# Chapter 2
Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Education

Abstract This chapter problematises play in the twenty-first century and begins with a review of the work of Rousseau, Froebel and Dewey highlighting their enduring influence on play-based practices in early childhood education. The chapter reviews the influence of Piaget's theory on the construction of knowledge via active exploration through play. Working under a Piagetian approach, which has significantly influenced Developmentally Appropriate Practice, the perspective that children learn 'naturally' through play, with the teacher facilitating opportunities for play in the environment, is apparent. However, the authors question whether these views are still current in the twenty-first century, and further question the notion that children learn 'naturally' through play. Applying Vygotsky's understanding about the social mediation of knowledge and learning, and play as a context for adult interaction, the role of the teacher during play to support children's learning is apparent. The authors further question through this reconceptualisation of play: How do teachers know that children are learning? And what is the role of the teacher in children's play? Attention to these questions leads to a more critical consideration of the role of pedagogical play, and the role of the teacher, in early childhood education. This chapter explores such considerations in-depth.

2.1 Introduction

"Recently, I made some profound discoveries that have provided a pivotal moment in my long career within the early childhood profession. The first discovery, which I found in a secret compartment of an old jewellery box, was a yellowed but neatly folded clipping from an early Australian newspaper from the turn of the last century (Fig. 2.1). It detailed the opening of a new kindergarten for the 'small wee ones' in the local Parish Hall. The newspaper spoke in effusive terms of the pencils, paper and dolls provided for the children who were 'seated on wee chairs at little wee tables' under the loving care of the teacher. The second discovery, I realised with a shock, was that nothing much has changed since the

Fig. 2.1 Australian newspaper clipping about the opening of Pingelly Kindergarten in Western Australia from the early 1900s (unknown newspaper and date)
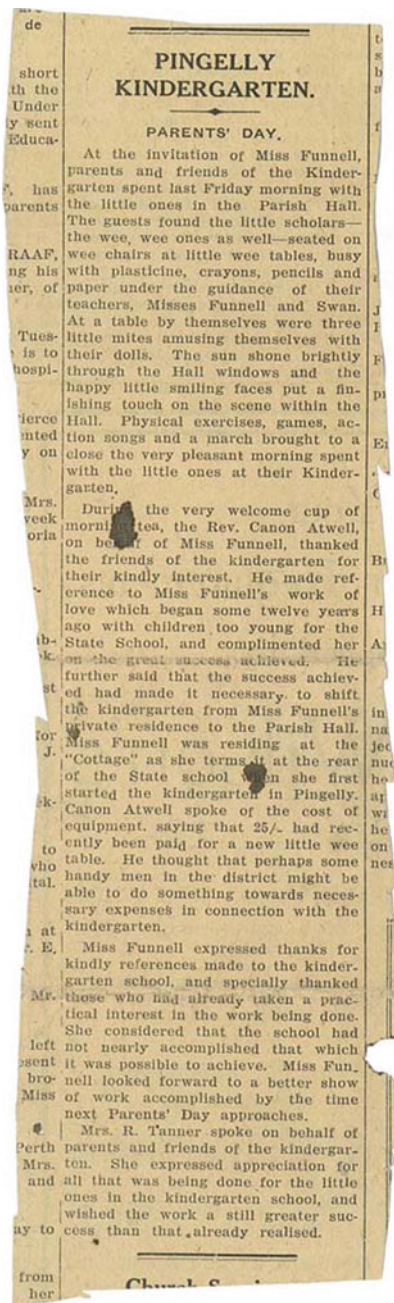
early 1900s in the contemporary early childhood settings and provisions of the twenty-first century. This seems true I realised, despite more than 100 years of intense investigation and research into children's play, learning and education. Why, I wondered with this concrete evidence in my hand, is the early childhood community so resistant to change?" (Moore, personal communication, 20th June, 2012)

A kindergarten established over 100 years ago is filled with small chairs, paper, pencils and dolls. Many years later, this very description remains a familiar account of typical early childhood provision. In this chapter we examine the concept of 'pedagogical play' and how this concept has informed the use of materials such as those celebrated in the opening of the Pingelly Kindergarten in Western Australia in the early 1900s—and continues to inform approaches to learning and teaching in early childhood education today. Pedagogical play refers to the use of play in early childhood education to promote the learning of young children (Wood 2010). Pedagogical play has a long and contentious history in early childhood education, beginning with the argument that children learn most 'naturally' from play, and focussing more recently on problematising what and how children learn through play. In this chapter we consider this history and outline where ideas about the naturalness of children's play came from and how these ideas have more recently been challenged by 'postdevelopmental' perspectives on pedagogical play.

