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Stakeholder Perspectives of Play-based Learning in the First Year of Primary
School: A Case Study in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This qualitative research study explored key stakeholders' perspectives of a play-based learning (Pb-L) approach in the first year of primary school. A case-study design was used to gather information about the perceived value, challenges, and characteristics of a Pb-L environment in an Auckland-based primary school. The children's perspectives of the role of play were explored in six focus group interviews, while an online survey was used to collect parent or caregiver's experiences of the current Pb-L approach. Lastly, two separate interviews were conducted with a classroom teacher and school leader to capture their experiences of implementing a play-based approach. The findings of the study indicated that children perceived self-initiated, hands-on exploration that was based on their interests, and social interaction with peers, as important in their play and learning activities. Overall, the parents, teacher, and school leader demonstrated a shared understanding of the value of a Pb-L approach, particularly in relation to the importance of child well-being and children's social and emotional development. The study outlines the adults' perspectives of the benefits and challenges of a play pedagogy and highlights the implications for schools/teaching practice, including potential opportunities for future research. It is proposed that a Pb-L pedagogy provides an approach to development and learning that embraces the natural playfulness with which children enter school to support meaningful early learning experiences that promote lifelong learning.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Overview

This chapter introduces the background for the study of play-based learning (Pb-L) in a New Zealand primary school. The use of play as an important medium for supporting children's development and learning is well-known and established in early childhood education, but its implementation in primary education is still emerging. In developing a rationale for the project, it became evident to the researcher that there are limited studies which explore a Pb-L approach in the New Zealand context. This study provides insight into Pb-L in a New Zealand primary school and offers multiple perspectives as a platform for future growth in this area. It proposes that a Pb-L approach in the first year of school provides a continuous pedagogy that children are familiar with, while they adjust to formal learning upon transition from early childhood education. It highlights the perspectives of the stakeholders identified in the research and considers how each provides a unique insight into the role of Pb-L. The researcher's journey of discovering Pb-L is outlined, and the chapter concludes with an overview of the subsequent five chapters.

Background for the Study

Play is recognised as an important part of healthy child development (Fromberg & Bergen, 2015). It is developmentally appropriate and can support the social, emotional, cognitive, language, and cultural development that underpins a young child's growth and well-being (Frost, Wortham, &

Reifel, 2008; Fleer, 2011; Gimtrova & Gimtrov, 2003; Hamilton & McFarlane, 2005; Marcon, 2002; Stagnitti & Lewis, 2015; Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016). A play-based pedagogy, common in early childhood education, is centred on play as a mode of learning that facilitates growth and development (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996). Importantly, many early play activities enhance academic skills in later school years (Bergen, 2009; Burke, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009). In New Zealand, children typically start formal education at the age of five, which is a period of human development still classified as early childhood (MoE, 2017a). Even so, during the first year at school children are expected to master literacy and numeracy skills that will allow them to meet prescribed National Standards (MoE, 2009). Learning in early primary school is often focussed on teaching these academic skills with less emphasis on holistic development and less time for play (Copple & Bredecamp, 2009; Henricks, 2015).

Increasing attention in the international literature has been given to the implementation of a play-based pedagogy in New Entrant classrooms (Baron, Immekus, Gonzalez, & Yun, 2016; Chigeza & Sorin, 2016; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Eyer, 2003; Hyvonen, 2011; Lillemyr, Søbstad, Marder, & Flowerday, 2011; Linklater, 2006; Lynch, 2015; Martlew, Stephen, & Ellis, 2011; Moylett, 2013). Pb-L incorporates a process of child-initiated play, which children are intrinsically motivated to engage in, while being supported by the teacher (Walker, 2011). Activities in the classroom are designed to be open-ended so that children direct the nature of play based on their interests and preferences. While play-based, a Pb-L approach is structured and

planned with some elements of explicit instruction, that helps the child to focus on the process of learning as they engage in play (Harris, 2007; Martlew et al., 2011). Most play pedagogies achieve this through whole class discussions prior to and after each session. Individualised learning occurs for each student as they pursue and engage in play, while the teacher scaffolds connections to learning either individually or in whole class discussions. It is this emphasis on child-centred teaching and learning practices that has resulted in growing attention in educational research to the role of a play pedagogy in the first year of school (Saracho, 2012). The purpose of this study is to explore various stakeholders' perspectives in a school setting and to contribute to the research literature of Pb-L in the New Zealand context.

Rationale for the Study

Play pedagogies are well known and established in New Zealand early childhood education (ECE). The MoE's (1996) policy is documented in *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, which describes a key component of children's early learning as exploration. Importantly, the policy recognises that, "... Children learn through play – by doing, by asking questions, by interacting with others, by setting up theories or ideas about how things work and trying them out, and by the purposeful use of resources..." (MoE, 1996, p.82). Play is recognised as an important part of children's development and therefore underpins the teaching and learning practices used in early childhood settings. According to the MoE (2015) an estimated 96.2% of New Entrants attended ECE services, where

play is characteristic of the learning environment and early learning experiences.

The New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007) provides the educational framework for Year levels 1-13 and gives schools the responsibility to determine effective pedagogy that fits its educational philosophy and curriculum. Each student's academic progress is measured to determine whether they have met age-appropriate standards across literacy and numeracy domains (MoE, 2009). During the first year at primary school, National Standards require teachers to report to parents on their child's achievement twice a year; after six months, and again at the end of the school year (MoE, 2011). A noticeable difference between early childhood education and primary education is the need for assessment that impact on school's selection of teaching practices. Traditional school classrooms are marked by a structured learning environment that typically offer few opportunities for child-directed play during instruction time. As a result, pedagogical practices become less child-centred and increasingly adult-directed, which implies that children are recipients of learning as opposed to active contributors engaging in learning (Russell, 2011).

Exploring perspectives about how Pb-L can support children's transition to school and adjustment to formal learning can provide insight for school's considering the implementation of a play pedagogy. Few studies have explored Pb-L in an Aotearoa New Zealand primary school setting, which suggests that such investigation is worthwhile to spark further interest within

New Zealand educational research. It is the purpose of this study to establish an understanding of the nature of Pb-L in a New Zealand school, and in particular to highlight the perspectives of key stakeholders: children, parents or caregivers, a teacher, and a school leader.

An Overview of Key Stakeholders' Perspectives

The children. Understanding child experiences of play and learning in the early years of school can offer insight into valued educational practices that are developmentally appropriate, and appealing, to students entering school (Copple & Bredecamp, 2009). Classroom environments that are set up to accommodate young children's need to move around more frequently, participate in social interactions with peers, and engage in hands-on activities recognise that engaging children requires meeting their specific needs (Johnson, 2015). These classrooms also attempt to aid children's transition between early childhood education characterised by play, and a school environment that focuses on more formalised academic learning. It is the aim of this study to explore children's perspectives about what play means to them and how they respond to a Pb-L environment.

The parents. Parental expectations of the school environment and the emphasis they place on academic learning often reflect community and societal beliefs about the importance of play and the nature of teaching and learning within a school setting. Research suggests that although parents value play in their children's early educational experiences, such importance diminishes as children enter formal education (Kane, 2016; Lemay, Bigras, &

Bouchard, 2016). McKinney and Power (2012) suggests parent's ideals of future success is coupled with expectations for academic achievement. Furthermore, parents value of play shapes how children spend time outside of school (Elkind, 2007). Literature (Myck-Wayne, 2010; Nichol森, Baur, & Wooley, 2016) describes a decline in free play, as spontaneous child-initiated activities, in favour of more structured activities. As a result, children engage in less play experiences that are important for holistic development and wellbeing. Understanding parent perspectives of play in their children's educational experiences would enrich a description about the role of play in the classroom.

The teacher. Teachers recognise the benefits of play in young children and often describe having a positive attitude toward a pedagogy of play in early education (Synodi, 2010). A key deterrent for teachers remain the pressures to help children achieve academically in order to meet required achievement standards (Lynch, 2015; Martlew et al., 2011). Teachers have noted the need for instructional strategies, usually adult-directed, that facilitate teaching specific skills for academic achievement as opposed to child-centred approaches, based on interests and preferences, that allow students to initiate and direct learning (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Harris, 2007). Teachers perform an integral role in the way in which a Pb-L approach is implemented and enacted, and therefore it is important to gain their perspective about factors that impede and enhance teaching and learning within a Pb-L framework.

The school leader. School leaders' determination of educational philosophy and curriculum dictates the teaching pedagogy which staff operate in. Primary schools in New Zealand are regulated by government departments, such as the Ministry of Education and the Education Review Office, that provide and review educational policies. Therefore, a key consideration in any school is the extent to which school leaders adhere to the national curriculum and achievement standards that defines educational practice. Of significance for this study are school leader's beliefs and the way in which they align with a Pb-L philosophy. A school's leadership team may explicitly or inadvertently send messages about the value of a play pedagogy to teachers, parents, and children by setting the school climate, the classroom environment, and expectations for teaching and learning (Baron et al., 2016; Smith & Smith, 2000). Understanding the school's leadership perspectives about child development, play, and learning can help to inform and guide the implementation of a Pb-L approach (Howard, 2010). It is therefore essential to explore the perspectives, experiences, beliefs and philosophies of school leaders in developing an understanding of Pb-L in primary school.

Researcher Background

As a researcher, my discovery of Pb-L has been greatly influenced over the past seven years by motherhood and work as a teacher aide. With the birth and growth of my own children I developed an interest in child development as I observed the way in which they would abandon toys in favour of play with cardboard boxes or choosing to play outside with blankets to set up a

'tent'. It was during this time that I returned to Postgraduate study and my eldest child started primary school. Unfortunately, his transition to school and formal learning was very challenging, even though we were well supported. This experience further prompted questions about the way in which the learning environment and pedagogy support child development and learning. During my time as a teacher aide I had the opportunity of working with many children with diverse learning and behavioural needs. A common trait in the difficulties they faced were the extent to which the curriculum focussed on the need for academic achievement. Personalising their learning experiences to support positive educational outcomes was a key component of my role. At this time, the primary school had commenced the implementation of a Pb-L programme, which underscored the researcher's educational philosophy of child development and teaching and learning practices that support learning through the medium of play. It was on the basis of these experiences that the current study emerged and I realised the value of contributing insight about Pb-L in the first year of school, in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Summary of Chapters

The following discussion outlines the key content of the thesis, and the structure of the document. Chapter two provides a review of literature on the importance of children's play and considers its role in supporting development and learning. The emergence of Pb-L in the first year of primary school is discussed to highlight the growing attention in education to promote positive outcomes for student well-being. The chapter provides an overview of the perspectives of a play pedagogy in early childhood and primary school

education. The review of the literature identifies the need for investigation of Pb-L in Aotearoa New Zealand and its relevance in the first year of school.

In chapter three the selection of a qualitative approach to the research, in which four key stakeholders were identified to contribute their perspectives of Pb-L are discussed. The use of children's focus group interviews, an online parent/caregiver survey, and separate interviews with a teacher and a school leader are detailed in the research design section. Ethical considerations are also discussed, as well as the methods for data analysis.

The key findings from each of the four stakeholder groups are presented in chapter four. The children, parents or caregivers, teacher, and school leader's perspectives are reported according to the set of questions they responded too and related to the three research questions that guided the study.

Chapter five discusses the importance of the findings of the study and examines key themes within the four stakeholders' perspectives. The findings are compared with existing literature to address how perspectives of Pb-L in the first year of school is positioned in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Chapter six contains the conclusion of the research. A summary of each stakeholder group's perspective and its relevant implications are discussed. The limitations of the research are also outlined along with recommendations for future research.

Summary

It is proposed that a play-based pedagogy gives children, entering primary school, a continuity of education that provides a foundation for positive early learning experiences. The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of key stakeholders in a current school implementing a Pb-L approach. It is hoped that the insights will contribute to the research literature in New Zealand on Pb-L and help educators that are contemplating its implementation in a primary school.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

Play is an important part of childhood. Defining, describing, and explaining play has been a focus of significant research and theorising. Early theories of play conceptualised children's tendency to engage in playful activities that resembled innate, active, and recreational qualities (Bruner, 1960; Curtis, 1916; Mitchell & Mason, 1948). Children were seen as active participants that made sense of their world through exploration (Baldacchino, 2014). Appleton in 1919, described children's play as a natural tendency toward growth and developing skills necessary in adulthood (Saracho, 2012). The most influential educational frameworks of play emerged from constructivist theories. In 1936, Jean Piaget described the importance of learning through play experiences that support social, emotional, and cognitive development (Piaget, 1951). He believed play reflected distinct cognitive stages in which children practiced things they had already learnt. Play does not occur in a vacuum but is determined by broader cultural systems and relationships that shape its importance in children. In 1934, Lev Vygotsky highlighted the social and cultural contexts that define the importance of play in a society and emphasised symbolic play, and its role in developing higher order thinking, that is grounded in social interaction (Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016). Piaget similarly believed that children engage in pretend play which develops symbolic thinking, but credited this to a child's progression through distinct stages of cognitive development. Vygotsky believed in the importance of

adult guidance in the Zone of Proximal Development where learning could be scaffolded to create new cognitions through play opportunities (Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016). Early theories captured the developmental potential of play as a medium for learning that is meaningful in early childhood education.

A renewed interest in the theoretical framework of play in early childhood education emerged with the World Health Organisation's agreement in 1989 on the rights of the child to have access to education that promotes individual "... personality, talents, mental and physical abilities" (Article 29(a), United Nations (UN), 2017a, p. 9). In addition, the UN underscores the child's right to "rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts," (Article 31(1), UN, 2017a, p. 9). This consensus is the largest ratified agreement made by the UN including 194 countries. Internationally, government policies in health, education, and social services aim to resemble the spirit of the agreement to foster wellbeing and development in children and young people. Research in the past two decades has mirrored the UN agreement with an increasing educational focus on understanding the relationship between play and learning (Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson, & Lander, 2009). Coinciding with the UN agreement New Zealand introduced the Education Act in 1989 documenting the right of all children to receive free education. Additionally, New Zealand ratified the agreement in 1993 to reflect the growing body of research that emphasises holistic care and development (UN, 2017b).

The importance of play in young children has been documented as a key contributor to healthy physical (Archer & Siraj, 2015; Gregorc & Meško, 2016), social-emotional (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2008; Singer, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, 2006) cognitive (Fleer, 2011; Gimtrova & Gimtrov, 2003; Hamilton & McFarlane, 2005; Marcon, 2002), and language development (Stagnitti, & Lewis, 2015; Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016). Mildred Parten's classification on the types of play in 1929, described the social development that occurs in play. A key tenet of her theory of play suggests that children's initial non-social play; including unoccupied, solitary, and onlooker; shifts towards more socially orientated play as children get older; including parallel, associative, and cooperative forms (Bernstorf, 2012). The possible contribution of Parten's classification of play relates to the understanding that children's play is developmentally appropriate. As children grow and engage in play experiences with others, the type and function of play changes. It is plausible that play promotes authentic and meaningful experiences, which become the foundation for developing early learning skills.

