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Play meets early childhood teacher education

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Abstract
Recent policy changes connect play in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings explicitly to learning, and to later school-learning outcomes, calling on early childhood (EC) educators to incorporate intentional teaching into their practice. Given these recent policy changes, the purpose of this propositional article is to raise awareness and promote discussion about the current place of play in initial early childhood teacher education programs in Australian universities and the vocational education and training (VET) sector. The article initiates dialogue by contributing a rhizomatically-informed analytical snapshot of publicly available information from course outlines and subject guides in EC initial teacher education (ITE) in 20 Australian universities and the VET sector. This rhizomatically-informed analytical snapshot showed that the word 'play' was absent or occurred at relatively low frequency in course and subject descriptive material. The least frequent occurrence was in materials from ITE degree-level courses. While the snapshot does not delve into the full course and subject content (and makes no claims to do so), the rhizomatic methodological approach used leads us to ask whether 'play' is being overlooked in the delivery of ITE and VET courses for ECE. Recent quality ratings of ECEC services in Australia support the idea that for beginning and experienced educators, the knowledge base may be less robust than assumed when it comes to combining intentional teaching with play-based learning and the achievement of child outcomes. At the very least, we propose that this warrants further investigation.

Keywords Play-based learning · Intentional teaching · Early childhood education · Teacher education · Education policy · Discourse

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Introduction

In Australia and elsewhere, governments point to the importance of investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and a strong start for all children. Recognising that high-quality ECEC has a positive impact on children's developmental and learning outcomes (Melhuish et al. 2015), the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to the development and implementation of an ambitious National Early Childhood Development Strategy (COAG 2009). Initiatives included Australia's first national learning framework for the early years (birth to age 5)—*Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (2009) (EYLF). The EYLF endorsed a play-based approach to curriculum and learning. Consistent with the understanding that policy enactment is a 'creative, sophisticated and complex process' (Braun et al. 2010, p. 549), it was designed to 'enable practitioners the option of working with a diversity of ideas and theories' (Sumsion et al. 2009, p. 6). Its emphasis on educators' practices and their everyday interactions with children also reflects understandings that process aspects of quality 'are the most powerful predictors of impact on child outcomes' (Siraj et al. 2017, p. 13).

Combining play with intentional teaching to achieve prescribed learning outcomes, while ensuring that pedagogical interactions are responsive to children and their playfulness, calls for nuanced pedagogical approaches and significant changes to established practices. Strengthening the capability of educators to combine play-based learning with intentional teaching is crucial given that the quality of adult–child interactions can improve child outcomes (Siraj et al. 2017). Initial teacher education (ITE) and vocational education and training (VET) have a key role to play in ensuring that EC teacher graduates and diploma-qualified staff are adequately prepared for these complex pedagogical demands. In Australia however, there is 'currently no effective mechanism to ensure that all early childhood (EC) courses (both university and VET-based) equip pre-service educators with the skills needed to produce effective teacher–child interactions' (Torii et al. 2017, p. 5). This critique is tempered by the fact that none of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers [Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2011] or the National Quality Standard (NQS) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)) specifically addresses educator–child interactions. For instance, AITSL Standard 1 (Know students and how they learn) focuses on physical, social and intellectual development and characteristics of students; understanding how students learn, and strategies for specific types of learners. The closest the NQS comes to discussing the quality of educator-child interactions is Quality Area 5, where educators are to promote respectful and responsive relationships with children to support their sense of security and belonging (Standards 5.1 and 5.2).

Regarding quality, Pascoe and Brennan (2017) have commented that 'overall, the most influential factors affecting quality, across age groups and service settings, are the education, qualifications and training of the workforce' (p. 63). In this article, we ask whether EC courses are sufficiently addressing the nexus

of play-based learning, intentional teaching and learning outcomes required to implement the EYLF. The expectation that teachers entering the school sector are 'classroom ready' (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) 2014) also applies to EC graduates.

In what follows, we elaborate and explain our apprehension. We provide a snapshot of course outlines and subject guides in EC initial teacher education (ITE) in 20 Australian universities, and the EC courses offered in the vocational education and training (VET) sector. We juxtapose our discursive readings of the wordcounts with other fragments of data outside of the ITE course outlines—data from the NQS (ACECQA 2018). Applying a rhizomatic approach, our investigation suggests the need for further inquiry into play pedagogies. But first, we tease out the importance of 'play' as a dominant discourse in both past and present fields of early childhood education and care. The complexities of featuring play as a highly symbolic and political emblem of ECEC mean the word 'play' has come to work as a code, a device of power (Foucault 1985), distinguishing EC professionals from others in education—for better and worse.

Background

Play has long been the 'holy grail', an almost hallowed concept, and a taken-for-granted feature of early years settings (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010). At the same time, interpretations of what play means are by no means universal. This is not surprising. Play is often discussed but rarely defined (Vu et al. 2015). There are many ways 'play' is constructed and understood in a field that draws on a breadth and depth of ideas, disciplines and theories.