2.2 Historical Theoretical and Philosophical Informants to Early Childhood Education

Deeply entrenched within the historical roots of early childhood education, play has long been a dominant feature of Western-European pedagogy (Rogers 2011). Over many centuries, philosophers, theorists, educationalists and more recently, policy makers have worked hard to define the nature of childhood, play and the purposes of education (Fisher 2008). In particular, researchers have become increasingly interested in how traditional and contemporary theories on play and childhood have informed conceptualisations of childhood (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010), the 'image of the child' (Malaguzzi 1994), and the development of early childhood curriculum (Graue 2008). Wood and Attfield (2005) claim that until the nineteenth century, "childhood was seen as an immature form of adulthood and children from all social classes had little status in society" (p. 29). Wood and Attfield suggest that it was the studies of classical play theorists, such as Rousseau, Froebel and Dewey, that dramatically changed societal views and attitudes towards children, to the extent that "freedom to learn could be combined with appropriate nurturing and guidance" (p. 29), through the strongly held belief that play was critical to children's learning and development (Platz and Arellano 2011).

These early theorists were strong advocates for children learning in, and from, nature as active learners, suggesting that "children learned best when they were allowed to observe and interact with nature and life" (Platz and Arellano 2011,

pp. 56–57). Integral to their beliefs, was the view that children were naturally good, and so educational and social goals for young children should be orientated towards nurturing this natural innocence. Platz and Arellano (2011) suggest that "the origins of many early childhood education theories and practices today can be traced back in time to early educators and philosophers who had a passion for the development and education of young children" (p. 54). However, despite the fact that the philosophies of these theorists were not always endorsed during their lifetimes (due to various political and moral stances of the time), their work has clearly impacted on European-Western ideologies regarding the importance of play as a primary mode of learning for young children in early childhood education (Lillemyr 2009).

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), as one of the first notable philosophers, was attributed with many idealistic views about children and childhood. Notions associated with child-centred education where "nature requires children to be children first" are believed to have initiated from Rousseau's theories on education (Platz and Arellano 2011, p. 56). Rousseau is known for his romantic views on children's innocence and the 'golden age of childhood' together with other significant shifts in the concept of childhood, as James et al. (1998) suggest:

> Rather than just instilling a sense of childhood innocence, Rousseau, more significantly, opened up the question of the child's particularity, a question that remains central in the status of person, a specific class of being with needs and desires and even rights. And it is this personification which has paved the way for our contemporary concern about children as individuals (p. 13).

While the issue of children's rights appears to have foundations in Rousseau's pioneering work, it has only become a "special safeguard for children" with the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) in more recent times (Lee 2001). Rousseau's projection of childhood innocence also paved the way for an image of the innocent child needing protection, and a tendency for adults to feel the need to "shelter children from the corrupt surrounding world … by constructing a form of environment in which the young child will be offered protection, continuity and security" (Dahlberg et al. 1999, p. 45). Early childhood settings have been perceived as providing this protective role, especially in relation to environmental education which has been viewed as a potentially overwhelming topic for the developmental capacity of young children (see for example Duhn 2012). Graue (2008) argues that this situation is a misplaced function of early childhood education's concern with children's development, and the sense that very young children in their innocence may not be ready to engage with complex conceptual or socially-based ideas.

Oelkers (2002) in his study of *Rousseau and the image of 'modern education'*, claims that Rousseau "took for granted that the self-development of the child is driven by immediate interests, i.e., not by instruction or by formal education" (p. 683), and continues this line of Rousseau's thinking by stating, "If educators let the child always be himself, attending to only what touches him immediately, then and only then will they find the child learning, capable of perceiving, memorizing,

and even reasoning" (p. 683). The underlying premise intrinsic to many early childhood philosophies and policies of 'taking the child's interest' clearly has its roots in this theory of Rousseau's approach to early education (Hedges et al. 2011).

