Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning at an Auckland primary school

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Abstract

Student agency has been hailed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as an ideal context in which the skills young people will need to succeed in the future can be developed (OECD, 2019). Accordingly, the New Zealand Ministry of Education has emphasised that the development of the skills aligned with student agency be prioritised in classrooms throughout the country (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, traditional methods of developing student agency that appear in the literature generally relate to older students and are not necessarily appropriate for younger learners (Adair, 2014; Mayes et al., 2019). Play-based learning, an educational approach also gaining traction in New Zealand schools, may help to address this issue. Play-based learning also seeks to develop vital skills, but through the developmentally appropriate means of play.

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between student agency and play-based learning, to discover the extent of overlap between these two disciplines and ascertain whether there may be the opportunity for amalgamation. This study was positioned within an interpretive phenomenological paradigm and used several qualitative research methods of data gathering. A series of semi-structured interviews were carried out with a New Entrant (children aged five years) classroom teacher to understand her experience of student agency and play in her classroom. A Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) was used to gather data from six child participants about their experiences. This took place over six focus group sessions using a variety of creative research methods including drawing and photo-elicitation.

Analysis of the data revealed that there appear to be misconceptions from all stakeholders around the way power manifests in the classroom, and that reintroducing a non-binary view of power to the student-teacher relationship may have a greater effect on student agency than other methods. However, attempts to develop student agency or play-based learning in the classroom may be met with significant barriers in the form of an already crowded curriculum and differences in parents' expectations of their child's schooling. Finally, this research suggests that play-based contexts have the potential to be suitable environments for student agency to be developed, with the

caveat that teacher scaffolding is still required to extend children's learning and make the development of student agency skills explicit.

Overall, this dissertation concludes with four recommendations at a national, school and teacher level. First, that the Ministry of Education keeps student agency at the forefront of the curriculum refresh currently underway by minimising prescriptiveness and having a greater focus on key competencies, particularly in junior primary classrooms; second, that schools facilitate comprehensive professional development around student agency and play-based learning, culminating in a school-wide definition and approach to these disciplines; third, that teachers make choice-making explicit in their classrooms by specifically voicing when and how the children make choices; and lastly, that teachers challenge their understanding of power, because it is from here that genuine opportunities for agency will be created.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Everyone deserves to have a voice and know unequivocally that their voice will be heard. This statement is more than just a platitude designed to empower adults; the United Nations has heralded it as a human right for all people, even children (United Nations, 1989). Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* states that children have the right to "express [their] views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (United Nations, 1989, p. 4). The right for children to have their voice heard underpins the educational phenomenon 'student agency', which is a current priority in education in New Zealand. As defined in Chapter Two, student agency refers to *students having the ability to influence relevant decisions in their educational setting or wider world, and knowing that they can have a say and make a difference*. Student agency is an approach to teaching and learning that seeks to increase children's autonomy, challenge existing power dynamics and put children's voice at the centre of decisions made around what they learn and how they will learn it. It is aligned with the global shift in educational priorities away from knowledge-transmission pedagogies and towards skills-based pedagogies, as recommended by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2019).

The facilitation of student agency is not the only significant movement in education of late; there has also been a shift towards a more play-based pedagogy being used in primary classrooms (Hunter, 2019). Play-based learning is a child-centred approach that seeks to "focus on children's academic, social, and emotional development, and their interests and abilities through engaging in developmentally appropriate learning experiences" (Taylor & Boyer, 2020, p. 127). While the early childhood sector has championed child-directed play for decades, some primary schools have only recently begun to create student-centred, playful environments (Hunter, 2019). The movement amongst primary schools towards play-based learning is a positive one according to Parker and Thomsen's (2019) study, where these authors passionately warn against what they call an "international squeeze on play" (p. 16).

The path to developing student agency, particularly in a junior primary classroom, is not always smoothly paved. While teachers are encouraged to teach in a way that promotes agency, there is little specific instruction on how exactly to achieve this. What research has been done on the topic has largely been carried out in secondary or tertiary contexts, with some cursory suggestions on how the findings can be extrapolated down to a primary level (Mayes et al., 2019). There is very little research on student agency that has been carried out specifically on junior primary students, which can leave teachers unsure of whether the recommendations based on older students' experiences are transferrable and appropriate for a younger cohort (Adair, 2014). Research done in this area in a New Zealand context is virtually non-existent. Furthermore, the constraints of an already crowded curriculum can form a discouraging barrier for teachers already struggling to 'tick all the boxes' (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). In addition, difference in parental expectation of their child's schooling can also prove problematic (Keung & Cheung, 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). These factors can give teachers the impression that student agency is an unachievable goal.

Research rationale

My interest in both student agency and play-based learning has led me to examine the literature in both of these areas. Play-based learning, like the skills inherent in student agency, also requires children to make decisions, plan ahead, collaborate with others, problem solve, select resources and decide what to learn and how they will do it, encouraging young children to become "independent and autonomous learners" (Briggs & Hansen, 2012, p. 25). It struck me that educators are treating student agency and play-based learning as two separate disciplines where there may be potential opportunities for overlap.

There is a clear lack of research focusing on the presence of student agency in contexts of young children's classroom experiences, particularly in a New Zealand context. This may be in part due to the perceived difficulty amongst researchers in engaging young children in decision-making (Mayes et al., 2019). As a result, teachers may be left trying to model their classroom practice on research that may not be appropriate for their context. In critiquing the structure imposed on junior

primary classes, Adair (2014) expresses concern that these classes are often modelled after older primary classes. Too much time spent following the teacher's directions to complete specific tasks may result in younger children not being afforded adequate developmentally-appropriate opportunities to follow their interests and passions (Adair, 2014). This view is supported by Brown's (2013) argument that school structures ignore the differences in the ways in which young students learn compared to those that are older. Vander Ark (2017) specifically points out that, "what agency looks like in first grade is very different than 7th grade or high school" (para. 6). Yet, some educators continue to struggle with attempting to build student agency in a way that is perhaps not suited to their students' developmental abilities (Adair, 2014).

Research aims and questions

The aim of this research was to critically examine the relationship between play-based learning and the development of student agency in junior primary students.
The following questions shaped this research:

- What does student agency look like in a junior primary classroom?
- How do junior primary children and teachers perceive the balance of power in the classroom and what impact does this have on student agency?
- To what extent do play-based learning contexts provide the environment for increased student agency?

Dissertation organisation

The structure of this dissertation is as follows:

Chapter One

This chapter introduced the topic and rationale for this research. The research questions that guided this study were outlined.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two reviews the literature in regard to student agency and play-based learning. This chapter begins by expanding on the history and definitions of these two phenomena in New Zealand and overseas. The rest of the literature review is

organised into three main themes that were evident in the literature: autonomy, personalisation of learning, and notions of power.

Chapter Three

This chapter presents the rationale for the interpretive phenomenological approach used throughout this study and provides an overview of the research methodology and methods. Ontological and epistemological positions are outlined and justified and the use of a Mosaic approach to data collection is explained. Following this is a description of the research methods used in this study - semi-structured interviews, observations and several creative research methods during the focus groups with the children. Finally, aspects of validity, trustworthiness and reflexivity are discussed, and ethical considerations are presented.

Chapter Four

This chapter presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews, observations and focus groups according to five key themes that became evident throughout the data-gathering and analysis.

Chapter Five

This chapter presents a discussion of the five key themes outlined in Chapter Four. The themes will be critically examined through an interpretivist lens and linked to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

Chapter Six

The final chapter of this dissertation presents the conclusions drawn from this study regarding the relationship between student agency and play-based learning. Several recommendations are made at a national, school and individual teacher level, and the limitations of this study are identified. Possibilities for future research are outlined, before my closing comments bring this dissertation to an end.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Recent literature concerned with knowledge-based primary school curricula and pedagogy increasingly notes that knowledge-based approaches are rapidly becoming outdated (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019). As a result, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2019) has announced that a greater priority should be placed on schools developing skills and competencies, as opposed to teaching knowledge in isolation. This conclusion is particularly emphasised in the Ministry of Education's *National Education and Learning Priorities* (Ministry of Education, 2020), where a focus on skills-based education and preparation for participation in civic and community life feature prominently as primary goals for the education sector. Spearheading this skills-based pedagogy is the concept of student agency, an approach to teaching and learning that encourages the development of students' skills and attitudes by increasing the power students have to influence decisions that affect them (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019). Student agency is not the only significant movement in education of late; there has also been a shift towards a more play-based pedagogy being used in primary classrooms (Hunter, 2019). Play-based learning has been steadily growing in popularity due to an increasing interest amongst some educators in a child-centred, developmentally appropriate means of engaging young children in learning (Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

This literature review will juxtapose the literature I have read on both student agency and play-based learning, drawing connections between the two bodies of literature and examining where they may present the opportunity for amalgamation. This review begins by summarising the recent history of both student agency and play-based learning and how these concepts developed globally and in the New Zealand context. I then examine the following key themes: an increase in student autonomy; learning becoming more personalised to the students' needs and interests; and changes to the power dynamic between students and teachers. Each of these will be discussed in turn in this review from both a student agency and a play-based learning perspective.

History and definitions of student agency

"Nothing that is learned under compulsion stays with the mind."

(Plato, ca. 375 B.C.E./1942)

I begin here by briefly discussing the development of student agency across recent decades. Before student voice became popularised in education, students in the education system were often viewed as passive 'empty vessels' having education 'done to' them (Nelson, 2017). This was in part due to the pervasive view that children were inherently incapable of logic and reasoning, and that they required adults to advocate for their best interests (Nelson, 2017; Phillips, 2010). Cook-Sather (2006) observes that the voices of young people were noticeably absent from discussions about education in the 1990s. In the late 1990s and early 21st century, the true "first wave" (Cook-Sather, 2014a, p. 132) of student agency occurred, with students beginning to be consulted about their learning and having the opportunity to influence school reform.

The term 'student agency' can be traced back to the United States of America (US) in the 1960s, when student power movements briefly brought young people's right to have a share of the decision-making power to the forefront of education, with students asserting their right to contribute to decisions being made in their classrooms and schoolwide (Mitra, 2004). This abated in the 1970s and 1980s, leaving a conspicuous absence of student voice in schools in the US (Cook-Sather, 2006). This era saw the rapid increase in class sizes and the use of standardised testing, which Goodman and Eren (2013) and Mitra (2004) suggest may have contributed to the demise of student agency in educational settings. A decade later, student agency re-emerged with a slightly different focus. No longer was student agency solely focused on rights and empowerment, but also the idea that through students' active participation, educational outcomes would be improved and school reform more effective (Mitra, 2004). The student agency movement was not limited to just the US; there were also significant changes happening in education and society far closer to home.