That 'children learn through play' is one mantra. There is no shortage of research on play. The problem is we don't know much about how teachers teach through play (Ryan and Northy-Berg 2014). Defining 'play-based learning' is no simple matter. If play is understood as the 'opposite' of 'work', or as something natural, free, and 'unschooled', then the logic is that children's play-based learning requires no 'teaching'. The role, value, status of the educator is diminished—EC educators are rendered little more than 'glorified baby-sitters' (Gibson 2015). They do not 'teach', rather, they 'direct' children along developmental pathways.

The complexity of the relationship between play, teaching, and learning outcomes means that the play/pedagogy interface is the site of lingering tensions. Play can be about imagination, experimentation, creativity, not-working. Play can involve rules, structure, pleasure. So-called '*free play*' is always 'tamed' to some extent, within 'educational' settings (Ailwood 2008), and the presence of educators. The challenges lie in enacting a curriculum that combines freedom and structure.

Playing and learning

The EYLF (CoA 2009) echoes an international preoccupation with more explicit teaching in ECEC (House 2012). Educators are directed to incorporate intentional

teaching into a play-based learning program that supports all children to achieve a range of outcomes. This intersection where 'play meets education' is far from simple. A *technicist* version of play (Wood 2014) is produced as a result of policy makers having significant influence over how play is understood and positioned (Hedges and Cullen 2011). Curricular models can work to reformulate play as secondary—as a means to promote specific ways of learning, leading to defined goals (Martlew et al. 2011). Coming to terms with the complexities and multiple understandings and interpretations of play does not mean settling on a single definition (Brooker et al. 2014). Champions for play in ECEC need to have a depth of understanding of its value and connections with learning, and be able to articulate these concepts with confidence.

Educators require particular skills to observe and attend to children's meanings and patterns of play, and to then effectively integrate their educative purposes with children's purposes (Wood 2014). Every day, educators are required to make decisions about individual children, groups of children, play, content knowledge, pedagogical approaches, learning outcomes, agency (see Grieshaber and Graham 2017). With a school climate that increasingly emphasises academic curriculum and testing regimes, the risk in the before-school years is that competing priorities lead to pedagogical approaches that narrow the scope of programming for play (Brooker et al. 2014). In England, school-based testing regimes have the potential to disrupt child-centred and play-based approaches that have previously characterised the before school sector, and substitute school preparation (readiness) procedures (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2018). Educators' confidence and capacity to articulate their theories and practices (see Hedges 2014) can mean the difference between a play-based program and the 'schoolification' of the early years.

When education meets play

Evidence that qualified teachers make a difference is increasingly recognised (Pascoe and Brennan 2017). It takes educators with necessary and specialist knowledges, skills and pedagogies to support play-based learning programs. Early childhood educators are distinguished by their knowledge of and expertise with play. However, there is very little empirical research/evidence about what early childhood educators actually *do*.

If educators are to navigate a complex curriculum of play-based learning, their professional preparation for enacting play pedagogies is crucial. ITE is where play pedagogies are initially introduced and practised. If research into pedagogies in EC education settings is a relatively new field, research into ITE is even more limited in EC (Ryan and Northey-Berg 2014). Of the few recent publications related to play, a small Canadian study showed that EC students began their ITE program "with strong classroom practice beliefs that reflect a child-centered approach, and that teaching practices that were least characteristic of their beliefs are teacher-directed" (Di Santo et al. 2017, p. 240). Another small-scale study from the USA found that facilitated critical reflection during a seven-week practicum supported students to value learning through play and exploration (Beavers et al. 2017). However, neither

of these small studies were about ITE nor educator–child interactions. Despite long held traditions of play as the identifying factor for EC education professionals, there are very few studies that describe how educators learn about play, and play pedagogies.

A review of professional learning about play pedagogies documents several studies that show coursework in ITE is 'a significant influence' (Ryan and Northey-Berg 2014, p. 208) on teachers' beliefs about play. One of the chief findings of this review was that pre-service teachers in the USA are more likely to have a whole subject devoted to child development, or particular curriculum areas (e.g. literacy and numeracy), and they are much less likely to be enrolled in a subject devoted to teaching about play and play pedagogies.[1] We used Ryan and Northey-Berg's findings as a springboard for an initial mapping exercise of ECE courses on offer across selected ITE programs at Australian universities, and VET offerings for ECEC Diploma and Certificate qualifications. The resulting snapshot suggests that similar conditions may apply in Australia.

Play and contemporary teacher education in Australia

Previous studies have mapped and analysed ECEC university courses across Australia (e.g. Garvis et al. 2013). However, these studies do not probe play, and play pedagogies. It is problematic to view ITE as a stable set of 'linear input–output transactions' (Strom 2015, p. 321) that can be readily measured. We used a rhizomatic approach, and juxtaposed fragments of data (Sellers 2015), resisting traditional hierarchies of knowledge and the 'scientificity' (Lather 2007) of evidence. We read ITE programs and the regulatory authority (ACECQA) as connected in associated power relations, going some way towards capturing the multidimensional interplay between ideas about play, policies and pedagogical practices (Zollo 2017). Without the imperative to find simplistic cause-and effect relationships, the poststructuralist methodological approach provided a means for examining organisations of power, singularities, nuances and possibilities (Zollo 2017).