It is generally agreed that the theories espoused by the German theorist, Fredrich Froebel (1782–1852) as the creator of the first 'kindergarten' or 'children's garden', were not only the most significant during his time, but still have an enduring influence on current early childhood practices (Ailwood 2007). Sherwood and Reifel (2010) comment on the "central element" of United States kindergartens initially holding "tightly to its Froebelian roots" (p. 323). These roots can likewise be viewed across many Western-European orientated approaches to early childhood curriculum, including in the New Zealand *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education 1996) early childhood guidelines, the Australian *Early Years Learning Framework* (Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations 2009), the Singaporean Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens *Nurturing Early Learners* (Ministry of Education 2012), the framework for the *Early Years Foundation Stage* in the United Kingdom (Department for Education 2012), the *National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland* (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2004) and in the American National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) *Developmentally Appropriate Practice Guidelines* (2009). In each of these documents reference is commonly made to children's play and their play-based interests as an initial site for learning and development. For example, the Singaporean curriculum document suggests:

> Play is the primary mechanism through which children encounter and explore their immediate environment. As such, play becomes a natural way to motivate children to learn about themselves and the world around them (Ministry of Education 2012, p. 34).

Likewise the Developmentally Appropriate Practice Guidelines say of play:

> Children of all ages love to play, and it gives them opportunities to develop physical competence and enjoyment of the outdoors, understand and make sense of their world, interact with others, express and control emotions, develop their symbolic and problem-solving abilities, and practice emerging skills (NAEYC 2009, p. 14).

Froebel believed that children would learn through their play, and therefore, "learn to live in harmony with others and nature" (Platz and Arellano 2011, p. 60). Edwards and Hammer (2006) suggest that:

> Froebel devised curriculum materials and a methodology of education that would foster a blossoming of concepts and understanding in young children's thinking. His approach to early childhood teaching emphasized the inherent nature of children's learning that unfolds through their play; the structure of developing concepts that were drawn from nature and the role of the teacher. Froebel's understanding of children's play was extrapolated as 'serious work' and he developed a sequence of 'Gifts' and 'Occupations' to harness what he described as a natural energy that could be directed towards learning concepts (p. 195).

The importance Froebel placed on the concepts of "first hand experiences and self-chosen activities" were manifestations of his belief that adults should "begin

where the learner is" and only "sensitively intervene" in children's play (Wood and Attfield 2005, p. 29). Many of these ideas are still evident in the philosophies and teaching techniques associated with early childhood education today (Krogh and Slentz 2010). For example, Liebschner (1993) highlights Froebel's theories around the importance of meaningful play embedded in his gifts, occupations and practical 'work in the garden' by quoting Froebel's actual tenet as:

> Play must always be in agreement with the total life of the child as well as with his environment, and cannot stand in isolation or be divorced from it; play will then be educative, serious and meaningful. Through it, life becomes more relevant (p. 54).

Interestingly, Froebel's appeal for play to be in agreement with the child's life could be viewed as a harbinger of the cultural historical argument regarding the significance of context in children's learning. For example, Vygotsky (1997) also talked of the need for educational experience to connect strongly with children's life experiences, saying that "Ultimately only life educates, and the deeper that life, the real world, burrows into the school, the more dynamic and the more robust will be the educational process" (p. 345). Froebel however, was especially interested in implementing his kindergarten ideas and practices for young children in the "space between home and school" as a "half day educational service" (Ailwood 2007, p. 53).

May (2006) argues that since Froebel's times, early childhood advocates have been attempting to "persuade society in general and politicians in particular as to the benefits of early childhood care and education for children prior to school entry" (pp. 245–246). May also suggests early childhood has "always been a site for experiment" (p. 262), and that indeed, to be considered "Froebelian, is about being an advocate for children, for women and for social justice" (p. 262). For Froebel, the image of the child, was one that focused on understanding "the young child as nature" where children's learning and "inherent capabilities" unfolded naturally when given the opportunity to do so (Dahlberg et al. 1999, p. 46).

