That's interesting to know.

The teacher introduces the possibility that preschool activities might not always be constructed as play (lines 1–3). In response, the children identify activities that involved planning such as setting up and preparing items. American researcher Whalen [48] found that the amount of time that children took to set up games before they actually started “playing” was considerable. During the “set-up” time, the children worked to jointly establish the roles in the interaction, the items that will be used and the purpose of these in the upcoming interaction. This time was “fundamentally important matters for the activity at hand” [48] (p. 326). The separation of the activities of preparing for and playing a game, shows how the children engaged in complex categorization of their collection of activities typically identified as “play” by adults.

In Fragment 6, the children identify adult-controlled activities as not play. The topic of learning also is explored:

Fragment 6: What's not play: Listening and learning

- 01 Teacher: So—so what things do we do at Kindy that aren't play?
 02 Sophie: Um listening.
 03 Teacher: Listening, that's not playing? When you say listening
 04 listening to what sorts of things?
 05 Sophie: Ah what the teacher tells you.
 06 Teacher: Okay, so when you're listening to what the teacher's
 07 telling you that's not playing?
 08 Sophie: No.
 09 Teacher: No?
 10 Helen: No.
 11 Teacher: Okay, cool. So what about learning, how do you think you

- 12 learn stuff?
 13 Sophie: Ah, from the teachers.
 14 Teacher: From the teachers, yeah. What sorts of things do you
 15 learn from the teachers. Sophie?
 16 Helen: They tell lots of fun stuff.

In response to the teacher's question, "what things ... aren't play" (line 1), Sophie was hesitant (um) but then names the activity of listening to "what the teacher tells you" as "not play" (lines 2 and 5). Sophie's hesitation suggests that her answer might not be well accepted by the teacher, who is an adult in a position of power within a class setting. Following the teacher's pursuit of this response, Helen agrees with Sophie (line 10). The teacher's use of "Okay" [49], here suggests that she has heard this response and she moves to a new topic. With the teacher's introduction of the idea of "learning", both girls name teachers as important for learning to take place (line 13). Helen suggests that teachers have an important role to play in information sharing and in delivering this in fun ways.

In the next fragment, the teacher questions a child as she watches a video-recording of her making a house with others in the dramatic play area.

Fragment 7: What do you think about learning?

- 01 Teacher: What do you think about learning?
 02 Laura: Uh when you listen at the teachers
 03 Teacher: Ah learning's when you listen to
 04 the teachers is it?
 05 Laura: Ah what the teacher tells you.
 06 Teacher: What about when you were playing,
 07 did you learn anything when you were
 08 playing here with Helen and Rachel?
 09 Did you learn anything then?
 10 Laura: Yeah
 11 Teacher: What did you learn?
 12 Laura: Um listening a little bit to Helen because
 13 she was talking to me.
 14 Teacher: Oh, so you were learning. That's clever,
 15 so when Helen was talking you were listening
 16 and you were learning.

This extract starts with the teacher asking, "what do you think about learning" (line 1). In a similar way as in Fragment 6, the activity of listening "at the teacher" (line 2) is named. When prompted, Laura elaborates, "at what the teacher tells you" (line 5). The teacher's next question (line 6–9) is constructed for a yes/no response, and brings together the topic of learning and playing with peers. Laura replies yes and, on the teacher's prompting, replies that she learnt "listening a little bit" to another child, Helen (lines 12–13). The teacher responds with an assessment "that's clever" (line 14). This positive assessment displays her alignment at Laura's association with learning as an activity to do when others, not just the teacher, are talking. Such a positive assessment indicates that she considers her response as reflective and thoughtful.

The teacher in the next interaction, Fragment 8 also introduces the topic of learning for discussion.

Fragment 8: What about learning?