Beginning with an existing framework for reading course content[2] (see McArdle 2010), we selected 20 EC teacher education courses in 17 universities across Australia (Table 1). We were interested in *what* could be learned from the publicly available information about ITE, and specifically about play, in full recognition of the difference between a curriculum and what might be enacted (Fraser and Bosanquet

[1] We refer here throughout this paper to the entire program as a 'course', and 'subjects' are individual units of study usually one semester long, with a designated sequence of focused lectures, tutorials and assessment tasks. Generally there are 32 subjects (four each semester over 4 years) which must be successfully completed in a Bachelor degree program.

[2] This framework builds on the work of Shulman (2007), Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) and others, and identifies key elements essential for quality ITE, including: critical and cultural contexts (foundations); professional attributes; strategies and skills for scaffolding teaching and learning (pedagogies); discipline knowledge and its relationship to school subjects (curriculum); informed theory and practice (field experience).

Table 1 'Play' in subject titles across courses [20] for EC ITE

Site	Course title	Notes on number of subjects and options for electives	Occurrence of the word 'play' across all subject titles
1	B Ed EC Teach	Advanced-standing diploma. 16 subjects, no electives	1
2	Grad Dip in Ed (EC)	1 year. 8 subjects, no electives	1
3	B Ed early years	4 years. 32 subjects, small number of electives	1
4	B Ed early childhood	4 years. 32 subjects, small number of electives	0
5	B Ed Early Childhood	4 years. 32 subjects, 1 elective in 4th year	0
6	B Ed early childhood	4 years. 32 subjects, small number of electives	1
7	B Teach EC	4 years. 32 subjects, small number of electives	3
8	B Ed EC/Prim	4 years. B Ed 0–12 years, 32 subjects, no electives	1
9	B Ed EC	4 years. 32 subjects, small number of electives	1
10	B Ed EC	4 years. 32 subjects, 1 elective	1
11	B Ed (EC/Primary)	4 years, 32 subjects, no electives	1
12	B Ed 0–5	4 years. 32 subjects, number of electives: various	0
13	B Ed EC/Prim	4 years. 32 subjects, number of electives: various.	0
14	B Ed ECE	4 years. 32 subjects. No electives	1
15	B Ed EC Teach	4 years. B Ed 0–12, 32 subjects. small number of electives	1
16	B Ed (Hons) EY & P	4 years. 32 subjects. No electives	3
17	B Ed (Hons) EY	4 years. 32 subjects. No electives	3
18	B Ed ECE	4 years. 32 subjects. No electives	1
19	B Ed EC	4 years. 32 subjects. No electives	0
20	B EC Ed	4 years. 32 subjects. No electives	0
			Total = 20

2006). We looked for indicators of what and how pre-service teachers encounter about play pedagogies in their preparation. The purposeful sample was aimed at providing understanding about the phenomenon of play (Creswell 2014) in course and subject outlines. It included all Australian universities that offered a specific teacher qualification in Early Childhood Education—urban and regional, large and small across all states and territories. In Australia, these differences in context can be significant, affecting factors such as funding and offerings, modes of study, and cohort size (ranging from 25 to 250 students). This is not a comprehensive coverage of all 83 offerings across Australia as many universities offer more than one course. Our method does not seek to establish 'typicality'. Rather, our purposeful selection sought to take into account at least some of the range of contextual differences and the complexities that have developed due to history, geography and other factors. The sampling included universities from: each State and Territory, metropolitan and

regional, older and newly established institutions, The sample of 20 courses goes some way towards addressing some factors that can be taken into account when inquiring into course content (McArdle 2010).

The sample included three universities with particular historical significance in the field—each started as a traditional 'kindergarten teachers' college' before the 1980s (see Wong and Press 2016). These three institutions might be expected to have an emphasis on play due to their histories. With their origins as colleges for the exclusive training of kindergarten teachers, it might be anticipated that 'play' was featured strongly in the curriculum designed to prepare these graduates (see for example, Byrne 1986). Some newer universities (established after 1989), in some cases, have added ECEC to what was once a Primary (Elementary) School qualification ($n=6$). Some courses provide ITE for working with children aged 0–5 years, others 0–8 years, and others 0–12 years (Primary/ECEC). Two shorter courses on offer were also included—Bachelor of Education Early Childhood Teaching (B Ed (EC)) and Graduate Diploma in Education (Early Childhood) (Grad Dip EC) (see Table 1, Site #1 and Site #2). The B Ed (EC) is designed specifically for students who already hold a Diploma in EC, and are granted credit for 16 subjects towards a B Ed Course. The Grad Dip EC is offered to Bachelor graduates from disciplines other than ECEC (e.g. Health, Social Work, Maths, Arts). Play might be expected to be a more significant feature in a shortened program, identifying the core/essential knowledge and skills for ECE.