In New Zealand, the 1990s was an important time for children's rights as the New Zealand government signed the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*

(UNCRC) (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.). Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations,1989) focuses on children having "the right to express [their] views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (p. 4). This supports an educational approach that sees children as competent individuals and members of society with "a voice of their own" (Loizou & Charalambous, 2017, p. 440).

New Zealand's implementation of an educational approach that encourages children to have a voice of their own has drawn both approval and criticism. Some commend New Zealand's educational policies for encouraging student agency. For example, Cook-Sather (2014a) praises New Zealand for "articulating a shared vision for student voice in educational research and practice" (p. 132) and the *New Zealand Curriculum* (2007) document's emphasis on students' active involvement in their own learning. Furthermore, Cook-Sather (2014a) applauds the *New Zealand Curriculum*'s (2007) explicit mandate to involve students in the assessment process to "develop students' capacity for self- and peer assessment, which lead[s] in turn to increased self-direction" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 40). Conversely, Charteris and Smardon's (2019a) research found that some teachers feel that their students are being "held back from being agentic" (p. 9) by the constraints of the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) and suggest a "radical shift in policy" (p. 9) may be needed to rectify this.

Although 'student agency' is now a commonly used term in education, there is little agreement amongst experts on how exactly to define it (Cook-Sather, 2019). Jadue-Roa and Whitebread (2012) suggest that this lack of definition may be due to the multifaceted nature of the term, with the concept of 'student agency' having the potential to fall within the fields of political science and law, sociology, economics or childhood studies. They suggest a multidisciplinary perspective would be best for defining student agency, and subsequently adopt the term 'learning agency' throughout their research. Similarly, Charteris and Smardon (2019a) acknowledge the complexity of student agency by breaking the term down further into three 'dimensions of agency' – curriculum agency, dialogic agency and spatial agency. What Jadue-Roa and Whitebread (2012) call "learning agency" is also referred to as "student agency" in some literature (e.g., Anderson et al., 2019; Cook-Sather, 2006; Goodman &

Eren, 2013; Podolefsky et al., 2013; Zeiser et al., 2018), and "learner agency" in other literature (e.g., Collins & Raymond, 2020; Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019; Raffo et al., 2021). There can also be some overlap in the literature in the use of the terms 'student agency', 'student voice', 'participation' and 'consultation', which adds to the complexity of constructing a definition.

While there are a range of differing definitions of what the term 'student agency' means exactly, many researchers agree that student agency involves:

- students actively participating in making decisions that affect them within their educational setting or the wider world (Bron et al., 2016; Cook-Sather, 2019; Kim, 2022; Mayes et al., 2018; OECD, 2019; Quinn & Owen, 2016);
- students knowing their voices will be heard and having a reasonable expectation that their ideas will make a difference (Cook-Sather, 2019; Mayes et al., 2019);
- students demonstrating autonomy by deciding what they would like to learn and how they would like to learn it (Adair, 2014; Hopwood, 2022; Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2019a; Zeiser et al., 2018); and
- students demonstrating organisational and interpersonal skills by selecting resources, setting goals, collaborating with others and reflecting on their learning (Kim, 2022; OECD, 2019; Vaughn, 2018).

For the purposes of clarity in this dissertation, I define 'student agency' as *students having the ability to influence relevant decisions in their educational setting or wider world, and knowing that they can have a say and make a difference*

History and definitions of play-based learning

"Do not then, my friend, keep children to their studies by compulsion but by play"

(Plato, ca. 375 B.C.E./1942).

Play-based learning, one context in which student agency may be demonstrated, has a long history of influencing education. Plato's quote above indicates that there is literature dating back to 375 B.C.E. suggesting philosophers of the time favoured a play-based learning approach. In more recent eras, John Dewey, an American philosopher whose work had a major influence on New Zealand's education system, championed 'free play' and critiqued US kindergartens in the early 1900s as being too structured (Stover, 2016). 'Free play' was further brought to the fore of early

childhood and junior primary education in New Zealand by Susan Isaac's speech at the *1937 New Education Fellowship Conference* (Mutch, 2013; Stover, 2016). This led to the *Playcentre* movement in the 1940s and, later on in the 1960s, to the inclusion of 'developmental time' where children began the school day with time for open exploration and play (Mutch, 2013). In fact, play for children is not merely a suggestion based on the preference of educational philosophers, but a fundamental right of childhood. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) does not only establish mandates related to student agency in Article 12, it also sets out provisions pertaining to a child's right to play. Article 31 acknowledges "the right of the child 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" (p. 9).

Article 31 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) may not have been actualised in education as intended, according to a later publication. In 2013, the United Nations' *General Comment No. 17* (United Nations, 2013) noted a concern over the poor recognition given to the rights outlined in Article 31. The *General Comment* noted that increasing academic demands serves to reduce the time available for these rights, an observation that is noted in the literature by a number of authors (see, for example: Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Hunter, 2019; Jay & Knaus, 2018; Parker & Thomsen, 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Pyle and Danniels (2017) describe this emphasis on early academic achievement as the 'push down' of the curriculum, where the expectation of mastering literacy and numeracy descends lower and lower through schooling, in the hope it will put children on a firm trajectory to academic success. A meta-synthesis of 62 studies of teachers' perceptions of play-based learning identified that policy mandates and curricular concerns were overwhelmingly the greatest barriers to prioritising play in day-to-day practice (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Teachers reported interference from policy makers and educational leaders with a preference for measurable learning outcomes as standing in the way of "engaging in play pedagogies in a way that would match teachers' own ambitions and aspirations." (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p. 788). Parker and Thomsen (2019) describe this challenge the education sector is facing as an "international squeeze on play" (p. 16) that must be rectified. Play-based learning is

one such approach that reintroduces play in New Zealand schools.

Play-based learning is a child-centred approach that seeks to “focus on children’s academic, social, and emotional development, and their interests and abilities through engaging in developmentally appropriate learning experiences” (Taylor & Boyer, 2020, p. 127). This is a feature of New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2017), which is renowned internationally for its alignment of learning with children’s natural developmental stages (Anning & Edwards, 2006; Hunter, 2019).While the early childhood sector has championed child-directed play for decades, primary schools creating student-centred, playful environments has only begun to gain momentum in recent years (Hunter, 2019). In the case of schools catering for Years 1-13, the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) does not explicitly include play-based learning as a recommended classroom pedagogy. However, it does include a set of ‘Key Competencies’, which could be developed through play-based learning (Ministry of Education, 2019b).

It is important to define not only play-based learning but the understanding of ‘play’ itself throughout this dissertation. The United Nations’ *General Comment No. 17* (United Nations, 2013) states that a challenge to the full realisation of Article 31 may be an inadequate understanding amongst parents and institutions of what ‘play’ means. *General Comment No. 17* (United Nations, 2013) notes that in many parts of the world, play is seen as “frivolous” (p. 11) and more structured recreational activities, such as competitive sports, may be preferred as ‘play’ experiences. It is generalised that structured and organised activities tend to receive the most investment, as opposed to spontaneous, unstructured play. *General Comment No. 17* (United Nations, 2013) stipulates that play is different from structured recreational activities, as “play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end” (pp. 5-6). To avoid confusion between ‘play’ and ‘structured recreational activities’ from occurring within this dissertation, ‘play’ will be defined as the engagement in an activity that is freely chosen and structured by the child for the purpose of enjoyment.

Autonomy

A driving factor of the play-based learning movement is the encouragement of independence and autonomy in young children (Briggs & Hansen, 2012). Pyle and Danniels (2017) lament that, despite research indicating the benefits of play in schools, teacher-directed academic instruction is still dominant. They accredit this to teachers having a narrow definition of play-based learning as being solely child-driven. This differs from the notion of being 'child-centred' by assuming the child has complete freedom to follow their inclinations without any teacher input required, as opposed to a partnership that considers children's interests, needs and strengths (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

This misconception around child-centredness and child-directedness leaves some teachers feeling unsure of their role in a play-based classroom. According to Pyle and Danniels' (2017) study, there is a lingering thought amongst some educators that play and learning are mutually exclusive. Some classrooms reflect this, with periods of unstructured free play starkly contrasting with teacher-directed instruction, with the belief that the latter is where the majority of the learning takes place. A discrepancy between teachers' conceptual understanding of play-based learning and their actual classroom practice has been found in other research, including studies done by Keung and Cheung (2019), Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) and Pyle and Bigelow (2015). For example, Pyle and Bigelow's (2015) study of three Canadian classrooms found three distinct approaches to integrated play and learning that emerged: play as peripheral to learning, play as a vehicle for social and emotional development and play as a vehicle for academic learning. Each of these play profiles were informed by teachers' diverse conceptions of the purpose of play and the role of the teacher in a play-based classroom, and resulted in very different classroom practice.

To help broaden educators' understanding of play, Pyle and Danniels (2017) developed a *Continuum of play-based learning* (see Figure 2.1). The continuum features 'free play' at the far left, where children direct their own play and select their own resources with very minimal or non-existent teacher support. An example of this type of play would be a child freely choosing to build a tower out of blocks, or engaging with sensory materials such as sand or play-dough. This is followed by 'inquiry play', where play is child-initiated and extended by the teacher to integrate curriculum objectives. An

example of this is when the teacher notices a child's interest in paper planes and embraces this by bringing in books on planes, helping the children to construct an aeroplane runway and introducing measurement tools to help the children monitor how far their planes could fly. In the centre of the continuum is 'collaboratively designed play'. This occurs when the teacher directs the outcomes of the play using their knowledge of curriculum objectives, and the children help to shape the context - for example, the teacher might set up a play shop where children have the opportunity to create and sell items, allowing for the learning of mathematical concepts like addition, subtraction and financial literacy. Next on the continuum is 'playful learning' where the learning activities are set by the teacher, but still fit within a playful approach. For example, in another shop scenario, the teacher may require children to fill out order forms or make a shop catalogue. Finally, the most teacher directed version of play is 'learning through games', where children play prescribed games with set rules to help consolidate learning, like playing Scrabble. Pyle and Danniels' (2017) continuum is now widely used in the literature on play-based learning to illustrate the different types of play that can exist in a play-based classroom.