- 01 Teacher: What about learning? How do you think
 02 we learn things?
 03 Tracy: like you can say a-b-c-d
 04 Teacher: Yeah, that's learning when you say a-b-c-d.
 05 Is there anything else that's learning?
 06 Isla: Um alphabet.
 07 Teacher: The alphabet is learning. Yeah anything-
 08 Tracy: And also you can do the numbers like 1-2-3-4.
 09 Teacher: Okay so when we do the numbers 1-2-3-4 that's learning.
 (lines omitted)
 10 Teacher: When you were making your snail and your flower,
 11 did you learning anything then, Tracy?
 12 Tracy: Yes.
 13 Teacher: What did you learn?
 14 Tracy: To make that sort of flower and some sparkles
 (lines omitted)
 15 Isla: She wanted it to stand up...to not stick on the paper.
 16 Teacher: Oh, so you—ah now I understand. Is that why you put the
 17 jewels on the bottom? That's clever, really clever
 18 thinking. So if you put the jewels on the bottom of the
 19 clay it wouldn't stick to the paper? (Tracy nods)
 20 That is very clever Tracy, that's great.

In this fragment, the teacher talks with Isla and Tracy about the video-recording of themselves in the art and craft area. Introducing the topic of learning, the teacher asks “how do you think you learn things” (line 2). Isla responds to the teacher’s categorization of learning “things” by naming something tangible that can be learnt—the sequence of alphabet letters (line 3). The teacher’s further questions (lines 4–6) indicates her search for a different response. This is picked up on by Tracy who proffers, “and you can do the numbers 1-2-3-4” (line 8), suggesting that learning has a tangible outcome, the recognition of numerals. As the interaction continues, the teacher constructs her next question with reference to a more specific example from the video-recording that they had just watched. She asks Tracy if learning took place while she was making the snail and flower in the art area (line 10–11). Tracy replies that she learnt to make a flower and snail. Isla elaborates (line 15) that she wanted the flower to stand up. The teacher’s formulation of what Tracey did when making the flower proposes why she had glued jewels on the base of the flower (lines 16–19). As Tracy agrees with this interpretation, the teacher provides a positive assessment of her actions as “very clever” (line 20).

Next, we explore methodological matters regarding how to ask children about what they were doing, without trying to predetermine or name those activities in advance. While working from a standpoint of not introducing the topic of play, or naming the activity as play, this approach proved to be challenging at times.

When examining the transcripts, we found that the children did not begin by talking spontaneously about play. This meant that the teachers adjusted how they asked about what was going on in the video fragments. Fragment 9 shows how an adult construction of the children's activities led to categorizing the children's responses within a binary of "play" and what counts as something else ("not play").

Fragment 9: What would you call what you're doing?

- 01 Teacher: When you were in your vet, what would you
 02 call what you're doing?
 03 What do you name those things?
 04 Have you got a word that says what you're doing?
 05 Michael: No.
 06 Teacher: Sometimes people, when they're in their games like vets,
 07 they say they're playing. Would you call it playing?
 08 when you're doing that?
 09 Michael: Yeah.
 10 Teacher: What sorts of things count as play?
 11 Are you playing when you're in a game?
 12 Yeah.

In Fragment 9, the teacher opens the discussion with the children using an open-ended question that encouraged the children to name the activity they had been doing. In lines 1–4, the teacher further attempts to gain a description from the children about their activities without naming the activity as "play", or without using some other description from an adult construct. One child indicated that that they did not have a "word" to describe what they were doing (line 5), which led the teacher to proffer the description of describe as a way to describe their game about vets. The teacher's question in lines 6–8 was designed in such a way that a preferred answer from the children would be a "yes" response, which is a less problematic response than one that differs with the teacher's description of the activity. The child produces the affirming response (line 9). Receipting this response, the teacher asks "what sort of things might count as play" (line 10), and then offers a candidate answer, "a game" (line 11). Again, the same child provides an agreement to the teacher's construction of what might constitute an activity that counted as play. Only this one child was heard to respond to the teacher's questions even though there were a small group of children present.

It might be easy to assume that the children found the teachers' questioning challenging because they did not respond without a lot of prompting from the teacher. We argue, though, that this was not the case. Rather, we suggest that the children's responses were due to the questions being asked by the teacher. When teachers asked questions where the children were able to provide responses that confirmed and oriented to an adult agenda of describing their activities as play, they were forthcoming and descriptive in their responses. That is, they oriented to structures of language where a preference for agreeing with a yes, when a yes/no question is asked. An agreement is a more straightforward response than one that is not [40]. On the other hand, where the children were asked if an activity was play or not-play, their lack of response suggested that they did not categorize these activity in the same way that the teacher was indicating. In Fragment 9, it is quite possible that the children did not have a name for the vet activity in which they were engaged, and the context of a small group meant that it

might be difficult for one child to come up with an answer to represent the views of the small group. This lack of response does not show the children's lack of competence in being able to provide an answer, but rather their awareness of social and power relationships constructed through everyday talk.