A simple word frequency count was adopted as an initial text-analysis strategy (Fraser 2005), using a particular understanding of how language can work as a device of power (Foucault 1985). We searched for how predominantly the word 'play' was used. This reading of the document as a prescriptive text could identify at one level what is marked out at a given point in time, and also what is excluded from this same territory. To unsettle the notion of objective readings of data to produce 'evidence', at this point we read 'against the grain' (St Pierre 2016), "connecting diverse fragments of data in ways that produced new linkages and revealed discontinuities" (Honan 2015, p. 29) that may go unmarked in analysis that draws on more conventional linguistic methods. We draw on disparate phenomena, including personal and archival material, learning design literature, higher education teaching and learning literature, and course development and administration experience, within ECE courses. Through our rhizomatic approach, if the frequency counts of the word 'play' are juxtaposed with disparate fragments of data 'outside of' the course outlines (e.g. curriculum and research literature, regulatory documents), then further cause for concern can be acknowledged.

First, we searched the titles of all subjects ($n=32$ or $n=16$)[3] offered over the course of study. 'Play' was read as a particular text, a code (Bloch and Kennedy 2014), marking out distinctive practices, principles and approaches illustrative of ECE (see Table 1).

There are 20 courses in Table 1, from a range of Australian universities offering EC qualifications. 18 of the courses are 4 years full-time, undergraduate courses

[3] Postgrad Entry Courses have reduced number of subjects, from 32 to 16.

(#3–#20). 2 courses (#1 and #2) are shorter courses, with an intake of students already qualified in another discipline, and wishing to qualify as an EC educator.

We scanned Subject Titles in these courses for occurrence of the word 'play' in the title (see right hand column, Table 1). The count for 6 of the 20 courses was zero (0/32). For the majority of the courses (11/20), the word 'play' appears in only 1 of the subject titles (1/32, or 1/16, or 1/8). In the remaining three courses (3/20), the word 'Play' appears three times ($n=3$). Two of these courses (#16 and #17) are at the same university, one course (#17) being offered for EC educators, and one (#16) more broadly for EC and primary combined. This first reading indicates the number of times, across the span of their courses, students have the opportunity to enrol in a subject that has the word 'play' in its title.

The third column in Table 1 addresses the degree of mandate for the students' enrolment choices in subjects. If courses were constructed with flexibility and offered multiple pathways, the task of determining the student experience would be complex. However, 10 of the 20 courses selected for this inquiry offer no electives ($n=0$). 8 courses offer a small number of electives (between 1 and 3), including 2 of these courses offering 1 elective in the 4 years of study (#5 and #10). 2 courses offer a suite of electives (#12 and #13). There are no electives in the two selected shorter courses (#1, #2) (16 subjects and 8 subjects). If enrolled in the courses with electives, it is possible that students *do* elect to enrol in a subject/subjects with 'play' in the title, increasing the total number of times they have this opportunity. Within the scope of this inquiry, we did not follow each of the elective offerings. Instead, for our further rhizomatic analysis, we took the 'worst case', and considered the students whose elective choices do *not* include subjects with the word 'play' in the title. If it is the case that the word 'play' features more frequently in subject titles of electives, this too has discursive implications. It might be said, for instance, that this would work discursively to marginalise 'play', or signal it as an 'optional' specialisation.

This information alone is not necessarily a definitive indicator of the importance or priority given to 'Play' in the design nor delivery of courses. We compared the frequency of the word 'Play' with the frequency of other words that the literature (e.g. Ryan and Northey-Berg 2014; Siraj et al. 2017) led us to believe might be also important signifiers (see Table 2). In total, across all 20 courses, 'Play' occurred a total of 20 times ($n=20$) in subject titles. It occurred less frequently than any of the discipline signifiers 'maths' ($n=47$), 'literacy' ($n=51$), 'science' ($n=32$), and less frequently than 'learning' ($n=92$), 'development' ($n=43$) and other associated words: 'pedagogy', 'teaching', 'experience', 'curriculum', 'health', 'social', 'language', 'development', 'creative', 'children', and 'young' (see Table 2).

Another strategy for understanding the organisation of knowledge and power was to consider the words surrounding and connecting with 'play' (St Pierre 2016). For instance, one subject with the word 'play' in the title was named: 'Developing a Play Curriculum'. The word 'curriculum' lends legitimacy to 'play'. At another university, personal archival material enabled us to trace a historical shift in the wording of a subject title. In 1996 one subject was titled: 'Theories of Play and Development'. In 2003, occupying the same space in the same course, the subject was re-titled: 'Learning, Teaching and Play'. In 2014, in the same course, there was no subject with 'play' in the title on offer. One subject titled 'Early Language and Literacy'