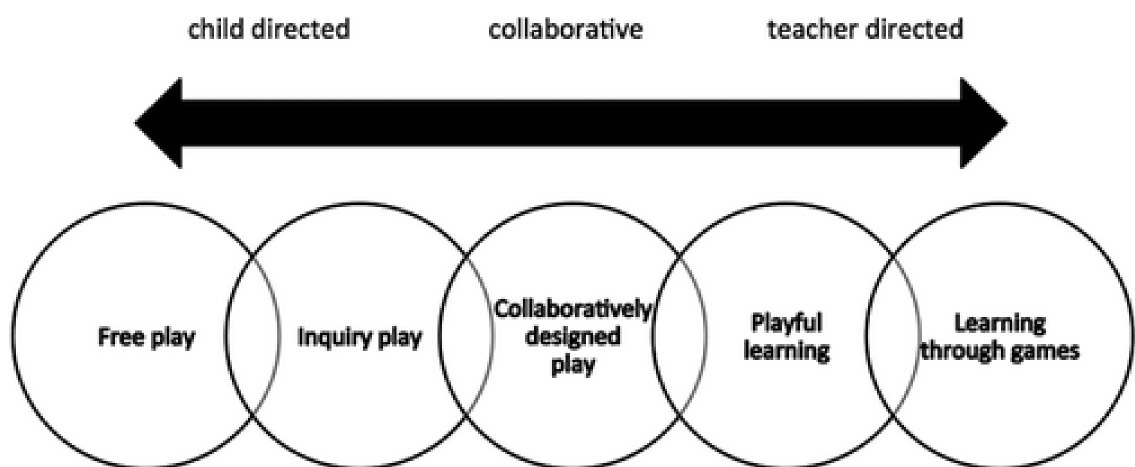


Figure 2.1

Continuum of play-based learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017, p. 282).

Pyle and Danniels (2017) were not the first to develop a continuum of children's participation - their work was preceded by Hart's (1992) *Ladder of participation* (see Figure 2.2). The *Ladder of participation* was first published in 1992 and has since been adopted by advocates of student agency in a wide variety of contexts, both within schools and in the wider community, to illustrate varying degrees of student

participation. The first three rungs of the ladder are grouped together by Hart as levels of 'non-participation', where student involvement is tokenistic. The following five rungs on the ladder describe models of 'genuine participation', each increasingly child-directed and autonomous. While Hart's (1992) ladder was originally created to address participation in the wider societal sense, it has since become extensively used as a model to measure the level of agency students have in a classroom setting (Bahou, 2012). Hart's ladder metaphor is not so widely used to examine child participation in play settings, despite the fact that Hart's essay was inspired by his 1979 work commissioned by the *International Association for the Child's Right to Play* (Hart, 1992). I believe that the similarities between Hart's (1992) ladder and Pyle and Danniels' (2017) continuum indicate that the *Ladder of participation* has the capacity to be used to provide further understanding of play-based learning, although this context has not been explicitly noted by Hart.

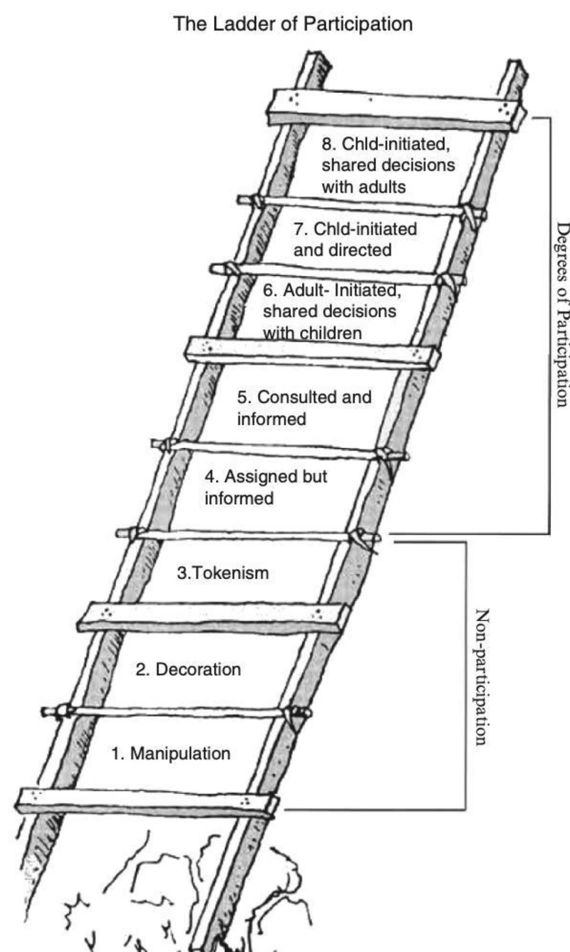


Figure 2.2

The ladder of participation (Hart, 1992, p. 8).

Pyle and Danniels' *Continuum of play-based learning* (2017) and Hart's *Ladder of participation* (1992) have both come to be significant models in the play-based learning and student agency literature respectively. The juxtaposition of these figures illuminates some similarities between them. Both feature a scale ranging from considerable adult direction to little adult direction, with the level of child-initiation changing inversely. The top rung features the highest level of child-initiation and the lowest level of adult direction, while the lowest rung of this section has very little child-initiation and is largely adult-directed. However, while one end of Pyle and Danniels' (2017) continuum has negligible teacher presence with child-directed free play, Hart's (1992) most autonomous rung still features adults as prominent figures. This was an intentional decision, according to Hart's (2008) reflection on his seminal work. Hart (2008) questions his critics' "preoccupation with children's power" (p. 24) and suggests that the prevailing understanding of Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* is incorrect, with people understanding the phrase "in all matters that concern them" (Hart, 2008, p. 25) to mean that children must always "have the last word" (p. 25). This contradicts Pyle and Danniels' (2017) assertion that during free play, children can and do operate with "little to no teacher involvement" (p. 282). Hart (2008) also appears to negate his own words earlier in the chapter, when he claimed that "Play is the one domain where it is common for the normal patterns of adult power to be suspended for a while" (p. 23), although Hart was referring to purely recreational play (at a public playground, for example) rather than play in a school context.

Hart (2008) goes on to urge that our knowledge of how students participate formally, through collaboration on a group project for example, be integrated with what we know about the informal participation that occurs through play. He acknowledges that when children play, there can be greater opportunities for demonstrating agency through participation than in traditional classroom structures. Both Hart's (1992) and Pyle and Danniels' (2017) figures identify that increased autonomy for children occurs when adults step back and make space for children to be agentic. What remains is to explore how relevant adult involvement is during the most autonomous sector of child participation, and how that may differ depending on the context.

Personalisation of learning

Aside from increasing autonomy, there is literature that indicates there may be many other benefits to incorporating student agency into the classroom (Bron et el., 2016; Mayes et al., 2019; Mitra, 2004; Quinn & Owen, 2016). One of the most valuable uses of student agency is when students collaborate to personalise their learning experiences by contributing to the design of their curriculum (Bron et al., 2016). Students have historically had negligible agency over decisions concerning the school curriculum (Biddulph, 2011; Charteris & Smardon, 2019a). A study done by Bron et al. (2016) found that students' involvement in curriculum design raises their motivation and engagement through increased relevance of the content and learning experiences. These findings are echoed throughout research on student agency (Mayes et al., 2019; Mitra, 2004; Mraz et al, 2016). Bron et al. (2016) critique the well-trodden path of outcome-based curricula as causing learning to be mechanical and linear. They advocate for a process curriculum, where students and teachers are the experts in lieu of outside policy makers, as this curriculum would reflect and support the freedom and individuality under which students thrive.

Considering students' interests can also have an impact on learning in a play-based context (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Taking children's interests into account is one of the key attributes of effective play-based learning (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Loizou, 2020; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Briggs and Hansen (2012) provide an example of what this looks like in a classroom by describing how a period of heavy snow may result in students having significant interest in how people survive in cold climates, leading to the teacher allowing the class to research and construct their own igloo in the classroom. This would sit in the 'inquiry play' zone of Pyle and Danniels' (2017) *Continuum of play-based learning*. An example of students personalising their learning to suit their interests in a 'free play' context is students who are passionate about animals choosing to combine the animal toys with the Lego set to construct their own zoo. Mraz et al. (2016) believe that children are born with a natural desire to learn about the world around them, and that through play "there is no boundary between their play and the thoughtful experimentation that leads to new understandings" (p. 140). Trostli (1998) neatly sums up this sentiment with his words: "Play is work and work is play" (p. 105). Furthermore, Briggs and Hansen (2012) strongly advocate for the personalisation of

learning through play. They write that personalising learning in a play-based context increases motivation and improves behaviour, and that the more the children are involved in the design of their education, the more likely they are to remember what they have learnt (Briggs & Hansen, 2012). When contributing to the design of their own curriculum, children must draw on problem solving and organisational skills to develop and resource their plan, which in turn requires a variety of creative, mathematical, scientific and literacy skills (Briggs & Hansen, 2012).

Creating a student-designed curriculum does come with certain limitations. Holdsworth (2018) passionately maintains that students simply aren't interested in curriculum issues and tend to stick to resolving issues that are 'safe', like organising the school social. He explains that curriculum changes are the hardest to implement and the most difficult for traditional practitioners to accept. It then stands to reason that students may come to feel cynical about the gravitas of their ideas when they may have previously encountered resistance from teachers (Bron et al., 2016). A potential pitfall of student agency is when students and staff begin to suspect that students' contributions are tokenistic (Chan, 2017; Holdsworth, 2018; Ibrahim, 2017; Quinn & Owen, 2016). For example, Quinn and Owen (2016) condemn the inherent tokenism in many schools' student agency practices, saying that their approaches rarely change and so the mediocre outcomes stay the same. They assert that the effectiveness of student agency depends on teacher authenticity. In their words, teachers endeavouring to increase the validity of student agency must have, "genuine commitment and value towards student voice" (Quinn & Owen, 2016, p. 61). Despite reasonable warnings from these authors, the general theme amongst the literature is that, when properly implemented, collaborating with students on the design of the curriculum can result in positive outcomes (Bron et al., 2016; Lockyer, 2017; Mitra, 2004; Quinn & Owen, 2016).