The analysis of these fragments of talk between children and adults highlight the moment-by-moment difficulties of interview data. The teacher was constrained by language choices (such as not using the word *play*), acting like an “outsider” to their activities, and the children were constrained by being asked to comment on some categorization of their activities and to respond on behalf of their peer group, where they may not have previously reflected on the ways that they characterized their activities. While the researchers' interest was in how children conceptualized their activities, the term *play* did not always capture what the children described as happening in their activities. Rather, they spoke of their participation and the roles they held in the play, and their levels of ownership and decision-making. While potentially a limitation, this method also opens up interesting possibilities for understanding how children grapple with adult-constructed agendas of research.

A methodological issue involved how questioning techniques may implicate certain responses from the children. While it may be possible to consider that the teachers' role as an authority was at odds with their role as researcher, we propose that the questions influenced the accounts generated and how the children produced adult-constructed agendas of research. It is possible that as the children knew their teachers well, this environment was one that encouraged children to feel comfortable to share their views about what they were doing.

4. Conclusions: Opportunities to Reframe Conceptions of Play and Learning

This study of children's perspectives of play raises questions regarding taken-for-granted early childhood concepts about play and learning. In line with Dockett and Perry [38], we found that children have different views to adults on the topic of play. This project gave the teachers time to reflect as part of a professional conversation. The idea of “looking both ways” [50] (p. 1) was explored, as teacher-researchers implemented the video-ethnographic approach to examine their own professional practice. As Herzfield [50] (p. 164) suggested, “the essence of the text itself depends upon the translator's presence”. In other words, involving teacher-researchers in the design, implementation and analysis of the study enabled a “rich and complex interplay” [51] (p. 16). Teachers had opportunities to consider children's perspectives while reflecting on the complexities of play and learning within the current curriculum landscape for early childhood education.

Understanding how children consider play and learning has implications for the field of early childhood education. Conclusions and guidelines for teachers are discussed below.

- The diversity of children's views about play and learning makes it increasingly important for educators and policy makers to be aware of the various standpoints of children and teachers and the implications for definitions of play and constructions of learning. Including play into educational practices in an integrated way may avoid dichotomies between play and learning [5].
- The children's accounts highlighted that they valued opportunities for choice and ownership of the preschool activities, and suggest respect for their engagement in their activities. The children did not trivialize their participation or involvement in activities, whether they named them as “play” or “learning”.

- Teachers' professional understandings about play and learning are enriched when they discuss with children their views of classroom life. Engaging children to critically reflect on the learning that is occurring in their play is a way to reduce the dichotomy of play and learning.
- Teacher pedagogical practice is key to fostering links between play and learning [52]. As the analysis has shown, play and learning are complex concepts that may be easily dismissed as separate, when rather they are deeply intertwined.

Based on the findings of this study, we propose three recommendations for educators to consider:

- (1) We suggest that teachers discuss explicitly with the children the types of learning that is taking place in their daily activities. For example, when children are building in the block area, asking them questions regarding what they learnt about the properties of blocks.
- (2) We recommend that teachers involve children in planning activities that address educational outcomes specified in curriculum documents. For example, asking the children to identify activities to meet the specific learning outcomes and explore curriculum topics.
- (3) It is useful to integrate children's current activities with past experiences and future ideas to connect what children already know, have learnt and could further investigate.

These observations generate opportunities for adults to consider what counts as play and learning for children, and to prompt further consideration of the role of play and learning as an antidote to adult-centric views of play.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the staff and children at Lady Gowrie Preschools and financial support from Lady Gowrie QLD and the Health Wellbeing and Happiness Program of QUT's Children and Youth Research Centre.