The domains of social and emotional development. Early play allows children the opportunity to explore the environment and engage in activities that interest them. Canning (2007) suggests that playfulness helps children to orientate themselves within the world and become aware of their ability to affect change in objects and situations. Safe and supportive play environments guide a child's exposure to positive outcomes that foster increasing autonomy, resilience, and resourcefulness. Children grow and

develop in social contexts that are characterised by relationships with people. The extent to which children form secure attachments with their parents or caregivers is supported by playfulness. Howard (2002) posits that parental modelling of playfulness contributes to environments that are free from the fear of failure in which children can control the goals and outcomes of their play. As children participate in play with others they develop increasing social competence through sharing, cooperating, resolving conflict, competing, and learning to accommodate others (Gagnon, Nagle, & Nickerson, 2007). Play is a powerful facilitator of socio-emotional development as children are intrinsically motivated to engage in activities that help them to identify with others while exploring the environment.

The domain of cognitive development. Literature has focused on understanding the role of play in facilitating cognitive development. Studies have explored how play contributes to children's academic skills in formal education (Bergen, 2009; Burke, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009). For example, Bergen (2009) notes perspective taking as a foundational skill in abstract thinking which is necessary for later academic learning. Marcon's (2002) American study followed 160 children's academic performance at the end of Year 6. Children came from three preschool backgrounds with varying play pedagogy. The reported findings indicated that children from child-initiated play experiences in early childhood had academically higher grades than their counterparts. The author suggested the possibility that children who were exposed to academic learning at the age of four were introduced to formalised education too early for their developmental stage. Long,

Bergeron, Doyle, and Gordon (2006) also highlight the importance of pretend play in children's ability to understand different perspectives, problem-solve, and creative thinking.

The domain of language development. Play in early childhood often occurs in social contexts with family, siblings, and peers. Children's play experiences foster social participation and exposes them to language rich environments. Play provides children with a unique opportunity to explore and express themselves through language. Play allows children to be creative without the involvement of an adult while talking to themselves or peers about their experiences (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013). Wasik and Jacobi-Vessels (2016) explain that although such play is important for language development, a limitation can be that language will centre around what children already know. Scaffolding language development with a knowledgeable adult can extend new vocabulary and concept knowledge (Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016). Children are supported in their self-chosen play activities and guided with new ideas to explore their world. Well-developed language skills have been associated with foundational skills in reading that foster decoding and comprehension skills (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2012; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). The extent to which play benefits child development and wellbeing has emerged in literature about the degree of structure needed in activities to make learning explicit in the classroom.

The Importance of Play

Play that resembles spontaneous and uninterrupted activities is characterised as free or unstructured play (Holland, 2012). Such play is initiated and directed by the child and is fluid in its processes and goals. Free play is associated with minimal adult involvement and high levels of intrinsic motivation which makes play a unique activity for children. An important aspect of motivation in free play is the extent to which a child's activities are free from the fear of failure. The Self Theory describes that children can exercise control over their play experiences (Moyle, 1989). Children's interests drive play activities which they are developmentally ready to engage in, and allows them to investigate the meaning of their experiences, and so enhance learning (Johnson, 2015; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009).

In 1979, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory proposed that human development occurs within interconnected relationships with people and systems (Walls, 2017). At the core, a child's development is impacted by the values and beliefs that parents and family, the school, and the community contribute to experiences of play and learning. Children's lives are characterised by more structure and adult intervention than in previous generations, which suggests less time for unstructured and free play (Elkind, 2007). Research of cross cultural values demonstrate the emerging phenomenon of the hurried child in which parent's risk averse attitudes, the impact of technology, and more structured sport and educational programs to

facilitate learning and future success contribute to less play (Elkind, 2007; Gleave, 2009; Gray, 2011; Hewes, 2006; Nicolopoulou, 2010; Saracho, 2012).

The effects of a schoolification trend in early childhood (Alcock & Haggerty, 2013) has placed tension between the time children engage in free and structured play activities. Broström (2017) highlights a trend towards formalising education in early childhood in preparation for meeting the academic standards in primary school. Cross-cultural studies in Australia, Canada, China, and the United States report key stakeholders including parents', teachers', and principals' belief in the importance of teaching younger children specific academic skills to prepare them for primary education (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Kane, 2016; Lemay, Bigras & Bouchard, 2016; Theobald et al., 2015).

A play-based learning (Pb-L) approach is child-centred and simultaneously led by the student and supported by the teacher. Literature on play pedagogies in kindergarten suggest that teachers facilitate learning through guided play activities (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015; Wu, 2015). Structured play activities are characterised by adult involvement with predetermined and specific learning goals that characterise traditional teaching and learning (Gimtrova & Gimtrov, 2003). Mastrangelo (2009) describes play in an educational setting as, "a complex phenomenon that occurs naturally for most children; they move through the various stages of play development and are able to add complexity, imagination, and creativity to their thought

processes and actions,” (p. 34). This articulation of a play-based pedagogy highlights children’s’ innate tendency to play as well as the importance of a process-orientated approach. Children are biologically primed to play through exploration and participation that is socially meaningful (Vygotsky, 2004; Wardle, 2012). A convergence of neurological and educational research suggests improving learning outcomes in the 21st century will require adapting pedagogy to make learning meaningful, limit unnecessary stress, help students to navigate self-regulation, and remove physical limitations to promote movement (Bruer, 2004; Hattie & Yates, 2013; Wardle, 2012; Willis, 2007). Pb-L embraces pedagogical elements that are child-centred and adult guided in facilitating playful experiences valued by students and therefore it is more likely to promote interest and motivation to learn.

Play-based Learning in a Junior School

Pb-L as described in this literature review is a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning that is both child and play-focussed. Pb-L draws upon two essential components in its approach to support early learning, it is both student-led and teacher-guided. However, at its core it is concerned with a student’s active involvement during the process of play. Martlew, Stephen, and Ellis (2011) describe active involvement in play as a child’s complete engagement in an activity. Play theorists advocate for playful learning that is driven by a child’s natural disposition to engage and enjoy playful experiences (Bergen, 2009; Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2011).

Pb-L in early primary school years is distinct in its pedagogical position and emphasises how children learn, not merely as a training ground for academic learning (Myck-Wayne, 2010). Literature on Pb-L has captured key conceptualisations in its definition that is associated with the needs, interests, and experiences children contribute to the meaning and usefulness of activities in the classroom as the foundation of learning (Howard, 2010; Howe, 2016; Linklater, 2006; Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

Experimental studies have identified the frequency with which children's early object and symbolic play, such as with blocks and shapes, establish emergent numeracy knowledge involved in identifying shapes, quantity, and the arrangement of relationships in math and science (Ginsburg, Pappas, & Seo, 2001; Sarama, & Clements, 2009). Similarly, language and literacy development is promoted and advanced as it naturally occurs during children's play experiences. Symbolic and dramatic play provide opportunities for social interaction with others to practice communication skills in the classroom context, and serves as a medium for language rich environments that have been positively correlated with emergent literacy skill development (Nicolopoulou, 2005; Pelligrini & Glada, 1982). In addition, when the Pb-L environment is enriched through guided play activities, children's talk and language of mathematical concepts increased (Chigeza, & Sorin, 2016). These findings suggest that Pb-L through guided play experiences provide developmentally meaningful learning opportunities that help to foster holistic development and support the generation of knowledge and emergent skills related to academic learning for subsequent years.

Perspectives of Play in Early Childhood Education

Stakeholders' perspectives of play help to define its value in education as well as the pedagogical approach with which it is implemented and sustained in the early years. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) define early childhood as the period from birth to eight years of age that requires a holistic approach in ensuring young children's health and wellbeing. Early childhood education has been known for a tradition of learning through play that allows children to explore, participate, and contribute to their understanding of the world (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Eyer, 2003). Early childhood centres are pedagogically and contextually designed as rich play environments for children, where they are able to follow their interests, interact with a wide range of materials and resources, and interact with peers and adults as partners in play. Literature suggests that children's play is under threat due to an increasing trend in the final year of early education policy to teach specific skills in readiness for formal schooling (Alcock & Haggerty, 2013; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Kane, 2016; Lemay, Bigras & Bouchard, 2016; Theobald et al., 2015).

Educational policy. There has been an increasing trend in education policy to incorporate more formal learning approaches in early years' curricula, specifically in the year leading up to children starting school. Studies in the United States (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008; Kane, 2016), Australia (Theobald et al. 2015) and China (Wang & Lam, 2017) found early childhood education settings are under increasing pressure to meet formalised learning centred goals, through more didactic,

teacher directed approaches. The implication for early childhood educators is reflected in the research suggesting that opportunities for play may therefore be minimised in order to meet curriculum requirements and targeted outcomes. Gibbons (2013) explains that within such an approach, children not only spend less time engaged in play, but that the nature of play activities becomes increasingly prescribed by adult interventions. A possible negative effect of exposing children to a formalised or scripted curriculum too early is that it impedes their natural disposition to experiment, explore, and interact, which in turn fosters self-directed learning, qualities that currently underpin the New Zealand ECE curriculum, *Te Whāriki*.

Teachers. Early childhood educators have an exclusive role to play in providing contexts and situations that nurture positive attitudes for future learning. An important characteristic highlighted by proponents of a play pedagogy is its focus on holistic development within which a strengths-based approach to learning underpins child development and learning (Alfieri, Brooks, Aldrich, and Tenenbaum, 2011; Bergen, 2009; Fisher et al., 2011).

Understanding perspectives of play has become an important factor in early childhood research over the past two decades. Teacher conceptualisations of play significantly influences the implementation and quality of play experiences children can engage in during early education. Studies suggest that teachers recognise play as an important contributor to children's holistic development and wellbeing (Archer & Siraj, 2015; Gimtrova & Gimtrov, 2003; Whitebread et al., 2009). Research by Aras (2016) and Lemay et al. (2016)

have focussed on early childhood educator's perspectives on the significance of play and its implementation, and found that adults perceived play as important for children's learning and development but did not demonstrate intervention to further support a play pedagogy.

Perspectives of Play in Primary School Education

Educational policy. Primary school education has been marked by a shift away from early childhood pedagogy of play toward a formal learning approach that teaches specific academic skills. The introduction of National Standards in the New Zealand Curriculum aims to measure student cognitive achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics (Te Kete Ipurangi, 2010). National Standards form the basis for assessment of specific levels of knowledge and skills, at a particular age or year level, to demonstrate achievement across key content areas. A current trend in literature identifies increasing pressure and a push down effect in primary education, to gearing teaching and learning practices towards meeting prescribed standards of achievement, which exposes children to formalised learning at earlier ages (Lai & Kushner, 2013; Smith & Smith, 2000; Synodi, 2010; Walker, 2007; Wu, 2015). The extent to which primary schools teach the curriculum is determined by school boards and leaders that reflect cultural and societal values of a given community (Francis, 2009). Stakeholder perspectives of Pb-L in the first year of school thereby inform the teaching pedagogy used to support learning within the classroom. Knowledge of the educational curricula and the impact on child development and learning can help stakeholders to explore optimal educational practice in meeting diverse

student needs. Literature suggests that the first year of school is characterised by teacher-directed approaches that focus on the cognitive abilities needed for academic achievement (Lynch, 2015; van Oers, 2014). Such a shift in pedagogy raises questions regarding the transition between early childhood education and formal schooling, and the way in which continuity of learning is fostered between educational settings. Consideration of the extent to which an early childhood pedagogy of play is continued in school is essential. The importance of continuity of learning signals the need to understand stakeholders' perspectives of Pb-L in primary education.

Smith and Smith's (2000) study suggests that school leaders' beliefs and understandings of play in early stages of formal education is instrumental in establishing instructional expectations. The authors suggest that principal's perceptions informed teachers, parents, and children about what play is and its relevance in educational practice (Smith & Smith, 2000). Similarly, Fung and Cheng (2012) explain that key stakeholders' doubts, about the benefits of learning through play and how this can be facilitated in the school curriculum, prevent the effective implementation of a play-based curriculum. An important consideration is the extent to which stakeholders reach consensus in their understandings of Pb-L in the classroom.

The way in which school leaders share their knowledge and understanding of Pb-L is important to informing parents and teachers of its usefulness in the classroom. Literature relates principals' inflated perceptions of themselves as experienced and knowledgeable about play and its role in the curriculum as

a possible factor that hampers effective play-based programs (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Smith & Smith, 2000).

Teachers. Research suggests that teachers understand the importance of play as an important mode of learning and a means of supporting wellbeing in children (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Tsai, 2015). For example, Lynch (2015) reported that teachers understood the significance of the first year in formal education as a platform for future learning expectations that shapes children's attitudes toward school. NicholSEN, Bauer, and Wooley's (2016) study of an elementary school describe American teachers' experiences of integrating play into the classroom. The teachers' understanding of child development, and in particular socio-emotional development, was seen as an important factor in implementing a play pedagogy (NicholSEN et al., 2016). These findings indicate that teachers recognise that young children starting school have particular developmental needs that need to be supported in readiness for formal learning to occur. Literature reports that teachers remain positive in their perspectives of the value of play but yet its implementation in early stages of primary education has been fraught by the complexities of a curriculum-based education system that limits teaching important skills, such as emotional and social skills through play, and as a trade-off revert to traditional methods of learning (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Lemay et al., 2016; Martlew et al., 2011).

Teacher perspectives of Pb-L are influenced by the curriculum requirements, as well as teachers preservice training, and ongoing professional

development (Lynch, 2015; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; van Oers, 2014). Teachers highlight a standing pressure to help students achieve academic success that is predetermined by a national curriculum, and increasing requirements for teacher and school accountability for standardised outcomes. Consequently, a play-based approach is replaced by teacher-directed activities to teach specific academic skills and knowledge (Howard, 2002), in order to meet required student outcomes. A study conducted by Nichol森 et al. (2016) indicated that teacher's implementation of play-based approach was compromised when they perceived tensions between the product-oriented curriculum requirements and process-orientated pedagogy of play. Pyle and Danniels (2017) study reported teachers' belief in the usefulness of play as a tool for learning, in which their role was to direct activities that support academic learning, helped to foster greater self-advocacy in implementing a Pb-L approach. The teacher and child co-construct play that is meaningful and based on the child's interests and preferences.