Table 2 Frequency of keywords in subject titles in 20 course outlines

Site	Course title	Play	Development	Sociology	Pedagogy	Numeracy	Math	Literacy	Science	Art	Teaching	Learning	Assessment	Research	Curriculum	Philosophy	Theory	Leadership	Management	Behaviour	Social
1	B Ed EC Teach	1	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	1
2	Grad Dip in Ed (EC)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
3	B Ed Early Years	1	3	2	1	0	2	2	3	1	1	3	0	2	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
4	B Ed Early Childhood	0	0	1	0	0	3	4	3	1	5	5	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
5	B Ed Early Childhood	0	2	0	0	0	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	1	5	0	0	1	1	0	1
6	B Ed Early Childhood	1	1	0	3	1	2	1	2	3	3	4	0	1	3	0	1	1	1	1	1
7	B Teach EC	3	2	0	2	1	1	3	1	2	2	2	0	1	4	1	0	2	2	0	2
8	B Ed EC/ Prim	1	4	0	3	0	3	4	3	2	5	6	0	1	3	0	0	3	2	0	4
9	B Ed EC	1	1	0	1	1	2	3	1	3	1	6	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	1
10	B Ed EC	1	2	0	2	1	2	1	1	2	1	4	2	1	4	0	0	1	0	0	2
11	B Ed EC/ Prim	1	4	0	0	0	4	2	1	2	4	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
12	B Ed 0-5	0	4	0	2	0	4	4	3	2	4	9	0	0	3	0	0	1	1	1	0
13	B Ed EC/ Prim	0	2	0	4	0	4	3	1	2	1	7	0	0	3	0	0	1	1	0	1

Table 2 (continued)

Site	Course title	Play	Development	Sociology	Pedagogy	Numeracy	Math	Literacy	Science	Art	Teaching	Learning	Assessment	Research	Curriculum	Philosophy	Theory	Leadership	Management	Behaviour	Social
14	B Ed ECE	1	2	0	2	0	5	3	2	2	3	7	1	0	4	0	0	1	1	0	2
15	B Ed EC Teach	1	1	0	2	0	3	4	2	1	4	2	0	1	2	0	1	1	0	0	1
16	B Ed (Hons) EY & P	3	3	1	1	0	2	3	1	3	2	11	1	2	2	0	1	1	1	0	0
17	B Ed (Hons) EY	3	3	1	1	0	1	2	1	2	2	7	1	2	2	0	1	1	1	0	0
18	B Ed ECE	1	2	0	0	0	2	3	1	1	2	4	3	0	3	0	1	1	1	1	1
19	B Ed EC	0	1	0	2	1	2	2	2	2	7	4	1	1	4	0	0	1	1	0	0
20	B EC Ed	0	5	0	0	0	2	2	2	2	4	6	2	0	3	0	1	1	1	0	0
		20	43	5	26	5	47	51	32	37	53	92	13	13	50	3	8	23	16	5	20

Table 3 University X subject descriptors and outlines for students

Subject EC:	Type	Descriptor	Outline	*N* = times word 'Play' is included
Mathematics Education 1	Curriculum	63 words	1017 words	0
English Literacies and Language	Discipline	76 words	873 words	0
Contemporary and Comparative Perspectives	Foundation	95 word	914 words	0

included 'Literacy and Play' as one of its weekly topics. Using this approach, it is important not to make 'truth claims' that identify causal explanations (St Pierre 2016) or go beyond re-description. We can say that at this level of university administration (subject titles), 'play' is not a prominent flag for early childhood teacher education.

There are 83 courses—including undergraduate ITE and postgraduate entry programs—available for ECE across institutions in Australia. This level of variation leads us to propose that numerous explanations are possible, and there is no one 'history of play' (Foucault 1985) in ITE. It is possible for instance, that 'play' is such a taken-for-granted entity that it is not considered necessary to signify it at the level of subject title. Play might be so embedded and foundational that it underpins everything, and therefore goes unmarked as a category.

If play is indeed embedded, we needed to drill down to the next level of detail in course materials—the Subject Outline. This is a more detailed descriptor of the subject, outlining the semester schedule of weekly lectures and tutorials, and including required reading lists, content areas, weekly topics, assessment tasks, and the assessed learning outcomes. Here, the word 'play' might indicate that play is intentionally taught as part of the ITE curriculum.

With this in mind, we selected one university, and drilled down to the level of the descriptor for individual subjects. We purposefully selected University X, being one of the institutions with its origins as a kindergarten teachers' college, becoming a university in the 1980s reforms. Our own knowledge of how courses are designed and evolve (see McArdle 2010) combined with history led us to anticipate a possible foundation of play prevailing in this ITE program for EC. Using publicly available documents from University X, we selected one course only, not as 'representational' nor 'typical', but rather, a singular possibility for understanding (Creswell 2014).

University X was included in Table 1. The word 'play' does not appear in any of the 32 subject titles ($n=0$). Next, isolating University X from Table 2, we noted that it was one of the universities where the word 'play' does not feature anywhere in the course outlines ($n=0$). Other expected terms that did occur included: curriculum ($n=5$), development ($n=2$), literacy ($n=3$).

Next, at University X, we looked at all of the individual subject outlines (lecture schedules, readings, and so on) for selected core subjects—curriculum, discipline and foundation (see Table 3). The word 'play' did not occur ($n=0$) in any of this material.

Finally, we draw on our own experience of tertiary education to acknowledge that 'play' might well be featured in the content of the weekly lecture material, and tutorial tasks and discussions. Further research employing different methodologies could prove useful to zoom in on the further detail of the learning experience for students. The complexities and varied theoretical understandings of play, as spelled out in the EYLF (CoA 2009), might be apparent in prescribed reading lists, weekly topics, and online materials, lectures. Nuanced pedagogical approaches—such as combining play with intentional teaching, and bringing together learning outcomes and play experiences—might well be dealt with at this level of the teaching and learning experience at universities currently. Our preliminary inquiry does not make claims about this. Rather, this rhizomatic exploration does suggest that the public discourse, as evidenced by the materials we examined, raises questions around the discursive production and positioning of 'play', and the hierarchies of knowledge afforded to 'play' in the teacher preparation courses currently available in Australian universities.