Author Contributions

All authors reviewed, provided comment and contributed to the analysis presented in this article. The first two authors led the writing of the article and all authors provided comment that progressed the writing and production.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. United Nations. Convention on the rights of the child. 1989. Available online: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm> (accessed on 24 July 2015).
2. Bodrova, E.; Leong, D.; Dickensen, K.; Neuman, S.B. Vygotskian perspectives on teaching and learning early literacy. In *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*; The Guilford Press: New York, NY, USA, 2006; pp. 243–256.

3. Bodrova, E.; Leong, D. Curriculum and play in early child development. In *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*; CEECD/SKC-ECD: Quebec, QC, Canada, 2010.
4. Miller, E.; Almon, J. *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*. Alliance for Childhood: College Park, MD, USA, 2009.
5. Nicolopoulou, A. The alarming disappearance of play from early childhood education. *Hum. Dev.* **2010**, *53*, 1–4.
6. Ailwood, J. Governing early childhood education through play. *Contemp. Issues Early Child.* **2003**, *4*, 4286–4299.
7. Björk-Willén, P.; Cromdal, J. When education seeps into ‘free play’: How preschool children accomplish multilingual education. *JOP* **2009**, *41*, 1493–1518.
8. Theobald, M.; Kultti, A. Investigating child participation in the everyday talk of a teacher and children in a preparatory year. *Contemp. Issues Early Child.* **2012**, *13*, 210–225.
9. Samuelsson I.P.; Johansson, E. Why do children involve teachers in their play and learning? *Eur. Early Child. Educ. Res. J.* **2009**, *17*, 77–94.
10. O’Gorman, L.; Ailwood, J. ‘They get fed up with playing’: Parents’ views on play-based learning in the Preparatory Year. *Contemp. Issues Early Child.* **2012**, *13*, 266–275.
11. Holmes, R.M. The outdoor recess activities of children at an urban school: Longitudinal and intraperiod patterns. *Am. J. Play* **2012**, *4*, 327–351.
12. Lee, H.; Tamminen, K.A.; Clark, A.M.; Slater, L.; Spence, J.C.; Holt, N.L. A meta-study of qualitative research examining determinants of children’s independent active free play. *Int. J. Behav. Nutr. Phys. Activ.* **2015**, *12*. doi:10.1186/s12966-015-0165-9.
13. Christensen, P.; James, A. Eds. *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*. Falmer Press: London, UK, 2000.
14. Mason, J., Danby, S. Children as experts in their lives: Child inclusive research. *Child Indic. Res.* **2011**, *4*, 185–189.
15. Mason, J.; Fattore, T. Eds. *Children Taken Seriously: In Theory, Policy and Practice*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London, UK, 2005.
16. Theobald, M.; Danby, S.; Ailwood, J. Child participation in the early years: Challenges for education. *Aust. J. Early Child.* **2011**, *36*, 19–26.
17. Corsaro, W.A. *The Sociology of Childhood*, 4th ed.; Sage: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2014.
18. Danby, S. The communicative competence of young children. *Aust. J. Early Child.* **2002**, *27*, 25–30.
19. Mayall, B. Towards a child standpoint. In *Towards a Sociology for Childhood: Thinking from Children’s Lives*; Mayall, B., Ed.; Open University Press: Buckingham, UK, 2002; pp. 112–139.
20. Prout, A.; James, A. A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems. In *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*; James, A., Prout, A., Eds.; Falmer Press: London, UK, 1997; pp. 7–33.
21. Einarsdóttir, J. Children’s perspectives on play. In *The Sage Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood*; Brooker, E., Blaise, M., Edwards, S., Eds.; Sage: London, UK, 2004; pp. 319–329.
22. Rogers, S.; Evans, J. *Inside Role-Play in Early Childhood Education: Researching Young Children’s Perspectives*; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2008.
23. Einarsdóttir, J. Icelandic children’s early education transition experiences. *Early Educ. Dev.* **2011**, *22*, 737–756.