Parents. Parent perspectives on the importance of play in early years' education have been informed by increasing research and knowledge of child development. Souto-Manning and Lee (2005) note that parents identified benefits of children's play in promoting physical development and social skills. Once children enter school parent perspectives appear to shift from the value of play to a focus on academic achievement. Literature identifies the phenomenon of the hurried child in the cross-cultural decline of free play (Elkind, 2007; Gleave, 2009; Gray, 2011; Hewes, 2006;

Nicolopoulou, 2005; Saracho, 2012). Children's time is increasingly regulated by parents with safe and structured activities such as sport or educational programmes, which may reflect parents' desire for children to perform well in a competitive and global economy which is associated with cognitive ability and academic achievement (Milteer & Ginsburg, 2012). Parents therefore place greater value on academic skills in formal education. An important consideration is the difference between parental knowledge of child development and the characteristics of Pb-L that emphasises creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, self-regulation, and social competence (Elkind, 2007; Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016; Whitebread et al., 2009), as important qualities in 21st century learners.

Children. Literature on children's perspectives of play has gained traction in the past two decades. The meaning children give to their unstructured activities can inform stakeholders conceptual frameworks of play and help to adjust educational practice. An important finding in research suggests that a more balanced view of combining play experiences and learning approaches is emerging. Research by Howard (2002) and Wu (2015) describe the concept of a work-play dichotomy continuum that places work and free play at opposite ends of the spectrum. In Howard's (2002) study children identified environmental and emotional cues that influence their play and learning ideas. Environmental cues related to; the spaces and constraints in the classroom, the types of activities with the absence or presence of toys, and a teacher's presence. Children used emotional cues such as positive affect, for example the level of joy, interest, or enthusiasm a

picture evoked, to determine whether activities were for play or learning. These cues formed a basis for the individual experiences that either reinforced a work-play dichotomy or not. Wu (2015) reported similar findings that underscore social and cultural factors as key mediators of children's understandings of play and learning. In this study, Chinese students had distinct perspectives of play and learning that were culturally mediated by an academic skill focus in schools and by parents. In contrast, German student perspectives were less distinct and play was more commonly viewed as a way to learn. Daniels, Kalkman, and McCombs (2001) reported that child perspectives of play and learning are synonymous with the classroom activities they are exposed too, which suggests that child perspectives are influenced by the degree to which guided play and academic activities are incorporated and accepted within the classroom context.

The Current Study

In summary, this review of the literature on Pb-L identified three key aspects that position it as an important pedagogical approach in junior primary education classrooms in the 21st century and beyond. Firstly, play theorists suggest that children are innately wired to engage in play. Early play experiences form the basis of exploration in which children are active participants working to construct meaning in developmentally and culturally appropriate ways. Such innate magnetism of children toward play is an important consideration in understanding approaches to teaching and learning through experiences that are meaningful in the early stages of formal education.

Secondly, the importance of play in young children has been documented as a key contributor to healthy physical (Archer & Siraj, 2015; Gregorc & Meško, 2016), social-emotional (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2008;) cognitive (Fleer, 2011; Gimtrova & Gimtrov, 2003; Hamilton & McFarlane, 2005; Marcon, 2002), and language development (Stagnitti, & Lewis, 2015; Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016). In New Zealand, the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* positions a play pedagogy as central to child development and learning.

Lastly, in contrast to early childhood, formal education in the junior school emphasises academic achievement through National Standards that measure learning progress against predetermined standards. Ultimately, this pedagogical difference reduces teachers' use of play in the classroom to support student wellbeing and holistic development. Alfieri et al. (2011) suggests that such conventional teaching pedagogies foster less divergent patterns of thinking and do not focus on the strengths children contribute to the processes of learning, as the focus of teaching is concentrated on meeting prescribed curricular outcomes.

It is on the basis of the above summary of literature on play, that the current study proposes to explore the experiences and views of children, parents, a teacher, and school leader in a play-based environment. Pb-L as an alternative approach in the early stages of formal education requires investment from various stakeholders responsible for its implementation and continued alignment of educational and societal expectations of schooling. It

is believed that the study will contribute an understanding of multiple stakeholders' perspectives on the value, challenges, and factors or characteristics of a play-based pedagogy approach.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The current study was designed to develop an understanding of play-based learning (Pb-L) in a primary school classroom through exploring the experiences of stakeholders responsible for its implementation and maintenance, as well as providing an opportunity for parent or caregivers and students engaging in Pb-L, to contribute their points of view. The research adopted a qualitative research design based on interpretative epistemological assumptions. It aimed to answer the question, “What are the perspectives of key stakeholders, (children, parents or caregivers, teacher, and school leader), regarding the implementation of a Pb-L approach in the first year of primary school?” Additionally, this was supplemented by three research questions:

- What do key stakeholders see as the value of a Pb-L approach in the first year of school?
- What do key stakeholders see as the challenges of a Pb-L approach in the first year of school?
- What factors or characteristics do key-stakeholders identify as important in implementing a Pb-L approach in the first year of school?

The aim of the study was to explore multiple stakeholder experiences of Pb-L in a New Zealand context. The following chapter will outline the theoretical foundations guiding the research and describe the design procedures followed in the study.

Theoretical Framework

The current study was conceptualised within a qualitative research design. Underpinning the theoretical framework was a desire to protect a holistic understanding of human knowledge and experiences. Moreover, such knowledge and experience aligns with a qualitative paradigm in acknowledging the subjective nature of the social world and the active participation by key members in contributing to the meaning within a given environment (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) argue for qualitative research to capture accurate reflections of human experience based on methodological paradigms that align with the fitness of purpose in a study. This project was guided by its purpose to collect in-depth information from multiple stakeholders to enrich the data. Access to this knowledge was based on an exploratory method of inquiry to elicit information and explanation from the keeper (Cohen et al., 2011). As such, an exploratory approach was used to capture data that revealed stakeholder perspectives of the pedagogy of play in the first year of formal education.

Interpretivist. An interpretivist paradigm underpinned the epistemological assumptions in this study. This paradigm considers knowledge as actively and intentionally constructed by individuals, taking into account the fluid and changing nature of their interpretations, depending on the context or situations in which they occur (O'Donoghue, 2007). This study further aligned itself with a phenomenology point of view that seeks to

understand and interpret meanings based in real world experiences. Developing an understanding of human perspectives of phenomena requires direct experience in the activities as they occur, are interpreted, and acted upon. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) suggests that the researcher's interpretation in each phase of the research acknowledges the contribution of subjective human experience, perceptions, and the meanings that are constructed in specific events, situations, and contexts. Moreover, in order for the researcher to develop an understanding of people's experiences it is imperative to be immersed in the social world and activities to gain insight into the real-world facilitation of a phenomenon.

Case study. A single case study design was used to facilitate the interpretive nature of the research. The case study approach allowed the researcher to gather in-depth and focussed information while preserving a holistic interpretation of participant responses in a given setting at a specific point in time. Stake (2008) refers to a case study as investigating a bounded system with boundaries that functions much like the body, with various parts comprising the whole body to operate in harmony. In this likeness, it is recognised that a phenomenon is more clearly understood and explained when its relevance is considered across the context and time in which it occurs. Since all aspects of a phenomenon cannot be studied, research questions have been used to provide clear focus in the case study (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Multiple sources of data collection were utilised to explore what stakeholders see as the value, challenges, and characteristics of Pb-L in an Auckland primary school.

Research Design

This qualitative study was an exploratory case study focussed on answering three research questions. Multiple methods of data collection were integrated to collect various stakeholder perspectives including, semi-structured interviews with the school leader and classroom teacher; an online parent or caregiver survey, and focus group interviews with students in the Pb-L environment.

Observation. The study involved the use of observations in the Pb-L classroom in order to provide a contextual understanding of the play environment, and the children's engagement with the activities. An observer-as-participant role was assumed by the researcher, in acknowledgement of ethical considerations in working with young children (Punch & Oancea, 2014). In this way, the researcher's purpose and identity was known by all the participants, to promote the naturally occurring play-based routines and behaviour in the classroom (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). In order to minimise observer effect on the student's typical play behaviour the researcher was present in the classroom for five days before commencing interviews. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) suggest that once initial curiosity is satisfied participants become accustomed to the presence of the researcher and therefore modify their behaviour less.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the classroom teacher and school leader to explore their knowledge and experiences with Pb-L in the classroom. Cohen et al. (2011) describes the

interview process as an exchange of information between the interviewer and interviewee that resembles the sharing of everyday life. The open-ended nature of the questions provided respondents the opportunity to discuss the perceived value, challenges, and characteristics of play in the classroom. Additionally, the interview afforded the researcher an opportunity to clarify interpretations made in observations and further discuss points made by the two interviewees (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The interviews conducted with staff provided a school perspective on the Pb-L approach relating to each of the supplementary research questions.

Focus group. Focus group interviews were used with students in the Pb-L classroom. An important consideration in educational research is the inclusion of children's voices as a valuable resource in understanding the issues of a phenomenon that affects their day-to-day lives (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2005; Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010). Cohen et al. (2011) suggests focus groups are especially useful with children in eliciting interaction within a social group situation to promote discussion of a topic between the members. In accordance with an interpretative paradigm this method of data collection acknowledges the importance of understanding young student's experiences of play by attempting to view the world through their eyes. As with any approach, focus group interviews with children require careful consideration of potential limitations regarding adult-child differences and the interplay of group culture and dynamics which can have an impact on answers given and the outcomes of a study (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

A key consideration in this study was the imbalance of power and status between adults and children. Cohen et al. (2011) suggest that meaningful discussion between peers are more likely in a safe setting. The role of the researcher becomes that of a facilitator, to guide discussion between the students. The implication here is the need for skilful moderating by the researcher to address the interplay of group dynamics, such as dominant speakers, less vocal participants or distraction within the group, to promote interaction in the discussion and to enrich the data. The current study developed strategies to underscore key concerns in interviewing very young children. Firstly, children were given an opportunity to give individual verbal assent to participate. Secondly, the group size was limited to three or four students in which the researcher used age appropriate semi-structured questions for discussion. Coloured A4 pieces of paper were placed in the centre of the table with a selection of pencils which was used to divert children's attention if distracted, or to regulate verbose answers and promote answers from children with less verbal input in the group. Finally, children understood their right to decline to answer any question.

Questionnaire. Parent or caregiver perspectives of Pb-L were collected via an online survey. A semi-structured questionnaire was used with a combination of dichotomous, open-ended questions, and Likert rating scales. Dichotomous questions pertaining to the knowledge of a Pb-L environment was supported with open-ended questions to explore parent or caregiver understanding. Likert rating scale questions were used to identify

the opinions held by the parent or caregiver sample. The survey enriched the study in providing information about parent perspectives of Pb-L and the importance of play as seen by parents. Due to the timeframe of the study, parent interviews were deemed too time consuming, and the use of a survey thereby allowed access to more participants within the study.

Researcher Bias

The researcher contributes an interpretation of the experiences participants shared through multiple methods used in the study. It is with consideration of the subjective nature of interpretation that the researcher acknowledges his or her own world view and its influence on the research (Cohen et al., 2011; Punch & Oancea, 2014). An important point to consider is the background of the researcher in contributing knowledge and experience to the study.

Originally, born in South Africa with European roots and English as a second language, I immigrated to New Zealand at the age of 12 years. The experience of immigration and education, both secondary and tertiary in New Zealand, and wider work experience and travel, as well as motherhood and postgraduate study, have shaped my understanding and learning of psychology and education. Furthermore, working as a Teacher Aide in recent years afforded me the opportunity to be involved in special education with a focus on promoting individualised learning and inclusion in the classroom.

The role as a researcher in the current project made it necessary to be conscious of the ways in which personal background and experiences have influenced a positive orientation towards Pb-L in the early years of formal schooling. Supervisory guidance in conceptualising and designing the study

provided a peer review process to consider and control for potential research bias. Procedures were set up to control the influence of the researcher and to enhance ethical practice in conducting the study.

Setting

The primary school in this study is based in the northern Auckland region. The school provides formal education from new entrant to year eight. The school serves an estimated 540 students and is rated a decile 10 school. The local kindergarten is situated on a shared site with the primary school with well established relationships between the early education and primary school staff.

The school principal was contacted by the researcher for potential participation in the study. After an initial introductory meeting, and consent from the principal and board of trustees, further information on the aims of the study was provided and explained to the school leader and classroom teacher, and informed consent was given. The recruitment of parents or caregivers and children was made by sending information packs home with children in the Pb-L classroom. A record of the information sheets is available in Appendix (A) and (B).

Participants

The participants in this study were key stakeholders in a Pb-L classroom in the first year of school. The research included four stakeholder groups that

comprised of a school leader, the classroom teacher, the parents or caregivers, and students in the Pb-L environment.

Focus group participants. The first group of participants in this study, were children aged between five and six years of age. An open-invitation was given to all the students in the Pb-L classroom, with parental consent, to participate in the study. A total of 21 students, from a class of 24 students, agreed to participate in six focus group interviews. The group interviews were conducted across five school days. Participants were free to discontinue participation or decline to respond to any item, at any point in the interview. The group size varied between three and four participants, and students who had not previously participated in a group interview session, were given preference. Each child participated in one focus group only. All children were proficient in speaking English. Refer to Appendix (C) for the focus group questions.

Survey participants. The potential survey participants were parents or caregivers of the children in the Pb-L classroom. To access this population, the returned consent forms signed by the parent or caregiver were used to collect email addresses (with permission). All the parents or caregivers received an information pack and were invited to participate in the study. A total of 15 parents agreed to participate and submitted a survey. Refer to Appendix (D) for the survey used in the study. Surveys with completed answers to ten questions were included and reported on.

Interview participants. A semi-structured interview was conducted individually with the classroom teacher and school leader. The eligibility of each of the participants invited to participate in the interview, was based on their immediate role in implementing and maintaining the Pb-L approach in the first year of school.

The interviewees responses were based on their views and experiences with Pb-L in Year One. The interview schedule consisted of 15 questions divided into four sub-sections. Both interviewees answered all the questions and an audio recording was made, to maintain the integrity of the participant responses. A transcription of the interview was given to each interviewee for their consideration and feedback to the researcher. An interview schedule is available in Appendix (E), along with a transcriber confidentiality agreement in Appendix (F), and a release of transcription form in Appendix (G).

Ethical Considerations

Information sheets were provided to all potential participants in the study to ensure sufficient understanding of the commitment for informed consent. Participants were informed of the project's procedures and invited with no obligation to take part in the study. The information clearly explained that anonymity would be protected with the use of pseudonyms and that the storage of all data would be securely placed until its disposal. A full ethics application was made to Massey University Ethics Committee for approval of the study and included in the information sheets of all potential participants.

Approval was granted by the committee on July 5, 2017 and can be referred to in Appendix (H) for details.