Notions of power

Many classrooms traditionally follow a hierarchical structure (Cook-Sather, 2019; Higgins et al., 2019), with teachers planning and directing learning activities and students being passive recipients of knowledge (Higgins et al., 2019; McNae, 2017; Pyle & Daniels, 2016). In this model, teachers reserve the majority of the 'power' - the

ability to unilaterally make decisions that affect students and their education - for example, the design and delivery of the curriculum (Cook-Sather et al., 2014a; Higgins et al., 2019). In a nutshell, teachers with an authoritarian pedagogy "hold all the cards" (Higgins et al., 2019, p. 1159). Higgins et al. (2019) critique this traditional classroom hierarchy for vastly valuing teachers' contributions over students', and neglecting the values of reciprocity, responsibility and respect. This view is shared by Matthews et al., (2018), who assert that "students and staff possess different but comparable forms of expertise" (p. 957). Consequently, students should have the opportunity to contribute "equally, although not necessarily in the same ways" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7) to decisions that affect them.

In the classroom, renegotiating the balance of power can transform the teacher's view of their students as "colleagues, not subjects" (Matthews et al., 2018, p. 958). For this to occur, a shift in adults' understanding of 'power' and the power relationship between students and teachers is required, so that reciprocity, respect and responsibility replace existing hierarchical structures (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Cook-Sather, 2019; Higgins et al., 2019; Taylor & Robinson, 2009). This change can be difficult for teachers when they encounter tension between, on the one hand, institutional norms that dictate the necessity of meeting external requirements, while on the other hand, simultaneously being encouraged to share responsibility for learning by promoting student agency (Dargusch & Charteris, 2018; Higgins et al., 2019). Fielding (2004) writes in his early work that for a transformation of traditional education hierarchical structures to occur, there must be a "rupture of the ordinary" (p. 296) that will be equally demanding of students and teachers. Teachers must be ready to see their students differently, as competent and capable individuals capable of reason and logic (Cook-Sather, 2006), as opposed to subscribing to the increasingly outdated view of children as passive, obedient learners (Phillips, 2010; Pyle & Daniels, 2016).

Changing the balance of power can lead to complex problems that do not have clear solutions (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Teachers may be sceptical that students will rise to the challenge of shared responsibility and worry about the possibility of having diminished control and respect (Goodman & Eren, 2013; Kim, 2022; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006), while students attain "unfettered authority" that

teachers must blindly follow (Cook-Sather, 2019, p. 888). Furthermore, Charteris and Smardon's (2019c) study indicates that the students themselves do not necessarily prefer having the opportunity to be agentic, as it is much easier to "sit and be receptive" with the teacher being "the hardest working in the room" (p. 103). Moreover, teachers whose conceptions of power either reinforce traditional hierarchies or, conversely, give full control to their students may perpetuate a misconceived view that power exists as a binary (Kecskemeti et al., 2017). Cook-Sather et al., (2014) warn of swinging from one untenable position to another by replacing a 'we know best' approach with an equally untenable 'they know best' model. Simply reversing who possesses the majority of power can be problematic (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) and may only serve to "reinstitute the same dynamic" (Kecskemeti et al., 2017, p. 36), not necessarily resulting in any improvement. Purely student-centred pedagogies can minimise the teacher's important intellectual contributions to planning and lesson delivery, while teacher-centred pedagogies forgo the benefits of student voice (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Kecskemeti et al., 2017). This suggests that it is not enough to claim that student agency requires a 'power shift'; what is required is a partnership pedagogy, where neither group is side-lined (Kecskemeti et al., 2017). A partnership pedagogy would also understand that power is fluctuating (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Higgins et al., 2019) and that both teachers and students have important, albeit slightly differing, roles (Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Cook-Sather, 2019). An example of such a partnership is where the student reveals their interests through play, following which the teacher carefully curates learning provocations to guide the children towards specific learning outcomes (Mraz et al., 2016), as in the igloo scenario described earlier in this chapter.

In addition, developing a partnership between students and teachers can require greater thought and enactment on the part of teachers when young students are involved (Mayes et al., 2019; McNae, 2017). The presence of an authority figure can heavily influence students' voice, causing them to ventriloquise what they believe the adult wants to hear (Charteris & Smardon, 2019c). As young children are still developing their ability to clearly articulate their thoughts, adults have a particular responsibility to ensure they are carefully listening to, understanding and affirming young children's ideas (Mayes et al., 2019; Whitty & Wisby, 2007). Furthermore, young

children may need more support to understand the concept of student agency and the power they have to influence change. As a result, extracting meaningful and genuine contributes from them needs to be delicately managed (Mayes et al., 2019). McNae (2017) affirms that young students need opportunities to develop an "authoritative voice" (p. 5) in education, which can be done by engaging them in activities where they must negotiate and be active participants in decision making.

One method of nurturing partnerships between young children and teachers is by establishing effective student-teacher relationships (Loizou & Charalambous, 2017). The importance of student-teacher relationships for the purpose of empowerment is mirrored in the literature on student agency (Quinn & Owen, 2016). Loizou and Charalambous (2017) acknowledge that relationships between teachers and students are strongly influenced by the power dynamic, and therefore, "quality relationships require a balanced negotiation of power" (p. 450). Taylor and Boyer (2020) write that a play-based pedagogy is uniquely suited to enhance student-teacher relationships. This is supported by Block et al.'s (2012) research, which found that through sharing experiential learning experiences, teachers witnessed previously unseen capabilities and students came to trust their teachers more, resulting in a strengthened relationship. When teachers engage with students during play, they guide, collaborate and ultimately have fun with their students on a more 'level playing field' than, for example, in a teacher-led game, helping to garner trust and build a relationship (Briggs & Hansen, 2012). Once a relationship has been established, a partnership can follow (Loizou & Charalambous, 2017).

Partnership between students and teachers also has the benefit of creating a context where children feel safe experimenting with their level of autonomy. Play "provides children with opportunities to be actively involved, to construct and deconstruct, to participate, to problem-solve, to reflect, to resist, and to question and shape decisions" (Loizou & Charalambous, 2017, p. 11). To ensure the cultivation of these skills, Briggs and Hansen (2012) recognise the importance of creating situations where children feel a safe sense of control. Therefore, when children are experiencing an increased level of control through the shared power made possible during play, they are incidentally more likely to exercise their sense of agency. In this way, the simple act of a child's play becomes the authentic and purposeful context needed to plant the

seed of student agency (Podolefsky et al., 2013).

Summary

The literature reviewed suggests that both student agency and play-based learning approaches may result in increased autonomy and personalisation of learning, and a change in the dynamics of power between students and teachers. This juxtaposition of the literature across both approaches illuminates many similarities in the skills involved and the outcomes from student agency and play-based learning, suggesting that there may be the potential for these approaches to be combined. Research on student agency done specifically on and for young children is scarce. This study will attempt to address that gap and contribute to the body of knowledge around student agency for young children.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides the rationale for an interpretive phenomenological approach being used throughout this research and provides an overview of the research methodology and methods. It begins by positioning this research with regard to the underpinning ontology and epistemology. I then justify the selection of a qualitative methodology as appropriate for this research. The data gathering methods: semi-structured interviews, observations, and six focus group sessions, along with how the data gathered from these were analysed, is described next. Finally, the validity of this research and the ethical considerations are examined.

The aim of this research was to examine the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in a junior primary class in Auckland, New Zealand. Supporting this aim was a set of research questions:

- What does student agency look like in a junior primary classroom?
- How do junior primary children and teachers perceive the balance of power in the classroom and what impact does this have on student agency?
- To what extent do play-based learning contexts provide the environment for increased student agency?

Cohen et al., (2018) assert the importance of research questions to drive, guide and shape the research process. The questions that were developed to support the research aim, in accordance with the interpretive paradigm that informs this study, constitute the foundation for the research methodology and methods explained below.

Research positioning

Ontology and epistemology

"Ontology is the study of 'being'" (Daniel & Harland, 2017, p. 34) or, as Hiller (2016) puts is, "the study of what exists, what is in reality [and] what is real" (p. 99). On the other hand, epistemology is concerned with how phenomena can be known (Hiller, 2016) and how people come to make sense of the world (Levers, 2013). In a nutshell, ontology is what we know and epistemology is how we come to know it (Daniel & Harland, 2017). There are four main realms within ontology, as described by Denzin

and Lincoln (2011). These are naïve realism, critical realism, historical realism and relativism. These each align with a positivist, postpositivist, critical theorist or interpretivist paradigm respectively. This study is positioned within a relativist ontology, which denies the separation between reality and a person's subjective interpretation of it, instead viewing reality as being entirely constructed from human experience (Levers, 2013).

Along with a relativist ontology, this study also aligns with a subjectivist epistemology. According to a subjectivist epistemology, knowledge is "always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 12). Hiller (2016) explains that a subjectivist epistemology understands that knowledge does not exist in the world independent of human thought, but it is solely constructed through an individual's interpretation of their experiences. Of utmost importance to this research is the respect shown to student voice. Consequently, as a researcher, the way I heard and understood a variety of voices and perspectives was vital. Students and teachers had differing interpretations of the reality that exists in their classrooms, each informed by their personal experiences. I had to accept that multiple realities exist within the same classroom and seek to equally value and comprehend each understanding of that reality. This approach demonstrates a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology.

Interpretive phenomenology

A subjectivist epistemology and a relativist ontology constitute lead to the world through an interpretivist lens. An interpretivist view of knowledge understands that individuals view knowledge uniquely (Daniel & Harland, 2017) and is constructed on a foundation of social interaction (O'Donoghue, 2007). Within an interpretivist paradigm, this research is further aligned with a phenomenological philosophy. Phenomenology is a philosophy that seeks to understand people's perceptions of phenomena, rather than the phenomena's objective reality (Daniel & Harland, 2017; Newby, 2014). Phenomenologists value the meaning people find in their experiences (Newby, 2014) and endeavour to comprehend how a person observes and processes them (Daniel & Harland, 2017). Interpretive phenomenology understands that the reality we experience is subjective, and, therefore, all knowledge is unique to each

individual (Daniel & Harland, 2017). According to Cook-Sather (2020), phenomenology is a recommended research philosophy for research involving young children. She writes that "the open-minded, contextual, and relational observations and interviews" (p. 3) that are generally phenomenological research methods are well-suited to the delicate ethical considerations that must be made when young children are involved in research. This research draws on multiple phenomenological research methods, such as semi-structured interviews and observations, to create a rich data set that represents the lived experiences of all participants.