24. Nicholson, J.; Kurnik, J.; Jevgiovikj, M.; Ufoegbune, V. Deconstructing adults' and children's discourse on children's play: Listening to children's voices to destabilise deficit narratives. *Early Child Dev. Care* **2015**, *185*, 1569–1586.
25. Glenn, N.M.; Knight, C.; Holt, N.L.; Spence, J.C. Meanings of play among children. *Childhood* **2013**, *20*, 185–199.
26. Theobald, M.; Cobb-Moore, C.; Irvine, S. A snapshot of 40 years in early childhood education and care through oral histories. *Aust. J. Early Child.* **2013**, *38*, 107–115.
27. Department of Education, Employment & Workforce Relations (DEEWR). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*; Council of Australian Governments: Canberra, Australia, 2004.
28. Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). Foundation to Year 10 Curriculum 2010. Available online: <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/curriculum> (accessed on 24 July 2015).
29. Theobald, M. Video-stimulated accounts: Young children accounting for interactional matters in front of peers. *J. Early Child. Res.* **2012**, *10*, 32–50.
30. Pomerantz, A. Using participants' video stimulated comments to complement analyses of interactional practices. In *Conversation and cognition*; de Molder, H., Potter, J., Eds.; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2005; pp. 93–113.
31. Cox, R.D. Teaching qualitative research to practitioner-researchers. *Theor. Pract.* **2012**, *51*, 129–136.
32. Eppley, K. Defying insider-outsider categorization: One researcher's fluid and complicated positioning on the insider-outsider continuum. *Forum Qual. Soc. Res.* **2006**, *7*. Available online: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/150> (accessed on 20 November 2015).
33. Silverman, D. *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction*. Sage: London, UK, 2006.
34. Garfinkel, H. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, USA, 1967.
35. Sacks, H. *Lectures on Conversation Vol. I and II*. Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 1992.
36. Heritage, J. *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Polity Press: Cambridge, UK, 1984.
37. Pomerantz, A.; Fehr, B.J. Conversation analysis: An approach to the study of social action as sense making practices. *Discourse as Soc. Interaction* **1997**, *2*, 64–91.
38. Dockett, S.; Perry, B. Trusting children's accounts in research. *J. Early Child. Res.* **2007**, *5*, 47–63.
39. Dockett, S.; Einarsdóttir, J.; Perry, B. Researching with children: Ethical tensions. *J. Early Child. Res.* **2009**, *7*, 283–298.
40. Peräkylä, A. Validity in research on naturally occurring social interaction. In *Qualitative Research*; SAGE Publications Ltd.: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 2011; pp. 365–382.
41. Theobald, M.; Danby, S. "Well, now I'm upset": moral and social orders in the playground. In *Morality in Practice: Exploring Childhood, Parenthood and Schooling in Everyday Life*; Cromdal, J., Tholander, M., Eds.; Equinox: London, UK, 2016, in press.
42. Corsaro, W.A. Peer culture. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*; Qvortrup, J., Corsaro, W.A., Honig, M.S., Eds.; Palgrave Macmillan: New York, NY, USA, 2009; pp. 301–316.
43. Danby, S.; Baker, C. How to be masculine in the block area. *Childhood* **1998**, *5*, 151–175.
44. Evaldsson, A.C.; Svahn, J. School bullying and the micro-politics of girls' gossip disputes. In *Disputes in Everyday Life*; Danby, S., Theobald, M., Eds.; Emerald: Bingley, UK, 2012; pp. 297–323.

45. Löfdahl, A.; Hägglund, S. Power and participation: Social representations among in children in pre-school. *Soc. Psychol. Educ.* **2006**, *9*, 179–194.
46. Grieshaber, S.; McArdle, F. *The Trouble with Play*. Open University Press: London, UK, 2010.
47. Goodwin, M.H. Building power asymmetries in girls' interaction. *Discourse Soc.* **2002**, *13*, 715–730.
48. Whalen, M.R. Working toward play: Complexity in children's fantasy activities. *Lang. Soc.* **1995**, *24*, 315–348.
49. Beach, W.A. Transitional Regularities for “Casual” “Okay” Usages. *JOP* **1993**, *19*, 325–352.
50. Herzfeld, M. Looking both ways: The ethnographer in the text. *Semiotica* **1983**, *46*, 151–166.
51. Woolgar, S. *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Sage: London, UK, 1988.
52. Perry, B.; Dockett, S. *Play and Mathematics*; The Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers Inc.: Adelaide, Australia, 2007.

© 2015 by the authors; licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).