Children. A key ethical consideration in the proposed study was conducting research with children aged under 16 years (Massey University Ethics Committee, 2015; Vulnerable Children Act, 2014). Children eligible for participation were students currently enrolled in the Pb-L classroom. Parental or caregiver consent was sought to permit children's participation in the study. The students with parental consent, were then invited to participate in focus group interviews. Each child was given an assent statement, read by the researcher prior to the interview, to sign their name and indicate their consent in an age appropriate manner. The protocol for non-participation was established with the classroom teacher to ensure no disadvantage to students unable to participate in the study. Children were given the freedom to choose whether to participate in the focus groups by open invitation. The use of pseudonyms was employed in the research to maintain child protection and privacy.

Teacher. The classroom teacher's collaboration was paramount to data collection in the study. The two-week data collection period required the presence of the researcher in the classroom environment and consideration was made to ensure the teacher's efficacy in delivering the play-based pedagogy. This meant that the researcher was mindful and proactive to prevent her presence from impeding upon the teaching time and space in the classroom when present to conduct the research. The teacher was given a

daily opportunity to view observations. An open dialogue was used at the end of each school day, where the teacher could provide any contextual information about the experiences that had occurred during the day, and raise any questions or concerns. Finally, a transcript of the interview was provided for any additional comments and feedback. The involvement and communication with the teacher promoted a process for consultation to support the position of the teacher in the least obtrusive way (Stake, 2008).

Cultural Competency

This research project acknowledges the unique contribution of Māori as *Tangata Whenua*, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. A process of consultation was conducted with the supervisors, Dr Karyn Aspden and Dr Jayne Jackson, to understand and include *Māori tikanga* (protocols and practices) in accordance with *Māori kawa* (primary values) in the study. The Māori Ethical Framework: *Te Ara Tika* was used in the project's decision-making process (The Pūtaiora Writing Group, 2010). Specific consideration of the potential ethical concerns was made according to the Treaty of Waitangi principles of partnership, participation, and protection. All the procedures within the study followed ethical guidelines to promote Maori rights and interests. Any concerns or issues related to the cultural practice were resolved with advice from Māori advisors within the Massey University Institute of Education.

Data Collection

Observation. A one week observation period was used in the study to provide a contextual landscape of the Pb-L approach offered at the primary school. The observation method served two purposes; it provided a platform for the subsequent data collection by familiarising school staff, parents or caregivers, and the children with the presence of the researcher by establishing rapport; and gave the researcher an opportunity to contribute to a working understanding of the relationships, daily processes, and systems involved in implementing and managing a Pb-L approach. The observation period was from 21 August to 25 August, 2017.

Focus groups. Six focus group interviews were held with three to four children in the Pb-L environment across five school days. An open invitation was given to children with written parental or caregiver consent. The focus group session lasted approximately 15 minutes in a designated space of the classroom. Children were approached individually to provide verbal assent to participate. Questions centred on children's play experiences of the day and explored the activity and materials used and peers that were included in the play activity. Children described preferences of play for the day and ideas about associated learning.

Survey. The web-based program, Survey Monkey was used to produce the parent survey. Potential participants received an email invitation to participate with the study information and an online link to the survey. The information sheet outlined the purpose of the study and clarified that

participation was voluntary. A confidentiality section explained anonymity of each respondent's survey to protect the privacy of the participants. A statement stipulated that ethics approval was granted by the Ethics Committee. Information regarding the right to access research findings and contact information was included. Prior to commencing the survey each participant indicated assent to reading and understanding the information pertaining to participation. The survey was open/live for one week between 28 August to 2 September, 2017.

Interviews. Two separate interviews were conducted with the school leader and classroom teacher involved in the implementation of the Pb-L environment. Each participant was required to give written and verbal assent which was audio recorded before the commencement of the interview. The interview questions were divided into four categories including initial training, teaching experience, and Pb-L experiences. Subsequent questions entailed the school leader and teacher's perspectives on the value, challenges, and characteristics of Pb-L in their current role.

Data Analysis

This study primarily used a content and thematic analysis approach to interpreting the data. Literature suggests a key advantage in employing these strategies in qualitative research as the flexibility it provides in interpreting information across data sets to develop key themes (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Prior to analysis the data was transcribed verbatim. The content of each data set was coded to identify the main

themes emerging from the data, which was further refined using iterative processes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process of analysis aimed to protect the integrity of the data concerned with a holistic approach to understanding the views of stakeholders through reporting on similarities and differences in each of the three groups. Each data set contributed information to answer to research questions as outlined below.

Observations. Observations were used in the study to develop an understanding of the play-based environment and concurrent field notes helped the researcher to summarise four key environments in the classroom. Themes identified in the areas of physical, social and emotional, intellectual, and temporal environments provided indicators of the important characteristics of the context of Pb-L in the classroom.

Focus group. The data provided in the student focus groups were analysed for themes. Discussions based on seven questions were coded for similar and contrasting responses. Themes were grouped to identify any patterns of responses that showed similar as well as differing perspectives. Key themes identified in the analysis were compared with parent or caregiver and school staff perspectives to explore characteristics of Pb-L consistently seen as essential across the groups.

Survey. Parent or caregiver survey responses were coded according to the content of the seven questions. Key themes were identified and grouped by the supplementary research questions. The responses were

compared with student and school staff data respectively, to identify patterns of similarities and differences in adult and student perspectives of Pb-L.

Interview. The school leader and classroom teacher interviews were analysed according to the content contained in the four sections of the interview schedule. The sections were formulated based on the three supplementary research questions related to the value, challenges, and characteristics or factors of implementing and maintaining Pb-L. The two interviews provided content drawn for comparison between the school leader and classroom teacher perspectives as well as interesting or unexpected responses in a pedagogy of play.

The data has been coded and analysed across the three research questions based on the value, challenges, and characteristics of a Pb-L approach. The key themes identified by the students, parent/caregiver, and school staff are summarised using tables. Direct quotes are reported in the study as examples of responses made in each stakeholder group.

Conclusion

This research project was designed within a qualitative case study approach. Access to the knowledge and experiences of participants was based on an exploratory method of inquiry to elicit information and explanation from the four key stakeholder groups. The study was situated within an interpretivist framework and epistemological assumptions. Multiple methods of data collection were integrated to collect multiple stakeholders' perspectives

including, focus group interviews with students in the Pb-L environment; an online parent or caregiver survey, and semi-structured interviews with the teacher and school leader. In keeping with the theoretical framework of the project each of the data sets were analysed according to the content in the group responses and analysed for themes. The following chapter will present the findings of the study.

Chapter Four

Findings

Introduction

The following chapter will describe a current play-based learning (Pb-L) approach in a primary school setting and present the key findings of the stakeholder's perspectives of the approach. The four groups identified as the key stakeholders were the children in the Pb-L environment, parents or caregivers, the classroom teacher, and the school leader. Six student focus groups aimed to capture the unique contribution of children's voices in their experiences of play, while adult perspectives were gathered from parents or caregivers in the online survey; and in interviews with the teacher and school leader responsible for the implementation of a Pb-L approach. Each stakeholder group's responses are outlined in the following sections and provide a platform for discussion of the key stakeholders' perspectives of a play pedagogy in the first year of school.

Setting

During mid 2015 the school's leadership and Year One team staged the implementation of a Pb-L pedagogy, known as the Walker Learner Approach, in the new entrant/year one classrooms. Pb-L in this approach is referred to as Investigation Time, and is characterised by children's hands-on experiences in play that create authentic opportunities for learning (Walker, 2011). Currently, the Pb-L approach is in its third year of implementation. Initial observations of the Pb-L classroom provided the researcher with a contextual understanding of the play environment, and the students'

engagement with the activities (21 August 2017 to 25 August 2017). Table 4.1 illustrates a typical day in a Year 1 classroom, with Investigation Time in the morning block.

Table 4.1

The Play-based Learning Classroom Timetable

9am	Mat Time: which includes Calendar Maths, provocations, and lead into learning for the rest of the day.
9.30am	Investigation Time (play-based learning)
10.30am	Morning Tea
10.50am	Mat Time: Phonics, handwriting, and story writing
11.30am	Alternate weeks between writing and reading groups Play continues
12.30pm	Lunch
1.30pm	Alternate weeks between reading and maths groups Play-based learning continues or investigation time
2.30pm	Mat time: Reflection of learning Class rules Number songs or number knowledge games

The teacher uses the start of the day to introduce provocations, an object to stimulate interest in an area of play and learning, and invites students to engage with a learning objective through play. The play areas or activities include; construction, creative, dramatic, experimenting, literacy with separate writing and reading spaces, and numeracy. During this time

students choose play activities based on their personal interests. The students direct how to engage with each play area, how long they spend on a given activity, and how many activities they participate in.

A core component of the Walker Learner Approach is the retainment of explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy in its pedagogy (Walker, 2011). This is accomplished by explicit whole class and small group instruction. Similarly, learning opportunities are scaffolded during Investigation Time with the selection of a reporter, photographer, and two to three focus children. The teacher assigns a specific task to each child, depending on the student's developmental and learning needs. At the end of Investigation Time, each student shares their assigned task with the whole class, and the teacher guides the student to make explicit connections between play and learning outcomes. In an interview with the teacher she described the importance of these roles.

“... the reason we have those is it helps turn it into more than just free play, it actually helps focus the whole class ... you share your provocation and you explain some learning and how they could reinforce those through learning through play ... the point of having the focus children is to spend some quality one on one time with them to build that relationship with them, to get to know them better, know their likes and dislikes. ... they're not just a focus for investigation time, you actually do focus on them for the rest of the day ... The reporter and the photographer is just another way of helping those students with individualised learning ...” (Teacher, p. 12).

Opportunities for play are also incorporated in subsequent parts of the school day. This was observed between 21 August to 25 August 2017. Children can extend on their construction and creative objects, incorporate an aspect of learning, such as, writing about it, or alternatively engage in a different play activity.

Stakeholders' Perspectives

Children's perspectives. A total of 21 students participated in six focus group interviews. During each focus group, the students were asked seven questions relating to their activity during Investigation Time. The following sections present the responses from the children to each question.

What play activities did you do in class today?

Of the children that engaged in one activity, eight played with Mobilo and six children engaged in creative activities such as, drawing. Children reported designing their own Mobilo objects, such as, a bat mobile, robot, train, rocket, car, and a dinosaur.

Creative activities included students' drawing, painting, or making objects by using resources from the collage table, such as sticks, glue gun, pipe cleaners, string, newspaper, bubble wrap, etc. Four children engaged in two activities during play which included Mobilo and painting; Mobilo and a math game; a math game and story writing; and experimenting and drawing. Of the 21 students, three children participated in three activities during their play

time. Their activities comprised of writing, playdough, and a math game; mobilo, reading, and outside play; and drawing, experimenting, and Mobilo.

Three students each engaged in literacy (Child 11), numeracy (Child 10), and science (Child 18) activities. Child 10 and 11 were focus children and Child 18 was the photographer (30 August 2017 and 31 August 2017).

Children in these roles negotiate an assigned task with the teacher to help direct their individual learning needs. All three students reported also engaging in additional activities that included story writing (Child 10); playdough and a math game (Child 11); and drawing a picture (Child 18).

What things did you use in your activity?

All 21 children indicated using materials and resources available within the specific area in which they played. Of the 11 students playing with mobilo blocks, three reported that they incorporated Lego Ninjago figurines into their mobilo designs and play. A further four students described breaking and rebuilding or adding to their constructed objects.

The seven students engaging in creative play all did drawings or pictures using craft materials such as colouring pencils, marker pens, paper, scissors, cellotape, and string. Common themes from the children's responses of their drawings were identified in the focus groups. Focus Group One respondents all drew a diagram of their families (Child 1, 2, & 3). In Focus Group Two, two girls drew necklaces (Child 6 & 7). Focus Group Five had two children's drawings with unique subjects of riding a horse and a daffodil.

Who did you play with?

Nine children stated that they played with a peer during Investigation Time. All nine children played with a peer that were also engaged in a similar activity, such as mobilo, drawing, and a math game. A common response from students is illustrated in the following example, “He made a transformer car and I made a robot,” (Child 9 talking about Child 20). One child also responded, “... I just choose somebody” (Child 15).

What were you learning/practicing in your play today?

Five students indicated that their activity was linked to the physical skill required in creating or playing with an object. Nine students related their activity to concepts of learning such as, problem-solving, making patterns, and experimenting with floating and sinking. Table 4.2 contains additional examples.

What do you like best about this time of day?

Eighteen students responded to the question, “What do you like best about this time of day?”. Of these fourteen respondents three indicated liking mobilo, three preferred creative activities, one favoured puppets, one enjoyed math, one literacy, and two children liked playing with friends. Three students indicated liking two activities during Investigation time, in all three instances children preferred Lego/Mobilo and painting or collage activities

that involve making objects (Child 4, Child 13, Child 20). An example of the latter is illustrated in this example, “I like playing with mobilo and the collage making area”.

Table 4.2

Children’s Ideas about Learning during Play

Child	Physical skill	Child	Concepts of learning
1	“Umm, drawing”	9	“... pieces on top of each other and it makes it longer and longer”
2	“Yeah. Drawing practising drawing”	10	“I never solved a problem before”
6	“I had colours in my head”	11	“And we know all about fish”
7	“Drawings”	12	“Fighting...it is Child 5, Child 16, and me versus Child 21 and Child 4”
17	“Cutting out”	13	“This is the first time being my friend”
		14	“I was learning how to read to make it”
		16	“They (magnets) stick together if they’re friends”
		18	“... I was thinking about what’s sinking and what’s floating”
		19	“There are patterns at the bottom”

What do you think you might like to play with tomorrow?

A total of 19 students answered the question, “What do you think you might like to play with tomorrow?”. Responses indicate that six students intended to play with mobilo. A further seven students suggested that they would like to engage in creative activities, primarily involving drawing, decorating, and colouring. Two students wanted to play with puppets, while one student wanted to play with play-dough and yet another with a peer. A final couple of responses indicated a desire to play with either play-dough or mobilo, and with a peer.

If you could add one more play activity what would it be?

Seventeen children responded to the question, “If you could add one more play activity what would it be?”. Table 4.3 provides an outline of the children’s responses. The children’s suggestions were varied but indicated extending on previous or current play activities offered in the Pb-L environment.

Collective voices. The following section provides an overview of the unique data children discussed in two of the focus groups. It has been included to provide context to the children’s play. The researcher identified their collective voices and aimed to follow the direction of the conversation to capture their opinions and interests as they were communicated. The section is organised according to the additional comments, indirectly relating to the seven questions asked.