Research methodology

Qualitative research

As an interpretive phenomenological paradigm was adopted in this study, a qualitative research approach followed as the natural choice of methodology. My desire to understand participants' experiences relating to student agency and play-based learning underpinned this research. This goal aligns strongly with a qualitative research design, in that it seeks to "provide an in-depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meanings, actions, non-observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions and behaviours" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 219). A qualitative approach values people's subjective experiences and the meaning they assign to them, with the goal of generating rich, descriptive data (Leavy, 2017). In this research, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were the main data-gathering tools. The schedules for these were deliberately flexible, as flexibility of research methods is an important aspect of a qualitative methodology (Lodico et al., 2010).

Sampling

According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018), the quality of a piece of research depends on not only the appropriateness of the methodology but also the suitability of the sampling strategy. Sampling strategies are generally grouped into two categories: probability sampling and non-probability sampling (Bryman, 2012). The former of these is often associated with quantitative research, while the latter is generally preferred by qualitative studies (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018). I chose to use a type of non-probability sampling for this study, opting for a purposive sample. Purposive sampling seeks to strategically sample participants to ensure they are likely

to be able to supply information that relates closely to the research questions (Bryman, 2012). A benefit of purposive sampling is that it can be used to target 'knowledgeable people' who have the expertise to contribute meaningfully to the research being carried out (Cohen et el., 2018). This makes it a more appropriate type of sample for this study, as a randomly selected teacher may not be very aware of the topics being investigated through this work and may be unable to comment on them (Cohen et al., 2018).

Participant selection

I specifically choose a classroom within a school with which I am familiar, that is well-known amongst the local education community for its dedication to play-based learning and student agency. This was not the school where I am currently employed. I contacted the school principal with the intention of arranging a time for me to attend a staff meeting to hand out my contact details to teachers who would like to participate. This email also included a *School Principal Information Sheet* (Appendix A) and *School Principal Consent Form* (Appendix B). However, the school expressed that they would prefer to share the information on my behalf and contact me when a suitable candidate had been selected. A prerequisite for prospective teacher participants was that they had taught for a minimum of three years. This was done to ensure that the participating teacher was indeed a 'knowledgeable person' and would have the experience necessary to provide insightful reflections. Once the school had located a teacher volunteer, I contacted them with a *Classroom Teacher Information Sheet* (Appendix C) and *Classroom Teacher Consent Form* (Appendix D). To select my child participants, I asked the participating teacher to recommend students who may enjoy sharing their ideas in a group interview. Parents were provided with a *Parent/Caregiver/Whānau Information Sheet* (Appendix E) prior to agreeing for their child to participate. Written consent for the children's participation was gathered from parents/whānau of the chosen children (Appendix F), along with consent from the children themselves (Appendix G) before beginning my work with them.

Data collection and analysis

When carrying out research involving young children, traditional data collection methods may not be the most effective (Brown, 2021). In the past, research on

children might have included adults, such as a parent or teacher, speaking on the children's behalf to share their interpretation of the child's views (Tisdall, 2015). This model is rapidly falling out of favour as, in accordance with the aforementioned Article 12 of the UNCRC, children are increasingly viewed as competent citizens with the right to express their views on matters that affect them (Hawkes, 2017). If children's rights are to be supported, then it is logical to involve children in research that affects them (Tisdall, 2015). In an effort to involve children in this research in a way that was suited to their developmental strengths and needs, I implemented a Mosaic approach to data collection, first created by researchers Clark and Moss (2001).

The Mosaic approach seeks to answer the question "What is it like to be in this place?" (Clark, 2017, p. 13). It is a qualitative approach that combines a range of methods to help the researcher and their participants to create an accurate image of their world (Clark, 2017; Hawkes, 2017). Central to the Mosaic approach is listening to young children (Clark, 2017). For this reason, using multiple methods is crucial as this recognises that children may have preferences in communication and accommodates these accordingly (Tisdall, 2015). In this way, if one method does not 'connect' with a child, another method might (Hawkes, 2017). My research Mosaic is made of several 'tiles' that combine to create a fuller picture of my participants' experiences. The methods I will use to construct the Mosaic are semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher, observations of the participating children, and several focus group sessions consisting of playing a decision-based game, drawing, photography and walking interviews.

Semi-structured interviews

Bookending this research were two semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher. Cohen et al., (2018) describe an interview as "a social, interpersonal encounter, not merely a data-collection exercise." (p. 506), which fits well with this research's interpretative paradigm. The purpose of the first interview was to help me begin to appreciate the teacher's experience of student agency and play-based learning. This interview allowed me to understand the teacher's philosophy before observing it in action during in-class observations. The second interview occurred at the end of my time at the participating school. It provided me with an opportunity to

share some of my observations and findings, to clarify things the children might have mentioned and to ask any more questions that arose throughout my time in their classroom.

Due to several Covid-19 lockdowns, there was a delay between the first interview with the teacher and the second. Several months had passed, and in that time, the teacher had moved to a new classroom with a new class of students. For this reason, I decided an extra interview was needed to check that the teacher's thoughts and feelings she communicated in the first interview were still relevant. This was a short interview in which we reviewed areas of the first interview's transcript and discussed any developments that had arisen. Where significant changes in the teacher's ideas were evident, this has been noted in Chapter Four.

Throughout these interviews, I used an interview schedule to help keep the interviews on track and ensure coverage of topic areas. When formulating interview questions, Bryman (2012) suggests the researcher asks themself, "What do I need to know in order to answer each of the research questions I'm interested in?" (p. 473), a question which leads the researcher to appreciate what the participant sees as significant in relation to their topic. The interview questions on my schedule were carefully selected so that the participants had ample opportunity to express their views on student agency and play-based learning (Appendix H; Appendix I).

<u>Observations</u>

Observations are an important part of this study as they "clarify and give meaning to the phenomena being studied" (Lodico et al., 2010, p. 36). My time spent observing in the classroom was a valuable way of increasing my understanding of the students' and teacher's perceptions of student agency in their class. I conducted three observations in the participating classroom. The purpose of these observations was to describe what I saw in the classroom environment and to note the instances where the six participating children were demonstrating student agency in a play-based context. I observed the language the children used that demonstrated choices being made (e.g., "I want to…") or a lack of choice being offered (e.g., "The teacher said…" or "We have to…"). I also observed the activities the participants were involved in to ascertain if they are following their own interests and are free to alter the environment as needed

to suit their inclinations. Finally, I also closely monitored how students demonstrated other aspects of student agency while they played, observing to see when the children independently solved problems, selected the resources they needed, reflected on what they were doing and shared their ideas with others.

Another main purpose of these observations was to establish myself as a non-threatening adult to all of the children in the classroom, and to help me to get to know the child participants in a safe setting. Blaisdell et al., (2019) convincingly advocate for a "relational approach" (p. 26) to discussing student voice and agency with young children. Observations are a key way of nurturing that relationship, as Hawkes (2017) noted when describing her observations in an early childhood centre: "The children were observing me as much as I was observing them" (p. 25). Also supporting a relational approach to research with young children is Lentz (1985), who suggests that research with young participants be conducted solely by the child's teacher or another trusted adult, as children are less likely to reach the same level of comfort and vulnerability with a stranger. This view presents difficulties for researchers who do not have access to a suitable group of children with whom they already have a trusting relationship. Furthermore, conducting research on a group of people with an existing relationship with the researcher presents its own ethical dilemmas. I was very careful to operate in the 'middle ground' by maintaining some professional distance as a researcher by not including children with whom I had a close personal relationship, but prioritising relationship building by spending time with the children in a familiar environment. An observation protocol was established prior to undertaking any observations to ensure ethical considerations were adhered to (Appendix J).

Focus group one – Decision-making game

My first focus group session with my child participants consisted of playing a game to help acclimate them to a group interview setting (Appendix K). In her research into children's decision making in primary schools, Smith (2020) utilised a game called "Would You Rather…?" to familiarise the younger children in her focus groups with the concept of making a decision. In the activity, children were given the choice between several options and asked which they preferred, with questions such as "Would you rather… climb a tree? Or ride a bike? Why?" (Smith, 2020, p. 86). Starting off my focus

group sessions with the same game helped to engage the children in discussions around making decisions, thereby ensuring they understood the overall topic of our sessions, as well as establishing myself as an approachable, friendly adult.

Focus group two – Drawing

Following on from our shared game, the children were given a drawing task to complete (Appendix L). Drawing's ease of facilitation and relative versatility makes it a commonly used research method for young children (Kara, 2015). Lentz (1985) says that "purely verbal methods are seldom effective with young children" (p. 982). She suggests combining verbal methods with visual representations to ensure better results. In this activity, children were asked to draw themselves making a decision during the morning play session. I asked the children to explain what they drew and why they made that decision. This helped me to understand if students demonstrated student agency during play and what sort of decisions they had the opportunity to make. The use of visual methods may have made it easier for the children to discuss the subject, which can be difficult to articulate (Kara, 2015).

I needed to consider several matters when using the drawing activity. One difficulty with drawing as a research method is that is has the potential to be an exclusionary task for those who do not consider themselves to be competent artists (Leigh, 2020). Their frustration may become a barrier to their full engagement. Conversely, while drawing can discourage some, it can also encourage others, particularly children who are passionate about art (Leigh, 2020). Another consideration with this activity is that the participants may not draw something based on their actual perceptions but may reproduce a stereotype or what they think is 'right.' To help prevent this, Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al. (2019) recommend starting an interview by reassuring the children that there is no right or wrong answer and frequently validating the children when they share their opinions to help encourage genuine answers. This was advice I heeded throughout my focus group sessions.