State of play

Despite the fiercely championed status of play, this brief investigation of ITE programs in 20 Australian universities suggests that, at the very least, 'play' is not central in a university curriculum that is designed to prepare educators for implementing play-based programs with young children. Similar to findings in the USA (Ryan and Northey-Berg 2014), students in Australian universities are more likely to enrol in specific curriculum, discipline and foundation subjects and less likely to enrol in any subject designed specifically to teach about play, and play pedagogies. Course design can work as an apparatus of power; although at the same time we recognise the complexities and possible internal contradictions (St. Pierre 2002) in ITE.

Behind current calls for specialist EC educators is the assumption that there is a strong professional knowledge base about play (Hedges 2014). Presumably, degree qualified educators have capacities to apply, model and articulate play-based learning, its importance and its benefits. Our snapshot suggests that if contemporary universities are where EC educators form their beliefs about play-based learning, and learn about play pedagogies for the first time, then it is little wonder that play remains rarely theorised, and barely articulated—at least by the graduating educators who are preparing to work with a play-based curriculum.

Without more information, it is not possible to determine causal explanations for this absence of the use of the word 'play' in the discursive field. If not the taken-for-granted, embedded explanation, another possibility is that, in a neoliberal climate and the highly competitive university market, play does not 'sell'. Universities have tried to manage funding cuts by designing and delivering more one-size-fits-all, generic degree programs (Press 2014). Specific signifiers such as play are necessarily minimised in a course/subject that might be delivered to pre-service teachers across all sectors of schooling—Early Years, Primary and Secondary. Courses can become 'patchwork quilts' sometimes with very little coherence or shared purpose,

with traces and remains of earlier ideas sometimes entrenched, the reasons for which have been long lost.

Play and VET

The various versions of a university qualification for early childhood education are only part of the story. Reforms (COAG 2009) call for every EC educator to be qualified. Many educators have undertaken or are enrolled in alternative study and training pathways, graduating with Certificates and Diplomas. These courses are taught through VET institutions and 452 providers currently offer ECEC programs across Australia (www.asqa.gov.au). Our investigation of the 'state of play' in university courses led us to wonder whether we would find similar 'gaps' in the VET courses. This was not entirely the case.

Significantly, there is not the level of variation across institutions, as occurs in the 80+ different University Course offerings. All registered VET organisations including tertiary and further education are obliged to offer the same ECEC course with the same subjects, as prescribed and ratified by the Federal Government. This is a joint initiative of the Australian state and territory governments through the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care (NP NQA ECEC 2018). All individual providers use the same course code and list the same subjects.

Students can enrol initially in a Certificate III course and then choose to complete further subjects, and earn a Diploma qualification. The course is titled: Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care (see www.training.gov.au). The government website lists a description for the Diploma course, including a list of core and elective subjects. A word search shows no mention of the word play ($n=0$) in the Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care course descriptor, including subject titles.

In the Certificate III course, there are 15 core subjects and three elective subjects. Of the core subjects, 11 are also in the Diploma. Of the elective subjects, two are also in the Diploma, one being a core subject of the Diploma and one an elective. In the Diploma, there are 23 core subjects and five elective subjects.

One of the core subjects of the Certificate III is titled: CHCECE011 'Provide experiences to support children's play and learning'. This is the only subject title that includes the word play. In the expanded subject description, there are ten mentions of play and one of playfulness. Of all the subject outlines, this is by far the highest frequency of use of the word 'play'. The subject is in the Certificate III course and is not included in the Diploma. Another Certificate III only subject, CHCECE010 'Support the holistic development of children in early childhood', also mentions play three times in the subject description.

Of all the subjects listed on the training website (www.training.gov.au), there were eight subjects that, while not having the word play in the title, do mention play in the description of content. Table 4 lists each of these eight subjects and the number of times the word play appears in the subject descriptors.

Table 4 Certificate III subjects and frequency of use of word 'play'

Subject title	Frequency of word 'play' in the subject description
CHCECE002 Ensure the health and safety of children	1
CHCECE003 Provide care for children	2
CHCECE007 Develop positive and respectful relationships with children	2
CHCECE017 Foster the holistic development and wellbeing of the child in early childhood	9
CHCECE018 Nurture creativity in children	3
CHCECE022 Promote children's agency	3
CHCECE023 Analyse information to inform learning	1
CHCSAC005 Foster the holistic development and wellbeing of the child in school age care	9

Table 5 Certificate III adjacent terms: play and teaching

Subjects that mention 'play'	Number of times that 'teaching' is referred to in some form, alongside play
CHCECE017 Foster the holistic development and wellbeing of the child in early childhood	1: 'teachable moments'
CHCECE018 Nurture creativity in children	1: 'teach'
CHCECE022 Promote children's agency	2: 'intentional teaching'; 'planned and unplanned teaching'
CHCECE023 Analyse information to inform learning	1: 'intentional teaching'
CHCSAC005 Foster the holistic development and wellbeing of the child in school age care	1: 'teachable moments'

Table 6 Certificate III subject outlines that mention teaching but not play

Reference to teaching	But not 'play'
CHCECE024 Design and implement the curriculum to foster children's learning and development	2: 'planned and unplanned teaching and learning'
CHCECE025 Embed sustainable practices in service operations	1: 'intentional teaching'

When we identified adjacent words, five of the eight subjects that mentioned play in the description also included a reference to teach or teaching, close to or alongside play (see Table 5).