Table 4.3

Play Activities Children would add to the classroom

Activity to add	Number of students
Lego	4
Toys from home	4
Kitchen	3
Bed to rest in	1
Collage materials	1
Math games	1
Genie lamp for wishes	1
Swimming topic	1
Total	16

Focus group one. In addition to the earlier overview of the children's answers, the three students in focus group one highlighted social aspects in their activities and play. All three students engaged in drawing their families and described, "Because I love my family," as the common reason why (Child 2, pg. 3). The students reported being friends with one another and explained playing together in the puppets area, and in the kitchen, which had been replaced by the puppets. On further prompting, the group explained their roles in playing 'families' in the kitchen, as Child 2 explains, "I was the mum. You were the big girl, you were the little sister." (p. 4). The group debated which sister finished their food and the mum's subsequent anger and consequence for the one who had not followed the rules. Furthermore,

the sisters also engaged in drawing during play in the kitchen, linking their original activity, drawing, with subsequent dramatic play.

Focus group three. The students in this focus group were distinct in their comments about 'Bucket Fillers,' a school-wide approach to fostering prosocial behaviour. This was directed by one student's mention of enjoying the company of a peer in his play activity. Two students explained their understanding of the positive affect in filling another person's bucket. Some of their comments included, "So you need to be nice to fill it up" (Child 11, p. 7); "... Child 20 overflows my bucket and I overflow his bucket" (Child 9, p. 7); "Child 10 is a very nice beautiful girl" (Child 8, p. 6).

Possible barrier to participation. Two children indicated that there may be social and/or cultural aspects of the play environment that effect their participation in certain types of activities. Child 11 explained, "I'm too scared like if the boys are like "get out it's the boys area" ... Because then I'd be the only girl." (Focus Group 3). A boy suggested that an activity was too noisy and this deterred his participation, "Because, it's so noisy." (Focus Group 6, Child 19).

Parent or Caregiver perspectives. An online survey platform, Survey Monkey, was used to collect the parent or caregiver perspectives of the Pb-L approach offered at the school. For the sake of brevity, the term 'parents' is used here to encompass parents and/or caregivers of the child. Of the completed responses, 14 parents' comments were included, while one

parent survey was excluded due to not completing any answers. The following section presents the participants' responses to seven questions related to their experiences of Pb-L.

Were you aware that the school offered a play-based learning approach?

All 14 parents reported being aware that the school offered a Pb-L approach in new entrants.

If yes, did this influence your choice to enrol them in the school?

A total of six parents indicated that their awareness of the Pb-L approach influenced their decision to enrol their child in the school.

What is your understanding of the term play-based learning?

All the parents indicated that the term Pb-L referred to learning that is supported through play in the classroom. Eight parents reported, "learning through play" as their interpretation of a Pb-L approach. Two parents suggested that play prepares children for learning (Parent 4, 15). Another three parents described learning as, 'from', 'during', and 'by' playing. Additional comments made by five parents also identified Pb-L as combining children's interests (Parent 2, 5, 8) with teacher-led or structured learning (Parent 13, 14) as a way of developing positive experiences of learning.

My child enjoys play-based activities in the classroom.

A Likert Scale was used in the question for parents to indicate their level of agreement and disagreement with statements about Pb-L. The table below illustrates the questions that were included.

Table 4.4

Parent Responses to Statements of Play-based Learning (n=14)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<i>My child enjoys play-based activities in the classroom</i>				3	11
<i>Play-based activities are valuable learning times for my child.</i>				6	8
<i>Children in the first year of primary school (between the age of 5 and 6 years) require play activities to support development.</i>			1	3	10
<i>Children in the first year of primary school (between the age of 5 and 6 years) require direct teaching to learn.</i>		4	2	6	2
<i>Play-based learning better supports child development than direct teaching approaches.</i>	1	4	9		

Overall, parents recognised their child's enjoyment of play in the classroom and felt that valuable learning took place during Pb-L. Most parents believed that incorporating play in the first year of school supported child

development. Parents considered direct teaching as important for learning and overall, responded more neutrally to Pb-L as better at supporting child development than direct teaching approaches.

What do you see as the benefits of play in the classroom?

A common finding in all the parent responses of the benefits of play in the classroom was that it supported their child's development and learning. Nine parents reported that a play pedagogy provided a fun and relaxed classroom environment that enhanced their children's enjoyment of school and early learning experiences. The following example illustrates the point, "The children are learning without stress and having fun. Therefore, our child loves going to school" (Parent 14). One parent stated that in addition to supporting emotional development and early learning, play in the classroom gave their child an opportunity to develop "... fine and gross motor skills" (Parent 10). Three parents described the balance of formal instruction and student-directed learning as beneficial (Parent 2, 5, 8).

An additional five parents highlighted social skills and emotional development as a benefit of play in the classroom. Common phrases reported by the parents include, "Building confidence in children. Developing leadership skills..." (Parent 3); "Involving others in their play" (Parent 4); "... Developing a lifelong love of learning..." (Parent 8); "...learning social cues and how to problem-solve..." (Parent 9); "...develop resilience..." (Parent 13). Two respondents mentioned, "The children settle in better and ... look

forward to going to school” and that play in the classroom facilitated, “A better transition between kindy and school” (Parent 7 & 8).

Do you have any concerns about a play-based approach within the new entrants’ class?

All parents agreed that there were no concerns about a Pb-L in the classroom. Two parents’ comments are illustrated below.

“... Initially with my older child I felt it might be detrimental to her learning as she was quite smart, but what I found was that she was challenged in ways she would not have had the opportunity for in a more structured, teacher directed classroom” (Parent 13).

Similarly, Parent 5 reported,

“... my son seems to be learning to read and write and do simple maths at a rate I would expect, and the idea of the relaxed environment for a five-year-old boy is great.”

Please make any further comments about play-based learning in the classroom.

Eight parents made additional comments about the Pb-L approach.

Three parents suggested that play in the classroom helped their child’s transition from early childhood education to primary school. Parent 7 commented, “... helps the kids to settle into school as it is similar to what they are used to at kindy”. One parent reported, that a Pb-L environment provides children with novel and interesting experiences, “My son... has become more creative and enjoys making and creating”. Similarly, another

parent added that experiences make learning meaningful, "...students reflect on their own learning and experiences". One parent commented on the importance of having "... a balance between structured learning and play-based learning" (Parent 5). Two parents stated that Pb-L supported social and emotional skills (Parent 2 & 13).

The teacher and leader perspectives. Two separate interviews were conducted with a school leader and a teacher responsible for the implementation of a Pb-L approach in the school. The following is an account of their responses and is presented in three parts. Part one will outline each staff member's perspective on the school's implementation of the current Pb-L approach. The teachers' description of and experiences with Pb-L and the associated challenges will be reported in part two. Finally, characteristics deemed important by the teachers in implementing a play pedagogy will be identified.

Can you describe Pb-L as it currently exists in the school?

In answering the question, "What aspects of Pb-L have you found the most rewarding?" the teacher emphasised student wellbeing and learning as supported in a Pb-L approach. The teacher explained,

"... we have been able to measure their wellbeing and engagement with the Levin scale so we could prove to the board that yes we are meeting National Standards, but our children are actually happy as well..." (p. 4).

The teacher further highlighted the development of social skills and oral language, as well as supporting children's transition to school as important.

She reported the most rewarding aspect of a Pb-L approach as,

“Seeing them make the connections...to what we call formal learning... to what they've done in play...making those connections to real life applications...” (Teacher, p. 7).

She reported the benefit of observing children learning from one another as satisfying,

“... they've chosen to do it because they saw one of their peers do it and they thought oh I can do that, that's not going to be too difficult for me” (p. 8).

In the interview with the school leader she highlighted children's wellbeing and readiness to learn which she perceived to be supported through play in the classroom. The leader reported,

“...we want children to be happy, we want them to want to come to school, we want them to be excited about learning...” (Leader, p. 4).

She also commented on easing the transition to school for families, “... Parents are happy, they know their child is settled and learning and wanting to come to school...” (p. 4). In addition to facilitating the development of social skills and oral language, the leader identified giving children the opportunity to extend their gross and fine motor skills as satisfying. She reported,

“... other important things like their core skills, just their ability to cut, to glue, to paint, to write, finger pencil grip... gross motor skills... too” (Leader, p. 4).

Comparing a play environment. The interviewees were asked, “How does a formal new entrants’ classroom compare with Pb-L environment?”. The school leader reported on the flexible nature of a Pb-L pedagogy that provides students with the opportunity to contribute to their learning, as different from a formal approach to teaching and learning. She explained, “... the structure and the choice for the children and letting them follow their passion, rather than you must do this and then you must do that ...” (Leader, p. 8). Furthermore, she suggested that a play environment promoted children’s engagement in learning and wellbeing,

“Our big thing is wellbeing... If we can get it right with the five-year-olds, we set them up for success right through school...” (Leader, p. 3)

“...children’s level of engagement lasts longer... because they’re not so brain drained and focusing on something that they’re just not ready to focus on doing” (Leader, p. 8).

She highlighted children’s engagement in learning through play as negating more challenging behaviours,

“... We had a few kids this year and last year ... that I think if they’re in a more formal setting they wouldn’t have coped, we would have had more bad behaviour, more meltdowns ...” (p.7) and “... looking on our Year 2 cohorts ... had we not done play-based learning, and give the

nature of a group of boys that we had, we would have had so many more behaviour problems ...” (p. 9).

The school leader identified the explicit instruction of literacy and numeracy as an aspect of Pb-L as comparable with a typical New Zealand classroom. She indicated,

“...the morning block is investigation time and then the next two blocks are the more formal learning time ... an element of play-based learning during that time ...” (p. 9).

The teacher drew a distinction between the physical arrangement of the Pb-L environment and a different new entrant’s classroom. She described,

“There are no individual desks...” (p. 10) and “...the set-up is completely different... There’s more photos as evidence of things that goes on in our classroom...” (Teacher, p. 11).

She described activities and displays as the focus of the room and individualised learning,

“...Over here there’s these plates with the life cycles of a butterfly, we were learning it but you can see there’s eight plates and then there’s work sheets, nine out of 24 kids... we were learning about the life cycle, some of them wanted to do the caterpillar, some of them wanted to do a different kind of insect, some of them wanted to do a frog, they were still learning the concept of that, and some of them actually did it with actual equipment, here’s a chrysalis, here’s an egg, here’s a caterpillar, here’s a butterfly, to me that’s still showing me that they’ve learnt the life cycle...” (p. 11).

In further discussion, the teacher outlined incorporating both early childhood and primary level national curricula to support Pb-L. She stated,

“... we’re using both the New Zealand Curriculum and Te Whāriki Curriculum because there are components of both that are absolutely suited to this...” (Teacher, p. 14).

She recognised the use of explicit instruction as akin to a typical New Zealand classroom, “...guided reading, guided writing, guided maths sessions...” (p. 7). She further described incorporating formal instruction provided structure for learning “... whereas you can teach them information that is relevant to them and they’re still learning all the areas of the curriculum...” (Teacher, p. 8). The teacher explained the primary reason for incorporating formal learning as supporting child development. “.... Our focus is on the developmental stage and getting the most out of them...” (Teacher, p. 12). She recognised the school’s responsibility to report to the Board of Trustees (BoT) and to National Standards. The following example illustrates the point, “...we have National Standards in the back of our minds, but that’s not our focus...” (p. 12).

Can you describe some of the challenges you’ve faced in implementing the Pb-L approach?

The teacher identified the process of enhancing the play environment as an aspect of Pb-L that has required improvement. She explained,

“... we were trying to change our areas at least once a month ... and we just found that was just a major ask, because to set up your classroom it takes a couple of days each holiday, because you put a

lot of thought into each area about what you're going to be teaching them that term ... change it every two weeks ... having to come up with a whole lot more resources ... We thought, 'oh they needed something every month, we needed to change it up because otherwise they'd get bored ... present a new provocation every day,' and we also found that just too time consuming, you were trying to think of an amazing provocation for five days of the week..." (Teacher, p. 7).

Another aspect highlighted by the teacher was the extent to which teachers deliver a consistent approach across the year level. She explained, "...I'm supporting everything, everyone, so the challenge is continuing to support the team ... all at a consistent level..." (p. 14).

A second challenge reported by the teacher implicated the development of assessment procedures specific to a play pedagogy. She stated,

"... we were trying to prove it to the board and prove it to the Principal we were taking copious amounts of notes about each individual ... it was actually becoming quite arduous for everyone and the enjoyment was gone ..." (Teacher, p. 6).

The school leader reported guiding children with specific interests to broaden their learning opportunities as challenging. She explained, "...the hardest thing is just really finding something to engage those kids so they can have their Mobilo ... but also, they're doing other things as well..." (Leader, p. 11).

What are some key factors you would consider important in implementing a Pb-L environment?

The teacher identified her role as an educator was to guide students' learning according to the individual interests and developmental needs of the child (Teacher). The point is illustrated in the following statement,

“... my role as the teacher is to go and help them learn through a concept that they're confident with versus making them do something that they're not going to get” (p. 9).

She highlighted the importance of guided play as a balance between structured and free play, “... making those connections to more formal situations just wouldn't happen without structure” (p. 15) and stated, “...To be true play-based learning it has to be student driven to do with their interests...” (Teacher, p. 10)

The school leader explained the importance of adapting a Pb-L approach to the specific vision and culture of the school as an important factor in its implementation (Leader). The school's vision of Building Learning Power, a programme developed by Guy Claxton, emphasises empowering students to develop their ability to be resourceful, resilient, reflective, and reciprocal (Claxton, 2008). The leader explained, “...those four things are play-based learning” (Leader, p. 5). The school leader perceived the school's Pb-L environment as characterised by integrating student interests, “... a lot more freedom to follow their passion...” (Leader, p. 8) and her role as an educator to, “...scaffold their learning as you play alongside them” (Leader, p. 6).

School support. A key factor identified by the teacher for the successful implementation of a Pb-L approach was the support from the school's leadership team. The teacher stated,

“We are very fortunate to have the backing of the board and the principal... they could see the benefit... we held a parent evening and explained what we were doing and why we were doing it and what it was going to look like in the classroom, and the parents were absolutely pleased” (p. 3-4).

The leader reported,

“... he (principal) was fully on board with it and could really see the benefits, so I think schools that don't have their principal's backing are doomed from the start because you need that support...” (p. 5).

Furthermore, the BOT required a formal proposal and a one year trial period with specific targets, including meeting National Standards prior to its approval and financial backing. The financial support from the school, including the BoT and Parent Teacher Association (PTA), contributed to the implementation of the Pb-L approach, as explained by the teacher, “... granted \$20,000 to buy equipment...each class gets \$1,000 per year to spend on consumables...” (p. 3).

Professional development. The teacher described her role in setting up and facilitating a network for schools in the Auckland region who offer a Pb-L approach. She recognises the importance such connection with others

provide in supporting the implementation of play in the classroom. She explained,

“... I sent out an email and said would anyone be interested in meeting up once a term to discuss how we’re going on our play based learning journey, and everyone came, we held it here and it’s grown from there. And more and more schools have been coming on board, as they come and observe us...” (Teacher, p. 4).