John Dewey (1859–1952), an American philosopher and educational reformist, believed it was important to provide many different experiences to enable children's learning through play "as a lifelong process in which children grew and learned along the way" (Platz and Arellano 2011, p. 56). Dewey, similar to the philosophers before him, strongly believed in connecting with the natural interests and activities of young children, such that the "question of education is the question of taking hold of his [sic] activities, of giving them direction" (Dewey 1956, p. 36). Interests, play experiences and opportunities for exploring the outdoors arguably placed the child at the centre of education and emphasised learning in social and meaningful contexts (Dewey 1956, p. 33). Wood and Attfield (2005) argue that Dewey viewed children as "co-constructors of their learning; he saw them as active agents and active participants in shaping their learning environments and experiences" (p. 30). Years later these same ideas were to become visible in the Reggio Emilia early childhood education practices, particularly in the focus on the competent and capable child "as an architect of their own learning" (Dodd-Nufrio 2011, p. 236). Interestingly, the concept of the socially

agentive child reflects many of the newly emerging ideas from the sociology of childhood (Bass 2010; Corsaro 2011) and the late 1990s positioning of the child as "the child as a co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture" (Dahlberg et al. 1999, p. 48).

Further changes in societal attitudes towards children and childhood were influenced by increasing childhood studies during the early to mid-twentieth century. Wood (2007) describes the historical trend of increasingly combining theory and practice in early child development and education, providing the prime example of E.R. Boyce (1946) in the "child-centred educational experiment" she set up in London, and states:

> Child-centred education incorporated care, rescue and correction of 'defects' alongside a commitment to free choice and free play within a richly resourced learning environment. There was no distinction between work and play … Content knowledge was embedded in play activities that reflected their everyday lives, and promoted fantasy and imagination (p. 121).

Although, the educational reforms and curriculum created and implemented by the early theorists are relevant to the time and contexts in which they were developed it is clear that much of their early beliefs and images of childhood have had a powerful impact on our current early childhood education systems and practices (Lim and Genishi 2010). In the latter part of the twentieth century political, social and economic changes and pressures became progressively more controlling in how early childhood curriculum was approached, with increasing demands to produce children who would be a "well prepared workforce for the future" (Dahlberg et al. 1999, p. 45). The French historian, Aries in his work on *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) may have "rediscovered the lost childhood from the past" (Frijhoff 2012, p. 24), however the society of the mid-twentieth century also discovered "the child as labour market supply factor" (Dahlberg et al. 1999, p. 46).

Jean Piaget (1896–1980), a Swiss developmental psychologist, was particularly interested in young children's cognitive development. Many aspects of Piaget's theory became associated with early childhood education during the 1960s. This is possibly because of the extent to which his ideas regarding the children's construction of knowledge aligned with existing ideas about the naturalness of children's learning through play already in place due to the influence of Frobel and Rousseau (Krogh and Slentz 2010). Piaget's emphasis on the explorative capacities of young children combined with the suggestion that learning experiences were most appropriately matched with children's play-based stages of development had significant implications for the pedagogical strategies associated with many early childhood programs over the past 50 years (Hatch 2010). Dahlberg et al. (1999) argue that the image of "Piaget's child" as progressing biologically through stages towards maturity was preferred by the scientific and psychological disciplines, suggesting that "the dominant developmental approach to childhood provided by psychology, is based on the idea of natural growth… childhood therefore is a biologically determined stage on the path to full human status" (p. 46).

2.3 Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Education

Piagetian theory and philosophical ideas about children and childhood subsequently informed the influence of the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) guidelines for early childhood education. Initially published in 1987 by the American National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp 1987), the guidelines were intended to respond to pressures to make the early childhood curriculum overly academic and provide a theoretical and research evidence base for protecting children's opportunity to learn and develop through the provision of traditionally valued play-based experiences. There was an early emphasis on the provision of play experiences that would support children's active engagement in play and the matching of children's developmental capacities to play activities (Edwards 2003).