Two other subjects do not include a reference to play, but they do refer to teaching (see Table 6).

It appears then from this very basic probe that the VET Certificate and Diploma qualifications afford more attention to 'play' in the educator preparation landscape in ECEC, compared with the university degree qualifications. One possibility is

due to another of the complexities of the field. Historically there are longstanding dichotomous education/care tensions (Gibson 2015), and a discourse that eschews 'teaching' in favour of 'directing and care' might be more inclined to feature 'play' more prominently.

Again, it must be reiterated that a frequency count of the words in subject titles is not a detailed analysis of course content, nor its delivery. Our level of investigation did not closely examine *what* is taught about play and pedagogies. Nevertheless, a poststructuralist reading of document-as-text does raise some questions about how play is discursively produced at the initial training stage for EC educators. Taking into account the preparation provided to all educators in the field (University Degrees, Diplomas, Certificates), the question of the knowledge base for beginning educators warrants further investigation when it comes to combining intentional teaching with play-based learning and the achievement of child outcomes.

More than subjects and courses

There is more to becoming an EC educator than enrolling in a series and sequence of subjects, regardless of the subject titles, course design and delivery. The process of learning to teach has always recognised the value of a master-apprentice model, and the mentoring provided by experienced teachers (Zeichner 2018). To develop a repertoire of theories and methods for enacting play pedagogies, it is expected that pre-service teachers have the opportunity to experience play pedagogies first hand. Ideally, during their field experience placements, student educators will be able to observe experienced teachers combining intentional teaching with young children's play-based learning in ECEC settings. And they will have opportunities to practice and develop the necessary skills through their own experiences with young children. Here we encounter another problem.

If experienced educators' knowledge, skills and practices do not extend to the complexities of acting intentionally to bring about learning through play, then the Field Experience model for teacher education falls down. This leads to our next question—what do we know about the current practice of experienced educators, who are required to enact play-based programs, combined with intentional teaching, to achieve learning outcomes for children?

Educators combine play with intentional teaching

The focus for 'reform' in education is now the quality of teaching (Siraj et al. 2017; Torii et al. 2017). The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), the national authority for quality assurance, oversees the quality of the educational program, which involves the states and territories assessing educators' demonstrated ability to enact this approach to curriculum. ECEC centres are rated on the capacities of staff to: understand, articulate and apply their understandings of play approaches to learning (ACECQA 2017); and to demonstrate measurable outcomes (ACECQA 2017; Hedges 2010). At present, there is very little evidence that

Table 7 NQF QA 1 Elements rated as either 'significant improvement required' or 'working towards the standard' in the audited services (3434) rated as 'not meeting' the NQS (ACECQA 2018, p. 15)

Element	Rating
Element 1.2.3: 'Critical reflection on children's learning and development, both as individuals and in groups, is regularly used to implement the program'	58% of 3434 services 'not met the Standard'
Element 1.2.1: 'Each child's learning is assessed as part of an ongoing cycle of planning, documenting and evaluation'.	57% 'not met the Standard'
Element 1.1.3: 'The program, including routines, is organised in ways that maximise opportunities for children's learning'.	33% 'not met the Standard'
Element 1.1.4: 'The documentation about each child's program and progress is available to parents'	28% 'not met the Standard'
Element 1.1.1: 'Curriculum decision making contributes to each child's learning and development outcomes in relation to their identity, connection with community, wellbeing, confidence as learners and effectiveness as communicators'	28% 'not met the Standard'
Element 1.1.2: 'Each child's current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are the foundation of the program'	25% 'not met the Standard'
Element 1.2.2: 'Educators respond to children's ideas and play and use intentional teaching to scaffold and extend each child's learning'	25% 'not met the Standard'

captures how the required knowledges, practices, and specialised skills are acquired, to enable EC educators to meet mandated policy imperatives.

National Quality Framework (NQF)

Current education policy is committed to responding to evidence-based research and data (Australian Government Productivity Commission 2016). Concerns over realising the expectations of the EYLF (CoA 2009) in terms of intentional teaching and play-based learning are supported by ACECQA data. Data from the National Quality Framework (NQF) Snapshot Q4 2017 (ACECQA 2018), for the period ending 31 December 2017, indicated that more than 94% (14,647) of ECEC services had been audited and rated against the National Quality Standard (NQS). Of the 14,647 centres audited to date, the most problematic of the seven Quality Areas (QA) for educators is Quality Area 1 (QA1): 'Educational Program and Practice': QA1 had the highest percentage (18%) of services that were rated as Working Towards the NQS.[4]

The NQF Snapshot Q4 2017 data (ACECQA 2018) indicated that 3434 of 14,647 services approved to operate (and that have a quality rating) were rated as not meeting the NQS [either 'Significant Improvement Required' (38; < 1%) or 'Working

[4] The NQS audit ranks a service across seven quality areas. Each area comprises several quality standards (18 NQF standards in total), and each standard comprises several elements (58 NQF elements in total). Each element is rated as either Significant Improvement Required; Meeting the NQS; Exceeding the NQS, or Excellent. Quality Area 1, the most poorly rated area in the current audit, as noted above, contains nine elements.