The school leader reported that there are few recognised Pb-L professional development (PD) programmes available in New Zealand. However, she suggested that visiting and observing other Pb-L facilitators has served as a form of PD (School leader, August 30, 2017).

Summary

In this study, all the stakeholders were positive about Pb-L. In summary, the children’s activities were characterised by hands-on investigation in construction or creative areas in the classroom, where most of the children interacted with a peer. Overall, the children believed that they were learning or practicing skills while they engaged with one another or in their chosen play-based activity. Parents reported that Pb-L promoted social skills and emotional development, which they deemed as important to their child’s wellbeing. Learning was perceived by the parents as an important characteristic of Pb-L, but was more broadly defined in terms of overall child development, and therefore considered as an appropriate medium for learning. As well as supporting socio-emotional skills, the teacher added that a play pedagogy also enhanced oral language skills. She emphasised

cognitive development as a key characteristic of Pb-L, and suggested that learning is founded on a child's developmental readiness to make connections between play and formal concepts. Finally, the leader agreed with parents and the teacher's holistic perspective of Pb-L that placed child development and wellbeing at the core of its pedagogy. She spoke of the way in which a play pedagogy aligns with the school's educational philosophy, and highlighted the support provided by the school's governing bodies as crucial to the successful implementation of a Pb-L approach. The challenges associated with implementing a Pb-L approach was regarded by the teacher and leader with a positive orientation towards problem-solving that aimed to improve and sustain play in the classroom.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Introduction

The following chapter will discuss the significance of each stakeholder group's perspectives of a play-based learning (Pb-L) approach in the first year of school. The study was guided by three research questions:

- What do key stakeholders see as the value of a Pb-L approach in the first year of school?
- What do key stakeholders see as the challenges of a Pb-L approach in the first year of school?
- What factors or characteristics do key-stakeholders identify as important in implementing a Pb-L approach in the first year of school?

The discussion will illuminate child and adult perspectives as they complement and contrast with one another. Furthermore, key themes identified by the children, parents/caregivers, the teacher, and the school leader will be compared and contrasted with research literature about Pb-L to explore its current position within Aotearoa New Zealand.

Stakeholders' Perspectives

The value of Pb-L. The first research question, 'What do key stakeholders see as the value of a Pb-L approach in the first year of school?' contributed to the understanding of stakeholder beliefs about the role of play in the classroom. All stakeholders agreed that a Pb-L approach was effective in supporting children's learning and development in the first year of school. Adult perspectives emphasised the holistic nature of Pb-L as it contributed to

children's wellbeing, while the children's perceptions highlighted that the play environment provided them with the opportunity to actively engage in activities they enjoyed. The following discussion outlines these perspectives in light of current research.

Children. The contribution of children's perspectives in educational research has steadily increased in the last ten years. The use of focus groups in research has highlighted this method of gathering data from very young children, which gives a collective voice to their experiences and understandings (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Incorporating children's perspectives in research may illuminate unique aspects of educational programmes that have been dominated by adult interpretation of child development and learning (Elkind, 2007; Rogers, 2013). Such considerations are important in a New Zealand context in which children typically start formal education at the age of five, and transition from an early childhood education context that encourages a learning through play approach, to a school environment which may emphasise a more structured approach to learning. Children come to school with a variety of personality traits, dispositions, and early childhood experiences that influence their preferences in play and learning, but it is well established that play characterises young children's lives (Barnett, 2013; Elkind, 2003; Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016).

The findings suggest that children's perspectives of the value of a Pb-L approach was characterised by having autonomy and interest in an activity. Children valued the opportunity to follow their interests as indicated by their self-

initiated engagement in a specific activity (Howe, 2016). Overall, children reported playing with construction (Mobilo/Lego) and creative (drawing, painting, collage) activities during Investigation Time, the Pb-L opportunity. Additionally, children reported that these activities were what they liked best about Pb-L. These activities involved active involvement and hands-on exploration. A potential reason for this common perception among students could be the underlying intrinsic reward that children gain from engaging in an appealing activity and the ability to exercise control over materials and resources (Colliver & Flear, 2016; Moylett, 2013). A Pb-L approach provides an environment that accommodates and encourages active exploration of materials and resources by stimulating interest and motivation to engage in play (Walker, 2011). The findings from this study give further support to research by Howard (2002) and Howe (2016) who found that children's perspectives of play were influenced by the context in which activities occur. Howard's (2002) study demonstrated that children's ideas about play and learning were based on environmental and emotional cues that influenced their interpretation of the value of play. Literature supports the development of early learning skills through hands-on experiences and exploration for children aged three to seven years, as a key contributing factor in teaching practices that sustain lifelong learning abilities (Souto-Manning, 2016; Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer, & Berk, 2011; Martlew, Stephensen, & Ellis, 2011). It is proposed that the current study's finding supports literature that identify student-led, interest-based exploration in play as a developmentally appropriate pedagogy.

Parent, teacher and leader perspectives. Each of these key stakeholders reported that the value of a play pedagogy was defined by the extent to which it benefited a child's holistic development. Parents identified the benefits of a Pb-L approach in terms of supporting children's social skills and emotional development, while the teacher added the development of oral language and cognitive skills. Similarly, the school leader identified the value of Pb-L in supporting child wellbeing and the advancement of physical development. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that Pb-L performs an important role in supporting children's socio-emotional, language, cognitive, and physical development and contributes to their overall wellbeing. This finding supports literature on the importance of play in children's lives as a contributor to healthy physical (Archer & Siraj, 2015; Gregorc & Meško, 2016), social-emotional (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2008;) cognitive (Fleer, 2011; Gimtrova & Gimtrov, 2003; Hamilton & McFarlane, 2005; Marcon, 2002), and language development (Stagnitti, & Lewis, 2015; Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016).

Furthermore, the adults believed that supporting a child's wellbeing helped to facilitate learning, which was defined more broadly in relation to the above developmental areas, as opposed to being based solely on more academic measures such as numeracy and literacy. These findings support research by Souto-Manning and Lee (2005) and Warash, Root, and Devito (2017) who found that parents generally believed a play pedagogy was valuable to promote their child's wellbeing and development. In contrast, the parents in this study did not place more emphasis on academic learning once their children entered school. Instead, parents reported that being 'happy' or 'enjoying school', would

lead to learning. The finding gives partial support to research by Fesseha and Pyle (2016) and Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Gryfe (2008) who found parents and teachers perceived a play pedagogy in the first year of school as instrumental in facilitating developmental teaching practices to prepare students for school. The current study contrasted with Fisher et al.'s (2008) finding in that parents, the teacher, and the school leader perspectives complimented, rather than differed, from one another.

The Challenges of Pb-L

The key stakeholder's perspectives were explored through the second research question, 'What do key stakeholders see as the challenges of a Pb-L approach?'. Overall, the children and adults had a positive orientation toward a learning-through-play pedagogy. Children and parents had fewer concerns regarding Pb-L, while the teacher and school leader considered wider developmentally appropriate practices that would improve the current Pb-L approach.

Children.

Potential barriers to participation in play. The focus group discussions were based on the play activities students engaged in during Investigation Time. Two students indicated potential contextual and social influences that prevented their participation in the dramatic play and construction play areas. Child 11 explained, "I'm too scared like if the boys are like "get out it's the boys area" ... then I'd be the only girl." (Focus Group 3). A boy suggested that an activity was too noisy and this deterred his participation, "Because, it's so noisy"

(Focus Group 6, Child 19). This finding may suggest that for a few children, participating in a Pb-L environment may be reduced if it is perceived that there is less access to certain types of activities they may be interested in. This finding supports research by Wu (2015) who found that environmental cues in classroom activities are important in shaping children's perspectives about play and learning. A possible implication is that educators need to be aware of the social and cultural influences within the classroom that impact on children's learning through play, such as, social skills, self-regulation, and confidence, and to support access to activities. It is important to note that this finding was not echoed in other student responses, and therefore require caution in its interpretation.

Parents.

The question of academic learning. Overall parents reported having no concerns with a Pb-L approach. Only two parents explicitly implicated less academic learning as a potential consideration in a play pedagogy. Parent responses indicated that learning through play was an important characteristic of a Pb-L approach. This may suggest that less directed play and learning, involving more free play as opposed to guided play, would be of concern to parents. This finding contrasts with research by Kane (2016) and Warash et al. (2017) who found that parent perspectives of the value of play was secondary to the importance of teaching practices that focus on academic achievement, once children start school. The finding in this study suggested that parents believed the benefits of a Pb-L approach to be associated with holistic development and were more inclined to see learning as mediated by overall

wellbeing (Fisher et al., 2008; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Huang, 2013; Rose & Elicker, 2008; Warash, et al., 2017). Therefore, parents were not concerned that less learning would occur because learning encompasses their perceived values of social, emotional, and cognitive development.

Teacher and school leader.

Pedagogical design. The teacher viewed the challenges of a Pb-L approach in light of the changes required to manage and improve the efficiency and sustainability of the approach. Various elements of the pedagogical design were perceived as needing adjustment. As implementers of the Pb-L approach the teacher perceived the strategic inclusion of both the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum (*Te Whāriki*) and the primary education curriculum (*The New Zealand Curriculum*), with the Walker Learner Approach (WLA) as useful in designing consistent teaching and learning practices. She believed that adapting assessments to the school's vision and culture, as well as measuring student wellbeing and engagement, were important indicators of a Pb-L approach's impact. The teacher and school leader considered that environmental adaptations and resourcing of the play and learning environment were challenging aspects of the approach. Collectively, this finding may suggest that the interviewees understood the challenges of Pb-L not as bound by the national education system but empowered by it. This is suggested in the way that the school staff incorporated early childhood curriculum with the Pb-L approach. The challenges were not perceived as obstacles but rather as a means to improve aspects of the approach. This finding supports research by Pyle and Danniels (2017) and Lynch (2015) who found that teachers'

perspectives of challenges limited the sustainability of a learning through play pedagogy. Literature of teacher perspectives further indicate that tension between teachers and leaders may be a contributing factor that affect the self-efficacy and agency of staff implementing a play pedagogy (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Lemay, Bigras, & Bouchard, 2016; Martlew et al., 2011). It is proposed that the lack of tension between stakeholders was beneficial to the implementation of Pb-L in the case-study setting. Moving forward, the school staff agreed that the present challenge was to navigate and replicate a version of Pb-L in subsequent year levels of the school.

The Factors and Characteristics of Pb-L Implementation

The question, 'What factors or characteristics do key stakeholders identify as important in implementing a Pb-L approach in the first year of school?' was used to gain an understanding of the various perspectives that drive its delivery in the school.

Children's perspectives.

Self-initiated and autonomous play. Overall, the children were able to identify an aspect of learning, or a skill they were practicing, in their self-chosen activity. Some children related this directly to the requirements of the task at hand, such as, drawing or cutting; while others recognised topics in their classroom inquiry or social aspects as learning, for example, fish or friendship. The students' perceived that learning was occurring regardless of the activity. This finding may suggest that students conceptualisations of learning and play were not mutually exclusive, however it was unclear whether preferred activities

(Mobilo and creative) were associated with play, while literacy and math resources were paired with work, and therefore influenced the basis of the favoured activity. This finding supports research by Howard (2002) and Wu (2015) who found that classroom context might affect children's categorisation of play and learning from the understandings children have of the contextual cues. Children's perspectives take into account environmental cues such as, emotional cues, adult presence, and socio-cultural factors that impact on the provision of activities in the classroom. In contrast to Linklater, (2006) who found that children relied on the teacher for play and learning in a structured play environment, the finding in this study indicated that the students showed agency in decision-making, were enthusiastic about activities, and believed that they were learning. Additionally, the teacher's use of specific roles, including focus children, a reporter, and photographer, fostered scaffolding opportunities to make connections between play and learning according to individual developmental needs.

Social interactions in play. Students valued the opportunity to engage with peers during play. This suggested the importance of social interaction during Pb-L. Children reported 'having fun' and involving others in their activity as important aspects of play. A possible reason for student's identifying play with peers as important may be due to children's developmental readiness to participate in increasingly social forms of play (Howe, 2016; Xu, 2010). Vygotsky described the importance of child development through social interactions with more skilled peers or an adult, where the individual can move from what they already know to a new level of mastery within a zone of proximal

development (Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016). Mildred Parten's (1932) influential study documented children's social play as distinct at certain ages. Parten proposed that child's earliest play involves solitary, or onlooker behaviour, from which children progressed to parallel, play in which a child plays alongside other children but confined to their own activity. Lastly, children become engaged in associative and cooperative play that is distinguished by children engaging with one another while playing with similar objects, and in the latter by intentionally working together toward a common goal using the same materials. Social interaction with peers offers enjoyable experiences and helps to develop social skills. In contrast, Xu (2010) highlighted the need to consider the contribution of culture, environment, and social factors in understanding children's social play behaviour. In particular, such consideration underpins a child's developmental readiness to engage in associative and cooperative forms of play, that may not proceed in a hierarchical pattern for all children. In other words, children's social play is influenced not only by individual traits and experiences, but is also shaped by the emphasis significant adults in a given culture, the wider society, and educational systems place on the importance of social play. Howard, Jenvey, and Hill (2006) found that when children were shown pictures with either a peer or a teacher engaged in an activity, they were more likely to associate pictures of a peer as play. Children therefore may have specific ideas about play as characterised by interaction with their peers as opposed to interaction with a teacher. As indicated in this study, children indicated that social interaction in a Pb-L environment was important, and this may be a factor that influence their perspectives of play in the classroom. Activities such as construction and dramatic play provided explicit opportunities

for interaction with peers, and forms a basis for socio-emotional, language, and cognitive development.

Parent, teacher and school leader perspectives.

Developmentally appropriate practice. A key characteristic identified in the stakeholders' perspectives was that Pb-L was a developmentally appropriate teaching approach for children starting school. Findings suggest that the adults as well as the children, believe that learning through play was an appropriate and responsive medium for teaching practices that incorporated a holistic view of child development and learning. Both parents and the teacher/school leader in the study shared a mutual understanding of Pb-L that recognised play as beneficial to all children aged five to six years old; the belief that play occurs organically for most children and that children tend to enjoy and relax when they play, which makes it valuable to their general wellbeing. This finding supports literature of a play pedagogy that recommend teaching practices that consider the child at the centre of its methods in early years education (Alfieri, Brooks, Aldrich, Tenenbaum, 2011; Bergen, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Parent and school based stakeholders saw Pb-L as promoting the engagement between the teacher and individual students' development and learning, through more responsive and individualised approaches. They recognised self-initiated play, characterised by children's freedom to choose and explore an activity that interests them, as an important factor of Pb-L. Equally, they considered the important role of the teacher in guiding such playful experiences,

as a platform for supporting learning. The children, viewed the nature of the activity as characterised by hands-on, active involvement, which invoked a sense of enthusiasm and autonomy, as important in their decisions about play. This may suggest that the children's perspectives of play were partially influenced by their preference for active exploration. This finding supports research by Howe (2016) and Theobald et al. (2015) who found children's perspectives of everyday classroom activities were influenced by doing, peer interaction, and agency. This finding is contrary to a common finding in the literature that teachers and parents differed in their conceptualisations of a play-based pedagogy and subsequent inconsistent implementation of teaching practices that are developmentally appropriate in a new entrants' classroom environment (Fisher et al., 2008; Fung & Cheng, 2012). Instead, the perspectives of the parents, teacher, and school leader exemplified a shared understanding of the importance of providing teaching practices that are developmentally appropriate and support student's self-initiated play.