Later, significant critique of the DAP guidelines (Kessler 1991; Silin 1987) saw them modified in 1997 (Bredekamp and Copple 1997), and again in 2009, to include greater focus on the role of social and cultural interactions on children's learning, play and development. Nonetheless, many of the Piagetian ideals about early learning and development associated with the DAP guidelines have become firmly entrenched in understandings about appropriate early childhood education. Hatch (2010) attempts to explain why the early childhood field has been hesitant to leave the security of a Piagetian theoretical framework behind:

> It feels heretical to challenge the Piagetian orthodoxy of the early childhood field… [it is] difficult to say why Piaget's core ideas and assumptions of developmental approaches have endured… perhaps early childhood educators have associated the precepts of Piagetian developmentalism so closely with a 'child centred' approach that to abandon them would feel tantamount to abandoning their concern for children (pp. 266–267).

Hatch's view is possibly accurate given the particularly close links established between child-centred practice, the images of the child and the underlying premise for developmental theories. However, emerging pedagogical practices and research interests from outside Piagetian ideas saw increased interest in alternative viewpoints on young children's play and its role in early childhood education. In particular, research began to be directed towards questions such as 'what do young children learn through play?' And 'are children able to learn through free play alone?' (Gibbons 2007; Hedges 2010).

These concerns have recently been summarised by Yelland (2011) who suggested that learning through play can be "problematic and misleading" (p. 5) because whilst children may be having "fun participating in such free play sessions" the type of learning taking place may not necessarily be obvious. The opening vignette to this book in which Seth observed the children swirling seaweed is a case in point. In such situations it is possible to ask "what connections are being made to the child's lived experiences and knowledge building and how are these articulated and extended in supporting activities?" (Yelland 2011, p. 5). The 'problem' with play became highly debated as researchers emphasised the

need for adult interaction during children's play to support learning (Winsler and Carlton 2003). Others criticised adult intervention in play as damaging to children's self-agency (O'Brien 2010), and still others worked to promote an understanding of balanced or integrated play that provided opportunities for both child-centred activity and adult interaction (Wood 2013). Meanwhile, the updated Singaporean Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens directly referenced a continuum perspective on children's play, emphasising the role of teacher interactions during play to support children's learning:

> Play can range from being unstructured with free choice by children and no/little active adult support to being highly structured with teacher-led instruction and direction. While recognising the benefits of child-initiated and free play-choice play, this framework highlights the critical role of the teacher in purposeful play (Ministry of Education, Singapore 2012, p. 34)

In part, the problem can be attributed to what was hinted at in the beginning of this chapter—somewhat unchanged materials and practices in the provision of early years pedagogy that mean it can be difficult to change what actually happens in terms of using play as the basis for supporting learning. Krieg (2010) taps neatly into this problem discussing the influence the 'technologies' (i.e., pencils, paper and dolls) of traditional kindergartens have on taken-for-granted pedagogies—that is, the assumption that the provision of stimulating materials will be sufficient for promoting the type of play that will allow children to learn and construct their own understandings of the world. This is the very basis of the play provision offered by Seth in the opening chapter. The plastic sea animals, seaweed and sponges supposedly embed concepts about biodiversity into the play experience—by making these materials available Seth may well believe the children will learn what characterises the different creatures. Meanwhile, recent arguments continue to suggest that, whilst challenging, the "time is ripe for a critical empirical and theoretical look at the contribution of play and an examination of what is perceived as play from the perspectives of all the stakeholders" (Stephen 2010, p. 19). This movement towards a more critical consideration of the role of pedagogical play in early childhood education has commenced within the context of postdevelopmental perspectives on early childhood education.

2.4 Postdevelopmental Perspectives on Early Childhood Education

Continued engagement with ideas associated with Developmentally Appropriate Practice in early childhood education were supported by a range of contemporary perspectives on early learning, development and play, including post-modernism, post-structural, sociocultural and sociology of childhood viewpoints (Nolan and Kilderry 2010). Collectively, these perspectives increasingly captured the notion of being 'postdevelopmental' (Blaise 2009), whilst individually they are understood to

hold quite significant theoretical and philosophical lines of thought that distinguish each from the other.