Focus group three – Photo-elicitation and walking interviews

Photo-elicitation requires participants to take a set of photographs for a particular purpose (Kara, 2015). It has the potential to enhance interviews by building a richer

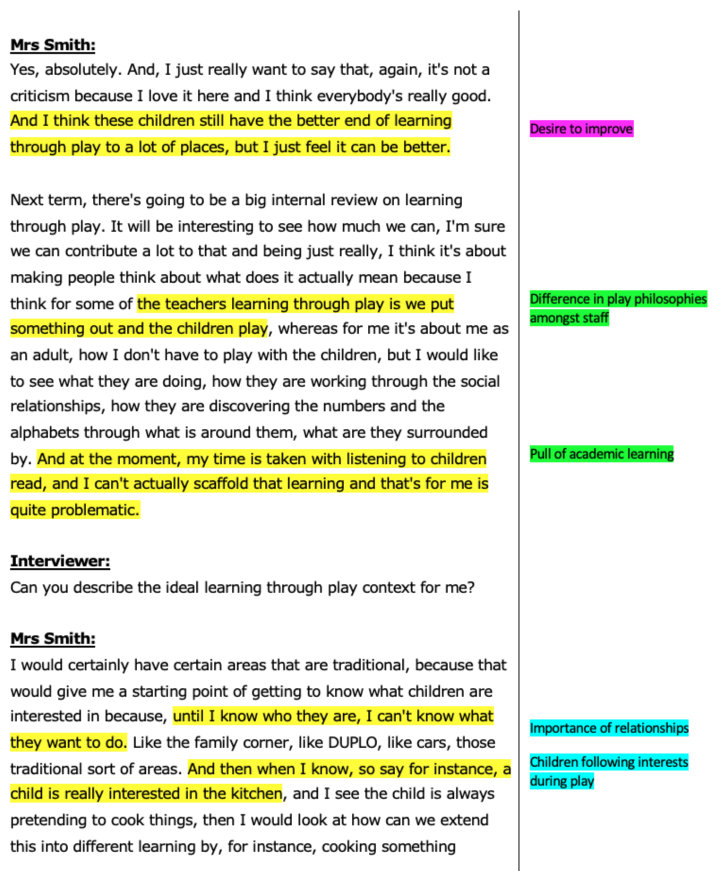
picture (Kara, 2015). During one of my in-class observations, I walked around the classroom environment and asked the children to show me where they like to learn best in their classroom, where they don't like to learn and where they get to make choices. I took photos of these areas, ensuring there were no children in the photographs for whom I did not have parental consent to be photographed. I was the photographer instead of the children, as their young age may have made it difficult for them to understand the instruction to not take photos with other children in them, but I endeavoured to take the photos according to the children's instructions as accurately as possible. A photography protocol was established prior to taking any photographs to ensure ethical considerations were adhered to (Appendix M).

While I was in the room, I also took some photos of the participants as they engaged in a range of self-selected or teacher-directed activities. I printed out the photos and brought them to the focus group session. During the focus group, we discussed what decisions were being made in the photographs and how or why they were being made (Appendix N).

<u>Data analysis</u>

Data analysis in qualitative research is a "dynamic, intuitive and creative process" (Wong, 2008, p. 14). Data from the interviews with the teacher and the focus groups with the children were recorded digitally, transcribed and analysed. The transcripts from the teacher's interviews were emailed to her so she could verify their accuracy. The discussions between myself and the children regarding what they had drawn or photographed were also digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed. Initial analysis occurred through a thorough reading of the interview and focus group transcripts. This allowed me to obtain a broad understanding of the data so I could begin to identify some significant patterns. Open coding was used to analyse this data as it aligned with the interpretive paradigm of this research. Gibbs (2018) writes that open coding positions the researcher as "both an observer of the social world and a part of that same world." (p. 61). I reread through the transcripts, coding specific themes that arose and highlighting the participant's words that demonstrated that theme. Once I had coded each transcript, I was able to group those codes into broader categories. I went through the transcripts again, highlighting the codes in different colours

according to the broader categories they fell within. This helped me to get a sense of the frequency each category occurred. Figure (3.1) below depicts this process:



Mrs Smith:
Yes, absolutely. And, I just really want to say that, again, it's not a criticism because I love it here and I think everybody's really good. And I think these children still have the better end of learning through play to a lot of places, but I just feel it can be better.

Desire to improve

Next term, there's going to be a big internal review on learning through play. It will be interesting to see how much we can, I'm sure we can contribute a lot to that and being just really, I think it's about making people think about what does it actually mean because I think for some of the teachers learning through play is we put something out and the children play, whereas for me it's about me as an adult, how I don't have to play with the children, but I would like to see what they are doing, how they are working through the social relationships, how they are discovering the numbers and the alphabets through what is around them, what are they surrounded by. And at the moment, my time is taken with listening to children read, and I can't actually scaffold that learning and that's for me is quite problematic.

Difference in play philosophies amongst staff

Pull of academic learning

Interviewer:
Can you describe the ideal learning through play context for me?

Mrs Smith:
I would certainly have certain areas that are traditional, because that would give me a starting point of getting to know what children are interested in because, until I know who they are, I can't know what they want to do. Like the family corner, like DUPLO, like cars, those traditional sort of areas. And then when I know, so say for instance, a child is really interested in the kitchen, and I see the child is always pretending to cook things, then I would look at how can we extend this into different learning by, for instance, cooking something

Importance of relationships

Children following interests during play

Figure 3.1
Manual coding process

The themes that were identified through this coding process guided the findings and discussion chapters of this dissertation.

Validity, trustworthiness and reflexivity

<u>Validity</u>

While research methods should be mainly influenced by the research aims, they must also be influenced by the pursuit of validity and trustworthiness (Bush, 2012). Validity refers to the extent to which the research methods accurately measure the phenomenon they were intended to measure (Bush, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010; Newby, 2014). An effective way of establishing validity is through triangulation, which seeks to validate a claim by using at least two sources (Newby, 2014). Forsey (2012) warns that interviews alone are notoriously unreliable and suggests that they are most effective when interviews are part of a "suite of approaches" (p. 365). The Mosaic approach

used in this study effectively increased the validity of the research because it used a range of methods to accurately describe the participants' experiences (Clark, 2017). Leigh (2020) passionately appeals to researchers to develop innovative methods that suit children's existing competencies. The three focus group sessions in this study each featured a different method of data collection: games, drawing and photo-elicitation. These were deliberately chosen to appeal to different competencies and preferences that the child participants may demonstrate. Conducting focus group sessions three times and with two different cohorts gives the children ample opportunity to express their perspectives and allows for more accurate themes to emerge.

Validity was further established by conducting a follow-up interview with the teacher at the end of my data collection in her classroom. Meriam and Tisdell (2015) recommend having 'member checks' to solicit feedback from the participants on the early findings. This reduces the risk of misinterpretation and allows for any researcher bias to be identified (Meriam & Tisdell, 2015). Prior to her final interview, the teacher had the opportunity to review the transcript of her initial interview to ensure that it was an accurate account of her perspective.

Before beginning data collection at the selected school, I piloted all of my research methods with a colleague and some students of a similar age to my child research participants at the school where I am currently employed. Conducting a research pilot can increase the validity and reliability of a project and provide the opportunity for the researcher to make necessary changes before embarking on a larger-scale study (Cohen et al., 2018). I discovered through my research pilot that the semi-structured interview questions were clear and appropriate, but I needed more structure to my focus groups to ensure coverage of content. These changes were made and yielded better results when the focus groups were carried out in the actual research.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is achieved when researchers are able to demonstrate that data have been gathered in a "precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner" (Nowell et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability to ascertain the trustworthiness of a study. Triangulation of data and member checking aided the credibility of this research.

Transferability was ensured by providing research of thick description, allowing those who may wish to transfer the findings to their own context to judge its transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). This research demonstrated dependability by following a process that was traceable and clearly documented. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed by an independent transcriber. The research methods used have all been clearly outlined throughout this chapter, so that the process followed is transparent for the reader. When credibility, transferability and dependability are all attained, confirmability will have been established (Nowell et al., 2017).

Reflexivity

When conducting qualitative research, the researcher becomes the instrument for analysis that is responsible for making judgements and contextualising the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Therefore, it was critical that I examine my assumptions and biases to avoid letting these influence my findings. Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle (2010) explain that phenomenological research aims to understand the lived experiences of individuals and describe these with great precision. They warn that phenomenological researchers must be keenly aware of their personal biases, as these must not be allowed to influence the participant's understanding of their experiences. When I reflect upon my own beliefs around this research topic, notable to me is my perception of play as a meaningful activity for children. I have many fond memories of a childhood spent playing in the garden with my sisters. Now I look back and can see how vital those experiences were, not just for my enjoyment of my childhood, but for the development of my learning and independence. Those experiences helped to shape who I am today. Also vital was the social aspect of my childhood play: that time spent playing with my sisters helped to develop my understanding of collaboration, problem solving and, undoubtedly, conflict resolution. This likely contributes to my belief that learning is constructed through experiences and social interaction. Lastly, before my debut as a primary teacher, I worked in the early childhood sector. This exposed me to the deep and meaningful play that young children engage in, and also reminded me to never underestimate what a young child is capable of. Lodico et al., (2010) relay an anecdote of a researcher who wrote their biases on a piece of paper and subsequently destroyed it to symbolise the removal of those perspectives from

the research. Rather than destroying all record of my biases, I chose to explicitly describe them above so that the reader can be aware of them. Now that they have been stated, I will make every effort to put them aside and approach this research with openness and reflexivity.

Ethical considerations

The consideration of ethics in research, particularly in research involving children, has attracted significant attention throughout the 21st century (Farrell, 2015). Wellington (2015) writes that "Ethical concerns should be at the forefront of any research project and should continue through to the writeup and dissemination stages." (p. 4). Children can be particularly vulnerable in research so it is imperative that a great deal of care is taken and that ethical considerations are adhered to from the outset (Hawkes, 2017). The main ethical principles I had to address throughout this research were informed and voluntary consent, privacy and confidentiality, vulnerability of child participants and commitment to te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Informed and voluntary consent

This research required all participants, the school principal, classroom teacher, six children and their parents/whānau, to provide their informed and voluntary consent before participating. The adult participant was provided with a *Class Teacher Information Sheet* (Appendix C) and *Class Teacher Consent Form* (Appendix D) to sign. I made myself available to these participants for further explanation or discussion if required. I made it clear to all participants that they had the option to withdraw at any time. The parents of the selected children received a *Parent/Caregiver/Whānau Information Sheet* (Appendix E) outlining the aims of my research and what their child's role would be. They were also be given a *Parent/Caregiver/Whānau Consent Form* (Appendix F) to sign, thereby allowing their child to participate.