Guided Play. The adults emphasised learning as a key component of a Pb-L approach in first year of school. However, learning was more broadly defined as the cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical skills that underpin development. The acquisition of academic skills and achievement were deemed by the adults as a result of children's participation, developmental readiness, and teacher-guidance, in the processes of learning.

The key characteristic of guided play is that it incorporates a unified approach to play that consists of child-led and teacher-directed play. Overall, the adults

explained the need for integrating student interests, choice, and exploration in the play environment. They believed that children could contribute to their learning through a process of active exploration of their interests, during which teachers can scaffold students' individual learning. This finding supports research by Edwards and Cutter-Mackenzie (2011) and Gallant (2009) who advocate for teaching practices that support the developmental needs of children in early formal education. The Walker Learner Approach (Walker, 2011) have retained the explicit teaching of literacy and numeracy, during which time the classroom teacher directs the focus of learning and play, while also incorporating elements of the curriculum. Formal learning occurs in the middle and last block of the day when whole-class instruction precedes small groups and incorporates some playtime. The teacher uses both Investigation Time and formal instruction periods to scaffold meaningful experiences. Alfieri et al. (2011) found that discovery-based approaches yielded optimal learning outcomes when it incorporated an element of providing explicit examples of the use of resources and learning, gave systematic feedback, and used scaffolding to develop investigations and learning themes. The Pb-L approach used in this case-study incorporated teacher-directed activities which were planned and intentional and consisted of 'tuning in' sessions prior to play which helped the children to think about how their activities was connected to learning (Walker, 2011).

Support. The teacher and school leader agreed that support from the principal, parent teacher association (PTA), board of trustees (BoT), and Year One team was vital for the successful implementation of a Pb-L approach. The

key stakeholders' (principal, PTA, BoT) support included financial backing for the associated set-up costs and the continued resourcing of the approach. The teacher specifically, acknowledged the importance of a shared philosophy with the principal and BoT which enhanced her personal and professional investment in the success of the approach. The school leader believed that it was important to work in partnership with the school management team in meeting specific requirements of the BoT, while the principal's support allowed for a less rigid focus on meeting National Standards at the expense of student wellbeing. The school leader added that professional development opportunities could only be sought with support from the school's leadership team. She further acknowledged the need to involve parents in the process of implementing a Pb-L approach. The finding suggests that the school leadership teams' support was perceived as permitting teacher agency to develop Pb-L. This finding supports research that found teachers' implementation of a play pedagogy was influenced by tensions that exist with school leaders, who tend to focus on academic achievement at the expense of using child-centred teaching practices (Baron, Immekus, Gonzalez, & Yun, 2016; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016; Hyvonen, 2011; Smith and Smith, 2002).

The extent to which the teacher and school leader highlighted professional development during the interviews would suggest that this is an important factor. A key factor in improving any educational programme requires teachers and leaders to upskill their professional knowledge and adapt their teaching practice (Bills, Giles, & Rogers, 2016; Howard, 2010; Owen, 2017). The teacher perceived building connection with other educators as important to enhance the

pedagogy of Pb-L. Although the staff pursued opportunities to observe and build relationships with Pb-L facilitators in NZ, and have adapted the WLA, they considered improving and personalising its delivery to their school setting as a key factor to ensure that it was responsive to the community of learners they teach.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the significance of the key stakeholders' perspectives about the value, challenges, and factors that characterise a Pb-L approach. Each of the themes were examined and elaborated on, as well as compared and contrasted with existing literature of Pb-L. It is proposed that Pb-L is well positioned to offer insight into teaching and learning practices that are developmentally appropriate to students entering primary school. The following chapter will discuss the implications of the findings in this case study to each stakeholder group.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore key stakeholders' perspectives of a play-based learning (Pb-L) approach in the first year of school. A qualitative case-study approach was used to gather in-depth and focussed information about the values, challenges, and key characteristics of implementing a Pb-L in a classroom. The participants in the study were from an Auckland-based primary school who currently offer a Pb-L approach. Four key stakeholder groups were invited to participate in the project, including children in the first year of school, their parents or caregivers, a teacher, and a school leader. Focus group interviews were conducted with the children to form an understanding of their conceptualisations of the Pb-L environment. Parents' experiences of Pb-L, as it related to their child's current enrolment in the school, were explored in an online survey. Interviews were conducted with a teacher and school leader to capture the way in which their different roles, responsibilities, and motivations influence the implementation of a Pb-L approach. The implications of the findings, limitations and strengths of the study, and future directions for research are outlined in the following discussion.

Implications for Practice

It was the intention of this project to contribute insight of Pb-L in an Aotearoa New Zealand context. Although play pedagogy is well-known and established in early childhood education, from where many young children transition to school, the same cannot be said about Pb-L in primary school

settings. It is therefore important to consider the implications of the current study, for schools currently adopting a Pb-L approach, as well as for schools that are considering its implementation. The implications for each of the stakeholders are discussed below.

Children. The children in this study valued classroom activities that gave them the freedom and opportunity to pursue their interests. For most of the children these activities were characterised by hands-on investigation of materials and resources in the construction and creative areas of the classroom, such as the Mobilo blocks. Children also indicated that being creative was important, as evident in the unique drawings or objects they made. Importantly, it was the students who initiated and directed the nature of the activity. Children indicated that having autonomy in their activities, which also included the extent to which they involved others in their activity or joined a peer's play, was an important part of their play. Most of the children enjoyed playing with other students and interacted with peers that were engaged in similar activities.

The implications for children relates to their perspective of play. Play is primarily planned, directed, and facilitated by the teacher who provides the structure for learning through activities. However, once students have been guided and engage in activities, the task of taking ownership of their experiences becomes inherently their own. This means that students are guided to make the best use of their time, engage with a range of activities, and practice skills (Walker, 2011; Howe, 2016). Children's ownership of their

play leads them to engage authentically with activities and gives way for opportunities to infer meaning. Meaningful experiences that are scaffolded by a supportive adult have learning attached to it which originated in the self-initiated play of the child. A further implication relates to children's reflection about learning. As children become adept at directing their activities in the play environment they are given opportunities to share their experiences and connections to learning (Walker, 2011; Wiltz & Fein, 2015). This is important in teaching students about evaluating their play and learning experiences to foster children's thinking process through play. As children take ownership of the activities and experiences that define their play, teachers can facilitate their development of both cognitive and meta-cognitive skills that help them to identify and articulate their learning. Each child's self-initiated activity, which is guided by hands-on, active investigations, and is characterised by their interests, represent a unique journey as they develop and learn. The child's ownership and sharing of meaningful experiences through play, with the guidance from a teacher, helps to shape their perspective of learning as inherently part of the classroom (Walker, 2011). Given the benefits to children it appears valuable for Pb-L approaches to specifically integrate opportunities to encourage children to think about the activities they may want to engage in, and to assist them in thinking about making connections to learning which is personally significant.

Parents or caregivers. Most of the parents in the study agreed that Pb-L supported their child's social and emotional development. This was important to parents as they believed that using play helped children to enjoy

school and eased the transition to formal learning. Parents believed that their child's general wellbeing was associated with their happiness at school and therefore valued play in the classroom as a medium for learning. Parents recognised the importance of incorporating adult-directed teaching strategies to guide play and to help children make explicit connections to learning. Learning was more broadly defined by the parents in terms of the skills children develop in play with peers, while also helping children to build confidence and resilience.

The implications of these findings for parents are twofold. Firstly, parents can enhance the benefits of a Pb-L approach at school through facilitating play in the home environment. Literature (Elkind, 2007; Myck-Wayne, 2010; NicholSEN, Baur, & Wooley, 2016) suggests that there is a cross-cultural decline of play at home due to parents' exerting more control and structure over their child's time. Additionally, parents tend to place less emphasis on the importance of play as children get older, which may further influence how children are encouraged to spend their time at home (Elkind, 2007). By providing opportunities for play at home, parents are influencing their child's concepts about the importance of play, and simultaneously reinforcing self-initiated play. Secondly, parents have the ability to support Pb-L in school through sharing their understanding about the importance of play, with teachers and school leaders. A collaborative relationship between parents and school staff influence effective implementation and sustainability of play pedagogies in school environments (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2011). It is therefore important for parents to collaborate with teaching staff to

develop and sustain a Pb-L approach. It is recommended that schools share their knowledge and understanding with parents or caregivers and provide opportunities to listen to their perspectives.

Teachers. The teacher shared parent's beliefs about the benefits of social and emotional development in a Pb-L approach. She considered a Pb-L environment as conducive to children's oral language development and reiterated that collectively these developmental dimensions contribute to children's wellbeing and adjustment to school. She believed that Pb-L supported her educational philosophy about implementing teaching practices that are responsive to the developmental needs of children. Furthermore, the teacher emphasised learning as a core characteristic of the play pedagogy approach adopted by the school and her role as an educator to scaffold children's play experiences by helping them to make connections to learning.

It is recommended that teachers understand how play and learning are complimentary processes that enhance children's early development. Teachers who are knowledgeable about Pb-L and how it aligns with a school's vision and culture, are positioned to advocate for teaching and learning practices that are developmentally responsive to young students (Walker, 2011). The implication for teachers is to establish and cultivate collaborative relationships with school leaders (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). It is recommended that teachers and leaders sustain collaborative efforts to implement Pb-L in the first year of school, that places less emphasis on

purely academic outcomes but considers child development and wellbeing in its teaching and learning practices to promote learning.

A second implication for teachers relates to the setting up of their classrooms. Establishing a physical and temporal learning environment that is effective and not simply token play, requires planning and organisation of the classroom space and resources (Walker, 2011). The activity spaces, resources, and range of materials need to be set-up to stimulate interest and engage children in meaningful experiences (Briggs, 2012; Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). It is recommended that teachers are intentional with the arrangement of the classroom environment and help to guide learning through scaffolding children's activities.

School leader. The school leader believed that Pb-L supported children's wellbeing through its holistic approach to child development. She highlighted social skills, oral language, emotional, and cognitive development as benefits of a Pb-L approach. A vital component of Pb-L was its alignment with the school's educational philosophy that focused on student wellbeing (Claxton, 2008). She believed that Pb-L better supported students' transition to school and emphasised that the continuity in teaching practice in Pb-L underpinned children's positive early school experiences. In her role as a school leader she emphasised the need for support from the school's Board of Trustees (BoT) to effectively implement a play pedagogy in the school. This was discussed in relation to gaining approval for the implementation of Pb-L, funding for resources and materials, and professional development.

The perspective gave insight into the important role that school leaders play in supporting teachers, and unifying educational objectives with a play pedagogy.

The implications for school leaders exist at a pedagogical and administrative level. Leaders need a comprehensive understanding of a Pb-L approach, as well as a sound knowledge of its alignment with the school's curriculum. It is recommended that leaders acquire knowledge and understanding of how Pb-L operates in the classroom and the difficulties teachers may face in its implementation. This will help to guide school leaders' identification of the support, training, or upskilling needed to help teacher's implement a consist approach. In the study, the school leader described how her one-day-a-week teaching in the Pb-L environment provided her with insight and experience of a play-based pedagogy and broadened her perspective.

Furthermore, facilitating and empowering the teaching staff in the implementation of Pb-L is crucial to its longevity. One way school leaders can achieve this, as it is evident in this study, is to develop a shared understanding with teaching staff (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) and to foster teacher agency (van Oers, 2014). A shared understanding between teachers and school leaders can lessen the tension that arise from their different roles.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

The research was designed as a case study with a single school as the focus for data collection. This was deemed the most appropriate means of

collecting multiple perspectives due to the constraints of time, cost, and access to the stakeholders available to participate in the study. Therefore, the generalisation of the findings should be interpreted with caution when considering the wider educational context of Auckland and Aotearoa New Zealand (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).

The addition of photographs in the project would have strengthened the findings of the research through its illustration of the unique arrangements in the Pb-L environment, as well as placing emphasis on the children's engagement in play. However, the project has attempted to capture the children's perspectives by weaving quotes throughout the findings chapter.

Strengths. Although a case study approach may limit the generalisation of the findings, it is believed that the implications represented in the stakeholders' perspectives hold valuable insights for schools to consider in the implementation of a Pb-L approach. A key strength of the project was that it gathered multiple perspectives within a school context. The researcher also spent one week observing the Pb-L environment to develop an understanding of the context. Collectively, these strengths help to support the interpretation of the findings in the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The engagement with this research project highlighted for the researcher, the ongoing search in education to improve teaching and learning practices to support the diverse range of student needs that are represented in New

Zealand primary school classrooms. An increasing emphasis in educational policy reflects the need for schools to adapt developmentally appropriate practices to support communities of learners (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006). An important goal of this project was the contribution of multiple perspectives that explored how Pb-L supports student needs. It raised further interest for the researcher about how students' progress from a Pb-L environment and the impact of this approach on future growth and development. It is recommended that future research could consider a longitudinal study of the long-term effects of Pb-L. During this time, a mixed methods approach could measure student wellbeing, learning progression, and development while simultaneously utilising focus groups of the children's experiences, to compare learning in a play-based and formal learning environment. Research could contribute to the Pb-L literature in New Zealand and provide useful insights to educators implementing the approach.

A second recommendation for future research implicates further investigation of teachers experiences of Pb-L in New Zealand primary schools. The suggested finding of this study that school leader's support was a key factor that effected the implementation of Pb-L, raise the question about how teachers in other primary schools' experience support from school leaders. Existing literature suggests that a barrier to the success of Pb-L is the extent to which teachers are given autonomy to exercise power and control over the implementation and administration of a play pedagogy (Baron, Immelius, Gonzalez, & Yun, 2016; Siraj-Blatchard, 2009; Smith & Smith, 2000). Future research might consider how teachers in various schools characterise and

achieve success and resolve the challenges associated with a play-based pedagogy. In particular, such research may uncover what and how teachers want to be supported in schools offering Pb-L, and thus enhance its implementation in classrooms.

A final recommendation requires consideration of the ways in which children can contribute to shaping characteristics of their learning experiences. It is proposed that it is essential to include children's understandings and experiences in order for educators to implement and sustain play in early stages of formal education.