Amongst the most significant of the postdevelopmental perspectives has been the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934). Vygotsky developed his theory during the early part of the twentieth Century through periods of great social upheaval and war. Nonetheless, his work has had far reaching implications for early childhood education and contemporary childhood studies in terms of his explanation of children's mastery of play, the development of imagination and the increasingly significant role of the teacher in children's learning (Kozulin 2001; Bodrova 2008). Kozulin et al. (2003) describe Vygotsky's work as:

> At the heart of Vygtosky's theory lies the understanding of human cognition and learning as social and cultural rather than individual phenomena… Vygotsky strongly believed in the close relationship between learning and development and in the sociocultural nature of both. He proposed that a child's development depends on the interaction between a child's individual maturation and a system of symbolic tools and activities that the child appropriates from his or her sociocultural environment. Learning in its systematic, organized, and intentional form appears in sociocultural theory as a driving force of development, as a consequence rather than a premise of learning experiences (p. 1).

Corsaro (2011) supports Vygotsky's ideas about children's interpretation of their culture through the acquisition of language and other cultural "tools or signs" (such as, drawing, objects) which are "created over the course of history and change with cultural development" (p. 15). According to Vygotsky, children "through their acquisition and use of language, come to reproduce a culture that contains knowledge of generations" (Corsaro 2011, p. 15). Corsaro (2011) continues stating "Vygotsky saw practical activities developing from the child's attempts to deal with everyday problems. Furthermore, in dealing with these problems, the child always develops strategies collectively—that is, in interaction with others" (p. 16).

From a sociocultural perspective, the teachers' role is much more proactive and engaged than previous understandings of pedagogical play which tended to highlight the role of the child's freely-chosen investigation in learning. From this perspective, Seth's approach, in which he stood and watched as the children played in the wading pool, would be considered insufficient for supporting learning. The increased role of the adult in children's learning therefore challenged conventional ideas about the child being the 'centre' of learning (Graue 2008), and resulted instead in arguments about pedagogical play that increasingly emphasised adult interactions to support children's conceptual learning and the acquisition of content knowledge (Eun 2010; Fleer 2010). Göncü and Gaskins (2011) argued that this movement represented a feasible reading of Vygotsky's ideas about the social orientation of play, however, noted that the adult "harnessing" of play for educative purposes shifted children's play from a focus on symbolic exploration to an intentional focus on learning (p. 55).

This shift was seen in the uptake of the idea of 'intentional teaching' (Duncan 2009; Epstein 2007) and in the use of the term 'sustained shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford 2009), where the educator and child engage in conversation to

further promote learning. Questions about how to best balance the role of intentional teaching with children, as opposed to setting up environments for open-ended play and acting as a facilitator to children's learning are becoming increasingly evident in research with educators (Thomas et al. 2011). This is particularly so where educators are concerned with the content associated with young children's learning and how such content learning can be best supported in early childhood contexts. Increasingly it is understood that content knowledge is constructed by children in concert with educators who already hold some degree of knowledge themselves. As Hedges and Cullen (2005) suggest:

> The kinds of informal, everyday knowledge children construct are mediated by teachers' domain knowledge in the context of responsive pedagogical approaches and can be a foundation for the co-construction of more formal knowledge (p. 5).

How children access content through pedagogical play is an area of research that increasingly highlights the relationship between children and teachers as a basis for learning (Hatch 2010). Whilst play and opportunities for freely-chosen play are historically valued and important, content knowledge and how this is co-constructed between children and teachers, is also considered increasingly significant in early childhood education. As Pramling-Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) argued, if play is to be considered educative in basis it would have to teach children 'something'. This representation of the 'something' sums up the tensions associated with contemporary perspectives on pedagogical play in early childhood education and illustrates the need for principles of play-based learning to inform early childhood environmental education. Otherwise, the situation can be very like the opening vignette in this book in which Seth observed the children at play, but there was little sense of what they learning about biodiversity that was going to contribute to their environmental education.

A shifting emphasis on the nature of interactions between children and adults in early childhood settings suggests instead that content needs to be more explicitly engaged by teachers for the pedagogical potential of play to be realised as environmental learning. Pedagogical play (encompassing the idea that play can be used in early childhood education to support learning) therefore centres on the debate regarding the extent to which the play should be relatively open-ended and exploratory, and the extent to which it should involve focussed interactions between children and adults in relation to particular content (Fleer 2011).