Towards the National Quality Standard' (3396; 23%)]. For these 3434 services not meeting the NQS, eight of the 16 most poorly ranked elements (of 58 total NQF elements)—i.e. rated as 'not met'—are from Quality Area 1, Standards 1 and 2 (see Table 7). A reading of these data suggests that when curriculum and pedagogy are considered, nearly a quarter of services (not meeting the NQS) are in need of further development when it comes to delivering quality programs for children.

Critical reflection (Element 1.2.3) on practice is not possible without a sound grasp of the principles and purposes of practice (McArdle and Ryan 2017). A pedagogical approach which requires recognition of and response to children's interests and learning is dependent on assessment (Element 1.2.1) as an integral aspect of learning and teaching. According to the EYLF (CoA 2009), it is through play that children's learning opportunities are maximised (Element 1.1.3).

While the ACECQA data alone 'rates' the teaching, it does not provide detail on how or why educators are not meeting specific elements when it comes to curriculum and pedagogy. There is little empirical evidence about how this professional knowledge base, as defined and measured by the ACECQA data, will become available and accessible for educators. It is therefore important to investigate the use of ACECQA data and/or other tools and strategies that might provide evidence-based research that will inform any undertakings aimed at improving teacher quality.

Conclusion

Changes that have accompanied the introduction of a national learning framework for the early years in Australia have required educators to make connections between play, intentional teaching and learning outcomes in their daily work. Long held traditions and beliefs around play, children and appropriate pedagogies have been largely taken-for-granted, at least among those who work with young children (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010).

This paper marks a starting point for a larger and more comprehensive investigation into play-based education and play pedagogies in Australia. It has provided a rhizomatically-informed analytical snapshot of the frequency of the word 'play' in course titles and subject information in the VET sector and ITE courses in 20 Australian universities. The purpose of the article is to raise awareness and promote questions and dialogue about the place of play in EC educator preparation. It makes no claims to delve into the full course learning experience, nor actual subject content. However, the snapshot suggests that further consideration is needed if educators are to successfully combine play-based learning with intentional teaching to achieve improved child outcomes, as required by the EYLF (CoA 2009).

The ACECQA (2018) data suggest a professional knowledge base about learning through play across the ECEC sector that is perhaps less strong than may be assumed (e.g. 18% of all services rated as 'Working towards' QA1). The only Element in Table 7 that mentions play is 1.2.2, and 25% (of the 3434 services rated as Significant Improvement Required or Working Towards NQS) have not met the standard required for this element. Of more concern from Table 7 are Elements 1.2.3, 1.2.1, 1.1.3 (58%, 57%, 33% respectively), which are about critical reflection,

assessment, and the program being organised to maximise opportunities for children's learning. An apparently minimal focus on play in Australian ITE and VET programs for educators means that, where the work of quality pedagogies is taught, play takes a back seat, in both theories and practices. The combination of these two factors raises concerns over the capacity of the early childhood profession to implement the play-based learning that is central to the EYLF.

The relationships between play, learning and teaching make it difficult to reduce complexity to order and prescribe definitively a right way of enacting intentional teaching in order to implement a play-based curriculum that leads to specific learning outcomes. One argument is that this lack of specific attention to the methods and strategies for teaching through play has resulted in the inability to articulate arguments for the defence and retention of play pedagogies. The ironies of preparing teachers for play-based learning in a larger schooling system where play is disappearing (Gleave and Cole-Hamilton 2012) compound the issue. Nonetheless, play-based learning remains a priority for ECEC in the current policy landscape in Australia.

The uncertainty of working with "generative methodology" (Lather, 2007 p. 117) precludes any truth claims or causal propositions. Nevertheless, it would appear that competing devices of power (Deleuze and Parnet 1987)—in this case ITE, VET, and ACECQA—have simultaneously promoted 'play' as central to children's learning and moved it to the margins. If educators are to combine intentional teaching with play-based programming, then it is important to recognise any limitations of current understandings about play, learning and teaching. Teaching teachers about play becomes a priority.

Learning about play is one thing. Learning about teaching through play is another matter. This inquiry was prompted by our research question about how educators learn to combine play-based learning and intentional teaching to meet the learning outcomes identified in the EYLF. The snapshot has questioned taken-for-granted beliefs. Specifically, we question what has been included and excluded in ITE, and highlight the need for more attention to play and play-based learning in teacher education programs and research. Professional learning opportunities for educators can start with learning about play and intentional teaching (see Siraj et al. 2017 for more specific recommendations). We argue this need is particularly crucial in the current policy environment because services are rated and practices shaped according to data built on measures of these key elements.

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