It was of the utmost importance that the participating children were appropriately informed of the aims of this research and given every opportunity to ask questions throughout the process. Farrell (2015) defines consent for children as "children being afforded the opportunity to indicate their willingness to be involved in the research (i.e., consent) and, conversely, to indicate their unwillingness to be involved (i.e.,

dissent), whether prior to or during the research" (p. 7). There are differing views amongst researchers on whether children involved in research must give their consent, assent or both. Some researchers prefer to use the term 'assent' instead of 'consent', arguing that young children are not able to give legal consent (Flewitt, 2005; Loveridge, 2010). Coyne (2010) writes that 'consent' requires a participant's positive voluntary agreement, while 'assent' simply refers to a participant's acquiescence. Conversely, Loveridge (2010) highlights that some definitions of 'assent' differ to those of 'consent' in that 'assent' may imply the researcher's ongoing responsibility for monitoring the child's willingness to participate at all stages of the research. This commitment to ensuring the comfort of the children involved was of utmost importance throughout this study.

My journey to procure the children's consent and assent began with sending home a *Child Assent Booklet* (Appendix G) for parents to read through with their child. This booklet introduced myself as the researcher and described what I would be doing in their class, using age-appropriate language that children could understand. It also provided an opportunity for the children to draw a picture showing their feelings towards participating in my research, and a "Yes" or "No" box to colour in to demonstrate their consent. Preceding my focus groups with the children, we discussed the *Child Assent Booklet* and I encouraged the children to ask me any questions about my research, as recommended by Leigh (2020). Flewitt (2005) suggests that while some children like to give verbal consent, others may prefer to show consent through drawing and mark making. The Child Consent Booklets and group discussion provided opportunities for both.

<u>Privacy and confidentiality</u>

The privacy of my participants was respected and their confidentiality protected. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. Any identifiable information about the participants or the school was changed to ensure their privacy was respected. Transcription was carried out by a professional transcriber, who signed a *Confidentiality Agreement* (Appendix O) prior to beginning transcription. Electronic data were kept on a password-protected memory stick. Both the electronic and hard copy data are now stored securely at AUT.

Vulnerability of child participants

Due to the age of my child participants, I showed particular respect for their vulnerability. There is a particularly pronounced imbalance of power when working with young children as the researcher is simply so much bigger (Te One, 2007). It was imperative that the children involved in my research felt comfortable and were happy to participate. I drew on my experience with teaching this age group to maintain awareness of any sense of discomfort. By paying attention to body language and facial expressions, I made every effort to be responsive to the needs of the children in the group.

Commitment to the principles of te Tiriti o Waitangi

Particular care was taken to ensure that te Tiriti o Waitangi was respected throughout this research. Cook-Sather (2020) writes that "the ethics of research with young people are particularly delicate, especially when working across cultures" (p. 185). Three key principles from te Tiriti o Waitangi, partnership, participation and protection, were considered. The principle of partnership was acknowledged through my commitment to fostering a sense of mutual trust and respect with my participants. The aims of my research were clearly communicated and I was honest and transparent throughout my time in the classroom. The principle of participation is particularly pertinent to this study, as the active participation of children is a key tenet of student agency. My chosen research methods were deliberately informal, allowing for deviation from the preprepared questions to encourage input from the teacher and children. This allowed for some autonomy and ownership over the research for the participants, and supported the view that the volunteers were partners in this research, not just subjects being studied. I addressed the principle of protection through the steps I took to respect participants' privacy and confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities; data were stored securely and any identifying information was changed. Finally, to demonstrate commitment to te Tiriti o Waitangi, I was aware of any cultural differences amongst the children being interviewed. Having taught young children for five years, I am accustomed to teaching children from a range of cultural backgrounds and conducted myself appropriately.

Summary

This chapter justified the use of an interpretive phenomenological paradigm is appropriate for this research. The decision to use a Mosaic approach to data collection, including semi-structured interviews, observations, playing a decision-based game, drawing and photo-elicitation was explained and each of these methods was described in detail. I have discussed how validity and trustworthiness were achieved. Finally, to conclude the chapter, ethical considerations were outlined.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, data from three semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher and six focus groups with six children are presented. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups were designed to explore the students' and teacher's perceptions of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in their classroom. Three sub-questions guided this data gathering:

- What does student agency look like in a junior primary classroom?
- How do junior primary children and teachers perceive the balance of power in the classroom and what impact does this have on student agency?
- To what extent do play-based learning contexts provide the environment for increased student agency?

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews and focus groups according to five key themes that became evident throughout the data-gathering process. Pseudonyms have been used in order to respect the privacy of the participants. It is important to note that the first interview with the classroom teacher took place a year prior to the rest of the data gathering, due to several Covid-19 lockdowns delaying the process. Some of the teacher's thoughts and perceptions changed in the year between the first and second interviews. When there was a noteworthy shift in ideas between the first and second interviews, this has been explicitly mentioned. Otherwise, when the teacher's first and second interviews exhibited no or very minor discrepancies, the data from both interviews have been amalgamated and presented together.

Perceptions of children's choice-making opportunities at school

The children's responses indicated a variety of perceptions about their own abilities and opportunities to make choices in the classroom. I began the focus groups by asking the children if they make choices when they are at school. Adam, Ben, Amy and James initially expressed that they did make choices and Melissa and Harriet felt that they did not, although it is possible those who said they do make choices did not fully understand the scope of the question. The children who initially said they did make choices focused on choosing to be well-behaved, rather than following their interests or having a voice. Adam, Ben and Amy equated monitoring their behaviour (what might typically be referred to as 'making good choices' in a classroom by not hitting

and being kind, for example) as their opportunity to make choices at school. When Adam was shown a photo of himself playing with LEGO and asked what choices he was making in the photo, he responded: “Good choices”. I asked Ben, Adam and Amy what choices they make at school, and they had suggestions like “Run away when someone is hitting you” and “Just be kind”. When I clarified the question and asked if they get to choose what they *do* at school, they all said “No”. Melissa and Harriet also responded that they do not make any choices at school. Melissa felt that this was because teachers know much more than children, and children need to listen and learn from them, saying:

> The teacher wants us to learn, but not us to teach her how to learn, because we are the ones who need to learn, because we school kids we are trying to learn, and Mrs Smith doesn't need to learn a teeny-weeny bit. [Melissa]

James specified that he only gets to make choices during outside time and play time, but not when he is learning. Melissa agreed with this and noted that they also got to make choices at kindergarten when they were playing.

The children also reported a lack of opportunity to make choices regarding the classroom environment, and all stated that the teacher makes the decisions around what toys and resources are available in the classroom and how these are arranged. In addition, they all expressed some level of dissatisfaction with the toys provided, each yearning for items that are not currently supplied by the teacher. For example, during her walking interview, Melissa mentioned that she didn’t like the toys in the construction area and wanted to make it more appealing for girls, saying: “I’d add some stuff so more girls would like to come here. I don’t know what girls would like to come here for”. The children also had ideas of how the classroom layout could be improved but did not think their teacher would listen to them if they suggested any changes. Ben agreed that children cannot make any changes about their classroom, saying that the only thing they can change is the colour of the pencil they want to use. Adam and Amy thought that their teacher would not say “Yes” to any of the suggestions they might make, unless they wanted to bring in a Christmas tree, which would likely be approved because they think their teacher also likes Christmas trees. Melissa and James acknowledged that perhaps it was for the best that they can’t make changes, with Melissa stating that:

> Then it [the toys] will be mixed up and then we will not know where to put it back and then we will get confused and say, "Huh". [Melissa]

Overall, the children didn't feel that the teacher would listen to their suggestions about the classroom.

Mrs Smith's own words subtly confirmed the children's beliefs around their lack of choice in the classroom environment. When describing the improvement in her classroom space this year compared to last year, Mrs Smith said:

> It's still not one hundred percent how I would want it, but I have more ability to create those smaller spaces where children can be, where they can make choices about what they want to do. So, there's always a provocation, but that doesn't mean that that's what they have to do. It's just really inviting their own thinking around what is made available for them. [Mrs Smith]

The "I" statements in this quote show the dominance of the teacher's voice in the design and layout of the classroom. There was no mention made of how the children could create those smaller spaces - they could just make choices about what they want to do in the predetermined space.

It does not seem that Mrs Smith makes the classroom environment decisions completely unilaterally, though. Mrs Smith explained that she greatly values her students' interests and carefully observes their passions during play. She then uses this knowledge to inform her decisions about which resources to supply. She described this process as:

> Just really picking up and homing in on children's spontaneous interests, and then ensuring that whatever they need to make that learning happen is available to them, as far as I can manage it because it's just not always possible. [Mrs Smith]

Mrs Smith also said that she needs to get to know the children well before she can start providing them with the resources they need, because "Until I know who they are, I can't know what they want to do". In her third interview, Mrs Smith confirmed that she uses her observations of children rather than their explicit verbalisation of their wants to alter the classroom environment. She describes this process below:

> Through my observations, I change the classroom to fit with what I think they are requiring… I am really aware if a space isn't working for a group of children, and then I do some thinking. [Mrs Smith]

Mrs Smith noted that if children did verbally express an idea for the classroom, it was often not “doable”, resulting in their requests rarely coming to fruition. During my focus group sessions with the children, a range of suggestions for the classroom were mentioned. Ben and Amy both wanted skateboards to be introduced to the classroom, which supports their teacher’s assertion that the students’ requests are often unrealistic. It is possible that Mrs Smith’s process of using her knowledge of students’ interests to inform her resource choice is not explicitly communicated with her students, resulting in the children’s belief that she does not listen to their requests.

It was also noted by one student that the teacher might say “No” to their toy suggestions because the school doesn’t have the right resources. Amy mentioned that she thought the toys available in the Maths area (predominantly insects and dinosaurs) were boring and wanted dolls instead, but she did not think that would be possible:

> <u>Interviewer:</u>
> Have you asked your teacher if you could get some dolls instead?
> <u>Amy:</u>
> No.
> <u>Interviewer:</u>
> What do you think she might say if you ask?
> <u>Amy:</u>
> No.
> <u>Interviewer:</u>
> Why do you think she might say no if you ask for dolls?
> <u>Amy:</u>
> Because she doesn’t have that kind of stuff.

The children’s perceptions that their teacher would not listen to their requests about the classroom environment is in stark contrast to their teacher’s perception of her consideration. When discussing the independence her students have during play, Mrs Smith said:

> They know that the equipment is there. They know they can ask if it's not there. Sometimes I can help them and sometimes I can't help them. Then, we either come up with a plan or we've just sort of got to rethink what is happening. [Mrs Smith]

Mrs Smith believes her students know they are able to go to her to ask for equipment that is not there, while her students do not think it is worth asking because she likely would not be able to help them anyway.