Final Thoughts

It was the intention of this project to contribute to the literature of Pb-L, and specifically within an Aotearoa New Zealand context. Collectively, the stakeholder groups emphasised Pb-L as a valuable approach that enhanced the early learning experiences of children starting school. The unique perspective of the students gave insight into their experiences of play, which gave them the opportunity to learn through their interests, while exercising autonomy and enjoying social interaction with peers. Parents underscored the importance of Pb-L in supporting social and emotional development in their child's wellbeing and believed that this was associated with learning. As well as reiterating parent perspectives about socio-emotional development, the teacher further highlighted Pb-L as both intentional (student-led) and instructional (teacher-directed) in its approach to teaching and learning. The school leader agreed with parents and the teacher in describing Pb-L as a

developmentally appropriate approach for teaching children in the first year of school. In addition, she highlighted that a Pb-L approach aligned with the school's educational philosophy that emphasises student wellbeing. The study highlighted that a shared understanding about the value and characteristics of Pb-L have led to its successful implementation in the school. Overall, this study supports Pb-L as a pedagogy that promotes child development and wellbeing, utilises teaching and learning practices that are developmentally responsive for children starting school, and enhances meaningful experiences that aid development of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills that are essential to all learning.

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Appendix A
Information Sheet for Parents or Caregivers and Children



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

Stakeholders perceptions of a play-based learning environment in a New Entrants classroom: A Case Study

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENT OR CAREGIVER AND CHILD PARTICIPATION

I would like to thank you for your interest in this research. My name is Mandie Blucher and I am a Masters student at Massey University. I am writing to inform you of a research project I am doing and invite you to be involved in. I am doing this study under the supervision of Dr Karyn Aspden and Dr Jayne Jackson who are both NZ registered teachers and lecturers in initial teacher education at Massey University.

Outline of the Research

This project presents an exciting opportunity to understand various perspectives of a play-based approach to learning in an Auckland primary school classroom. It affords me the privilege, with your participation, of gaining information from a school leader, the classroom teacher, parents/caregivers, and students in a new entrants classroom.

For the purposes of this study, play-based learning refers to teaching and learning that is centred on play experiences such as sand and water play, pretend play, and physical play. In this approach the emphasis is placed on children's exploration of play experiences, rather than more structured, teacher directed activities.

Within the classroom, teachers use a range of play activities based on children's interests or preferences, as opportunities for exploration and learning. Play is seen as a valuable tool to support children's learning.

Invitation to Participate

With permission from the school principal and board of trustees I humbly invite you and your child to participate in this research.

Project Procedures

This is a case study with several points of gathering information or data. In the first phase, I will conduct classroom observations across five full school days, considering the way in which play-based learning is reflected in the physical, social and emotional, intellectual, and temporal environments in the classroom. These observations are to inform my understanding of the context of the classroom and the way in which play-based learning is supported.

In the second phase of the study I will collect information from parents/caregivers, children, the classroom teacher, and a school leader. Students, with parental consent, will be invited to participate in a 15 minute focus group interview, with two or three other students and

myself. I anticipate being in the classroom for approximately two hours a day to permit flexibility to the classroom routines.

I will also interview the classroom teacher, and the school leader. Your perspective as a parent/caregiver will be collected through an online survey.

Parent/Caregiver

If you agree to participate in this research I would like you to complete a brief online survey which asks about your perspectives about play-based learning in the classroom, and any successes and challenges your child has experienced. I anticipate that the time commitment would be a maximum of 20 minutes.

Child

If you agree, your child will be invited to participate in a small group discussion with two or three other students and myself. The focus group will be conducted during school hours in a designated space in their classroom. The children will be invited to talk about the play activities they participated in, what they did in those activities, whom they included in their play, what they most enjoyed, what they look forward to doing the following day, and what they would change in the play environment. I anticipate that the time commitment would be a maximum of 15 minutes.

As well as your consent as the parent/caregiver, I will also seek the consent of your child before the study commences, which will be recorded and states, "I understand that my voice will be recorded. I know that the ideas I talk about today will be used in a study. I do not have to answer a question if I don't want to". If your child agrees they answer yes and sign their name on the statement. Your child's identity will be protected and a pseudo name will be chosen to describe any information they provide in the study. You are encouraged to discuss the study with your child at home.

You and your child's participation in this study will provide a unique opportunity to contribute parent/caregiver and child voices of the experiences of play-based learning in New Zealand.

Data Management

The data from this research will be used in a thesis, subsequent journal article, and may also be used as the basis for professional articles. Both you and your child's participation in the project will remain confidential; a pseudonym will be used for him/her. Data will be stored in a secure environment for 5 years then disposed of in a confidential manner. If you would like a summary of the research findings we will send that to you. At the end of the study the classroom will be gifted with book of pictures to share the children's contribution.

Participant's Rights

You and your child are under no obligation to accept this invitation. You and your child have the right to decline to answer any particular question.

Project Contacts

If you have any questions about the project at any time, please contact one of the people listed below.

Researcher:	Mandie Blucher Email bluchermandie@gmail.com Phone 0210666433
Supervisor:	Dr Karyn Aspden Email k.m.aspden@massey.ac.nz Phone 414 0800 extension 84389
Supervisor:	Dr Jayne Jackson Email j.h.jackson@massey.ac.nz Phone 414 0800 extension 43527

Committee Approval Statement

This study has been approved and is supported by the school Principal and Board of Trustees and presents an exciting opportunity to learn about play-based learning in a New Zealand context.

The project has also been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 17/29. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Ralph Bathurst, Acting Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz

In addition to the school's and ethics approval, I also have police clearance to work in the school in accordance with the Vulnerable Children's Act.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request for your and your child's' participation in this project. I would be most willing to meet with you to provide further information and explanation about the project should this be required.

If you would like to accept the invitation to participate in this study then please complete the consent form and return to Mandie Blucher via email bluchermandie@gmail.com or alternatively to the classroom teacher.

Appendix B
Information Sheet Teacher and School Leader



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
 TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

Stakeholders perceptions of a play-based learning environment in New Entrants: A Case Study

INFORMATION SHEET FOR THE SCHOOL LEADER AND TEACHER

I would like to thank you for your interest in this research. My name is Mandie Blucher and I am a Masters student at Massey University. I am writing to inform you of a research project I am doing and invite you to be involved in. I am doing this study under the supervision of Dr Karyn Aspden and Dr Jayne Jackson who are both NZ registered teachers and lecturers in initial teacher education at Massey University.

Outline of the Research

This project presents an exciting opportunity to understand various perspectives of a play-based approach to learning in an Auckland primary school classroom. It affords me the privilege, with your participation, of gaining information from a school leader, the classroom teacher, parents/caregivers, and students in a new entrants classroom.

For the purposes of this study, play-based learning refers to teaching and learning that is centred on play experiences such as, sand and water play, pretend play, and physical play. In this approach the emphasis is placed on children's exploration of play experiences, rather than more structured, teacher directed activities. Within the classroom, teachers use a range of play activities based on children's interests or preferences, as opportunities for exploration and learning. Play is seen as a valuable tool to support children's learning.

Invitation to Participation

As a school leader or teacher involved in the implementation of the play-based learning environment I humbly invite you to participate in this research.

Project Procedures

This is a case study with several points of gathering information or data. In the first phase, I will conduct observations in the classroom across five full school days, considering the way in which play-based learning is reflected in the physical, social and emotional, intellectual, and temporal environments in the classroom. These observations are to inform my understanding of the context of the classroom and the way in which play-based learning is supported.

The second dimension is one week of data collection in the classroom. Students with parental consent will be invited to participate in a 15-20 minute focus group interview, with two or three other students and myself. I anticipate being in the classroom for approximately two hours a day to permit flexibility to the classroom routines.

If you agree to participate in this research I would like you to engage in an interview to discuss your experiences and perspectives about the value, challenges, and characteristics

of implementing and managing a play-based learning environment. We anticipate that the time commitment would be a maximum of 60 minutes. A transcript of the interview will be provided to you for review and any additional comments or feedback to take into consideration. It would be appreciated if the transcript is returned within a week of receipt. A parent or caregiver online survey will be active in this week.

Data Management

The data from this research will be used in a thesis, subsequent journal article, and may also be used as the basis for professional articles. Your participation in the project will remain confidential; a pseudonym will be used for you and your school. Data will be stored in a secure environment for 5 years then disposed of in a confidential manner. If you would like a summary of the research findings we will send that to you.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. You have the right to decline to answer any particular question.

Project Contacts

If you have any questions about the project at any time please contact one of the people listed below.

Researcher: Mandie Blucher
Email bluchermandie@gmail.com
Phone 0210666433

Supervisor: Dr Karyn Aspden
Email k.m.aspden@massey.ac.nz
Phone 414 0800 extension 84389

Supervisor: Dr Jayne Jackson
Email j.h.jackson@massey.ac.nz
Phone 414 0800 extension 43527

Committee Approval Statement

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 17/29. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Ralph Bathurst, Acting Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz

Thank you for considering this request for assistance. I would be most willing to meet with you to provide further information and explanation about the project should this be required.

If you would like to accept the invitation to participate in this study then please complete the consent form and return to Mandie Blucher via email bluchermandie@gmail.com.

Appendix C
Focus Group Interview

Date of interview: _____

Group names:

Q1: What play activities did you do in class today?

(refer to the time of day and the name the children are familiar with for example, 'morning play')

Q2: What did you play with?

- What did you do with the (specific material)?

Q3: Who did you play with?

- What do you like about playing with (name of child)?
- Do you often play with them?

Q4: What were you practising in your play today?

Q5: What do you like best about this time of day?

Q6: What do you think you might play with tomorrow?

Q7: If you could add one more play activity what would it be?

Appendix D

Parent or Caregiver Survey

Parent and Caregiver Perceptions

Survey of Play-based learning

I would like to thank you for your interest in this research. My name is Mandie Blucher and I am a Masters student at Massey University. I am doing this study under the supervision of Dr Karyn Aspden and Dr Jayne Jackson who are both NZ registered teachers and lecturers in initial teacher education at Massey University.

This project presents an exciting opportunity to understand parents/caregiver's experiences of play-based learning in New Zealand. As a parent of a child in a play-based New Entrant classroom, you will be asked about your perspectives of play-based learning in the classroom, and any successes and challenges your child has experienced.

The survey consists of ten questions which will require a maximum of 20 minutes to complete. Your responses will be anonymous and you have the right to decline to answer any particular question. You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. You have the right to decline to answer any particular question. Submitting the survey will be deemed as consent for participation.

Thank you in advance for your participation.
Sincerely,
Mandie

Parent and Caregiver Perceptions

PAGE TITLE

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. Please answer the following questions in relation to your child's current enrolment in a play-based learning New Entrant class.

1. Were you aware that the school offered a play-based learning approach?

Yes

No

2. If Yes, did this influence your choice to enrol them in this school?

Yes

No

Parent and Caregiver Perceptions

PAGE TITLE

3. What is your understanding of the term "play-based learning"?

Section Two

For the purposes of this study, play-based learning refers to teaching and learning that is centred on play experiences such as sensory play, pretend play, and construction/collage play. In this approach the emphasis is placed on children's exploration of play experiences, rather than more structured, teacher directed activities. Within the classroom, teachers use a range of play activities based on children's interests or preferences, as opportunities for exploration and learning.

Please select the answer which best represents how you feel about each statement

4. My child enjoys play-based activities in the classroom.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
My child enjoys play-based activities in the classroom.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Play-based activities are valuable learning times for my child.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Children in the first year of primary school (between the age of 5 years and 6 years) require play activities to support development.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Children in the first year of school (between the age of 5 years and 6 years) require direct teaching to learn.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Play-based learning better supports child development than direct teaching approaches.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Parent and Caregiver Perceptions

⊕ PAGE TITLE

5. What do you see as the benefits of play in the classroom?

Parent and Caregiver Perceptions

⊕ PAGE TITLE

6. Do you have any concerns about a play-based approach within the new entrants class?

7. Please make any further comments on play-based learning in the classroom.

Appendix E

Teacher and School Leader Interview Schedule

Name:

Date:

Venue of Interview:

Part One: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Can you tell me about your teaching background?

- What qualifications do you have?
- What positions in education have you previously held?

Can you tell me about your current role in the school?

- How long have you been working at the school and in the current position?
- What are your key responsibilities?

What experiences have you had in play-based learning (PBL)?

- Previous training and experience
- Interest that have led to your current involvement

Can you give me some history on PBL in this school?

- When was PBL introduced and by whom?
- What was the attraction to it?
- How was it originally implemented?
- Who led its implementation?

Part Two: VALUE Worth of play-based learning in New Entrants

Research Question: What do key stakeholders see as the value of a play-based programme in the first year of school?

Can you describe an experience of PBL that stands out to you?

What aspects of PBL have you found most rewarding?

If you had to compare a different New Entrance classroom with the PBL class:

- How are they similar?
- How are they different?

What advice would you give someone teaching PBL for the first time?

Can you describe your stance on PBL as it currently exists in the school?

How does it tie into the school educational practice, value, principles or vision?

Part Three: CHALLENGES

Research Question: What do key stakeholders see as the challenges of a play-based programme in the first year of school?

Considering your experiences thus far with PBL:

- What aspects are working well?

- Which aspects most need improvement?

What are the areas in PBL that you find challenging?

- How does PBL link into the national curriculum – what does that look like practically on a daily basis?
- What opportunities are there for professional development in PBL?
- How is PLB supported in the school?

How do you see your role as a teacher in PBL environment?

- What are some of the instructional strategies you use to coincide with PBL?

Part Four: FACTORS AND OR CHARACTERISTICS

Research Question: What factors or characteristics do key-stakeholders identify as important in implementing a play-based approach in the first year of school?

If you were giving advice to someone setting up PBL for the first time what would you tell them?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix F
Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

Stakeholders perceptions of a play-based learning environment in New Entrants: A Case Study

TRANSCRIBER'S CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I (Full Name - printed) agree
to transcribe the recordings provided to me.

I agree to keep confidential all the information provided to me.

I will not make any copies of the transcripts or keep any record of them, other than those
required for the project.

Signature:

.....

Date:

.....

Appendix G
Teacher and Leader Authority for Release of Transcript



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

Stakeholders perceptions of a play-based learning environment in New Entrants: A Case Study

AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature: **Date:**

Full Name - printed

Appendix H Ethics Approval Letter



Date: 05 July 2017

Dear Mandie Blucher

Re: Ethics Notification - NOR 17/29 - Stakeholders perceptions of a play-based learning environment in a New Entrants class: A Case Study

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Human Ethics Northern Committee, at their meeting held on Wednesday, 5 July, 2017.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B Finch".

Dr Brian Finch
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)