Another area of postdevelopmental research that has contributed to perspectives on pedagogical play is associated with the emergence of ideas from the sociology of childhood perspective (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Moran-Ellis 2010; Shanahan 2007). James et al. (1998) describe a "new paradigm of the sociology of childhood" where children are no longer merely a "category" but "social actors shaping as well as shaped by their circumstances" (p. 6). James et al. (1998) claim that "the discovery of children as agents" (p. 6) is of prime importance in this new way of thinking about children because it opens opportunities for thinking about how children construct perspectives, experiences and knowledge in relational ways. Dahlberg (2009) also established this perspective, suggesting that knowledge is

socially co-constructed by children as social actors capable of creatively influencing their own lives within "their everyday lives in the preschool" (p. 235). Pedagogically, Nolan and Kilderry (2010) argue that:

> Postdevelopmental orientations are inspired by theories and practices located outside child development theory, and suggest that play, and the pedagogical use of play, are not governed by individual children's 'needs'. Instead children are viewed as competent, socially active learners who are able to co-construct their learning intentions, learning strategies and learning outcomes in culturally meaningful ways with peers and adults (p.113).

Similarly, Corsaro (2011) argues that children engaged in peer culture play are able to enact control, autonomy and agency as they negotiate and protect their interactive play spaces within their early childhood settings (p. 161). From a sociology of childhood perspective, educators are likely to view children as competent actors capable of influencing their own learning with ideas and theories of pedagogical worth (Dahlberg et al. 1999, p. 48). With similar beliefs to those expressed by Dewey in the early twentieth century, Dahlberg et al. (1999) defined the 'new' sociology of childhood and the social construction of childhood:

> In this construction of the 'rich' child, learning is not an individual cognitive act undertaken almost in isolation within the head of the child. Learning is a cooperative and communicative activity, in which children construct knowledge, make meaning of the world, together with adults and, equally important, other children: that is why we emphasize that the young child as learner is an active co-constructor. Learning is not the transmission of knowledge taking the child to preordained outcomes, nor is the child a passive receiver and reproducer… he or she is born equipped to learn and does not ask or need adult permission to start learning (p. 50).

Postdevelopmental perspectives on play, whilst emphasising children's co-construction of knowledge in social contexts, also highlight the extent to which play is seen as open to interpretation. This includes seeing play in terms of the impact of gender, peer relationships, cultural experience and socioeconomic opportunities (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010). In early childhood education, this expanded understanding of play has resulted in the suggestion, that rather than seeing pedagogical play only as related to developmental or educational outcomes that educators think about how and why play is being used in early childhood education settings. In this way, play is thought about in terms of the 'context of application' in which it occurs and is used (Brooker and Edwards 2010). This can include developmental and educational outcomes, but also consideration of the impact of peer relationships on children's learning through play or the role of their cultural experiences on learning in early childhood settings. Importantly for early childhood environmental education, the context can and should consider the nature of children's play-based interactions of the world so that these may be orientated towards learning 'something' about the environment.

2.5   Conclusion

Early childhood education has been informed by a rich variety of beliefs and values over many generations of theorists and educators. Many of these ideas are still present in some form in multifaceted combinations of theories, images of the child and pedagogy. Long held views and traditions can be traced from the eighteenth Century through to contemporary thinking about pedagogical play. These include Rousseau's ideas about childhood innocence and protection; Froebel's notion of children being at work when playing in the children's garden; Dewey's focus of the active learner working on real life problems; Boyce's embedding of content knowledge in play; through to Piaget's exposition on the construction of knowledge through active exploration during play. More recently, ideas derived from Vygotsky's understanding about the social mediation of knowledge and learning, and play as a context for adult interaction are increasingly evident in approaches to early childhood education that now also value the role of the educator during play to support learning. The sociology of childhood highlights childhood agency, whilst notions of power relations between children and adults continue to shape discussion regarding the use of play-based learning in early childhood education. While play is gradually reconceptualised, the historical informants are still recognisable, and the Australian kindergarten described in the introduction of this chapter "for the small wee ones", may not be very different from the kindergartens now provided for young children in Singapore, New Zealand, the United States of America, the United Kingdom or Finland. This is not to say that pedagogical practices remain unchanged, rather to reflect on the extent to which early childhood education as a field evolves in relation to highly valued historical ideas about play, and the role of pedagogical play in the education and care of the very young. How these ideas manifest with the provision of early childhood environmental education forms the focus of the Chap. 3.

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