Views on 'learning' versus 'playing'

The discussion moved on to what sort of choices children can make when they are at school. All the children felt that they can make choices when they are playing, but not when they are learning. During a play observation, I noted that the teacher encouraged every child to verbalise the choice when they were on the mat before sending them off to play:

> Teacher:
> Where are you choosing to play today, Harriet?
> Harriet:
> In the family corner.

This explicit verbalisation of choice-making may contribute to why the children felt that they make more choices when playing than learning.

Additionally, the children's comments suggest that they view playing and learning as dichotomous. I began to notice that the children were talking about playing and learning as activities that happened during different parts of the day, rather than occurring together during play-based learning. To explore this further, I asked the children to describe the difference between playing and learning. The children's responses below demonstrate this 'separation' of learning and playing:

> Playing is like having fun, and learning is about learning new things and keeping safe. [Melissa]
> Playing is where you have a lot of fun, and learning is where you have to do what the teacher says. [James]
> Because you learn, just like numbers, and then by playing you just do whatever you want. [Adam]
> The difference between learning and playing is that you cannot make choices or you can make choices. [You make choices] by playing, and by learning, you make no choices. [Ben]

The children's descriptions of 'playing' centred on making choices, having fun and doing what they wanted, while 'learning' involved no choice-making and doing what they are told. The children's comments implied that they viewed playing and learning as two separate activities with distinct characteristics. Ben justified the construction area as being his favourite area in the classroom because "You can just play what you want to do and you don't have to learn anything", clearly unaware of any learning that might take place incidentally through construction. Furthermore, the language the children used when describing playing and learning was also quite different. When

describing themselves playing, children used a multitude of "I" statements, saying things like "I wanted to…", "I decided to…" and "I will…". This is a striking contrast to the language they used when describing learning, where many sentences began with "We have to…", "The teacher tells us to…" and "The teacher makes us…".

During the children's walking interviews, the mat area stood out as being significant in two ways: it was the place all children brought me to when asked where they like to learn, and it was also the place all children brought me to when asked where they don't get to make choices. All children described 'learning' on the mat using words that imply something is being done to them, rather than an activity in which they are actively involved. Harriet said she likes to learn on the mat because "The teacher makes us learn new stuff", while James and Ben both described the mat as the place where the teacher "Tells us things". When asked why they do not make choices on the mat, Melissa summed it up nicely: "Because basically I don't get to choose what I learn and not learn".

The children also described how they feel during play and during learning. All the children reported feeling good when they are playing, using words like 'fun' and expressing clearly that playing is their preference over learning. Melissa described her experience of playing at the tinkering table as feeling:

> Really good, but sometimes bad until it doesn't work out the way you really want it to. But you just have to try new solution. Then if it doesn't work, you just try again, and if it works, then that's just really good. [Melissa]

Conversely, the children explained that they feel bored when they are learning because they have to sit on the mat ("maybe for two minutes!" [Harriet]) and do not get to play. James lamented that learning can never be fun and there is nothing that can be done to improve it, while Melissa informed me that, although she agrees with James and Harriet that learning is boring, she is progressing with her reading and is motivated to get her "golden butterfly words".

Mrs Smith shared with me her suspicions that her students preferred playing over learning, but also defended the learning that takes place during play. According to her, "I think when children are playing, they are always learning something". Mrs Smith condemned the "societal opinion" of learning and partially attributed the students' separation of learning and playing to this. She said:

> It is really hard for parents to comprehend that their children are coming to school to play because they don't value that as learning. They see formal learning as learning. [Mrs Smith]

In Mrs Smith's opinion, the very best learning occurs when children are playing and the teacher is present with them to scaffold and support the children:

> If you are with them and you make suggestions of "Maybe we could do this?" or "Maybe we could get you working with numbers?" or "Maybe we can get a game out and do a game together?" Otherwise, if they are left to their own devices, they tend to just gravitate to what they know and where they are comfortable. [Mrs Smith]

Mrs Smith explained that all of her students have "experienced some really good success with learning" that began during play and that it motivated them to want to learn more.

Children pursuing their interests during play

During classroom observations, there were many occasions when the children chose to follow their interests. The classroom was set up with several different areas, including a Maths area, family area (set up for 'home' role play), tinkering area (a place where children can make things with cardboard, glue guns and other craft equipment) and a construction area (LEGO and Mobilo – a type of interconnecting blocks). The children have 'free rein' to choose where they would like to go and what they would like to do. There did not appear to be many restrictions in place surrounding the choices that children might make, as long as they were behaving appropriately. Some children, like Ben and James, were eager to continue working on a project they had been engaged with for a number of days. Ben immediately chose to create a maths and phonics book, inspired by one his teacher had given him the day before. He said, "I am going to make a book because I know how to make a book with cello tape and staples". James was busy in the construction area making something with Mobilo. He was excited to tell me, "I am making an army boat and an army station. I love army things". Melissa chose to spend her time making a sheep in the tinkering area, saying "I just like making new creations because it's fun making new creations". She also explained that she likes being able to do drawing during playtime because "I like drawing and it's a really good art place to practise for my art class".

There were also several instances where children mentioned making or following a plan they had created. When Ben was working on his maths and phonics book, I asked him if someone had taught him how to do it. He responded, "No, I made my own plan". James couldn't wait to get into the tinkering area to begin making a marble maze: "I had a plan for many days to make a marble maze and now is finally my chance!"

Mrs Smith also commented on the freedom the children had to pursue their interests during play, and went on to describe how she utilises this to facilitate and extend learning:

> When I know, for instance, a child is really interested in the kitchen, and I see the child is always pretending to cook things, then I would look at how can we extend this into different learning by, for instance, cooking something together or making play-dough together, but then introducing the literacy and the numeracy by having recipe cards and measuring jugs. You'd have all those concepts coming in so the child is learning all of that, or at least being exposed to it if not learning, because some children may not make the connection. [Mrs Smith]

Mrs Smith demonstrated how a student's interest that has been revealed through play can become the foundation for relevant, student-centred learning. She also provided another example, this one from her experience teaching in an early childhood context. In this scenario, a child who had a keen interest in rubbish trucks sparked a preschool-wide project on recycling, including a trip to the recycling plant. Mrs Smith ended her anecdote by emphasising the impact one child's interests can have by saying, "And that was just a catalyst of one child".

Mrs Smith strongly believes in the importance of students having the opportunity to follow their interests and passions. In fact, she mentioned that she thinks children would benefit more from doing that than anything else she could offer them in the room. When I asked her why, Mrs Smith elaborated:

> Because this is something that they have come up with, so it's an interest for them. They're feeling passionate about it, and when you're passionate about something, you want to do your best, you want to make it work, you want to extend on it. Those are all learning skills we want children to cultivate. [Mrs Smith]

She continued to detail how her students' intrinsic motivation to follow their interests results in them learning new skills, building friendships and developing their oral language.

Perceptions of who should make the choices at school

Another theme that emerged through the focus groups with the children is that the children would rather an adult makes the choices at school. I asked Harriet, James and Melissa if they thought it was important that children be able to make choices at school or not, and all three were in agreement that "kids don't need to make choices". Harriet felt that, in particular, children don't need to be involved in choices about learning, because "if you learn, you can't make choices". They all expressed that they would feel very happy if the teacher wanted to make all the choices at school.

Two main reasons for a preference for adults to make the choices emerged. The first is that the children were concerned about safety and trusted that adults would make decisions that would keep them safe, "so that then they will tell us what is not dangerous and what is, so we don't run into any dangerous stuff." [Melissa]. This concern for safety is further shown in the exchange below:

> Interviewer:
> Why can't the kids choose what they want to learn?
> Melissa:
> Maybe when you decide to go for a stroll without your mum and dad and you go across a stone and crocodile looks like a leaf and you step on and it goes upside down under the water and snaps you and you'll be dead.
> Interviewer:
> So, you think you might be eaten by a crocodile if you make all the choices?
> Melissa:
> Yes, or maybe a shark. Well, actually, maybe not a shark.

The second reason the children preferred an adult to make the choices was so that they could be 'good' by doing what they teacher tells them to do. Harriet's reasoning for adults making the choices was "because then I can follow the rules". Adam was similarly concerned about obedience, describing "I just made a choice of just listening to the teacher" as the choice he made at school that morning, and saying that the teacher should make the choices because he needs to do what she says. Adam was also worried that if he got to make the choices, everyone might listen to him, when

they should be listening to the teacher. James was the only one who responded that he thinks the children should make the choices because he wants to be able to do what he wants to replicate the freedom he has at home:

> I think that children can play whatever they want and choose whatever they want, because I want to make it at school like at home. [James]

After the children established they would generally rather be told what to do than choose it for themselves, we discussed whether this was *always* the case or if sometimes children should be able to choose for themselves. Amy believed that both teachers and students should be involved in the decision-making process, because both parties need to put some thought into it. In her words: "because you have to think about it and the teacher has to think about it as well". Melissa described a classroom where the teacher chooses some things and the children choose some things as "per.. per.. perfect", and Harriet and James both agreed this would be ideal as well.

All children agreed that the teacher needed to make all the decisions about learning. However, James, Harriet and Melissa thought that children might be able to have some influence over topics the teacher decides to teach them about. For example, Melissa said she would love to learn about cats at school, and she thinks that if she asked the teacher about it, the teacher would let them learn about cats for the day.

The children saw playing as being the realm where they should be able to make the choices. When asked what decisions should be the children's responsibility, James responded, "Not the food [we eat], but where and what we want to play". While they always viewed power as being distinctly binary ("the teacher can make the choices, or you can make the choices" [Adam]), the children identified that they and their teacher could "take turns" making choices, depending on whether they were learning or playing.

Mrs Smith agreed that the children have much more power during play while she has the power during learning. In her words:

> I think in play they almost, almost totally have the power I would say, unless there's really poor choices being made. But for the rest I feel they have the power in play, whereas soon as we start doing anything formal, unfortunately, the power is mine. [Mrs Smith]

She explained how it would be impractical for the children to make choices about learning because they would most likely choose to "get up and go" instead of sitting on the mat. She pointed out that, "For most children, if you ask them that they want to learn phonics, or did they want to play, I can assure you that I know what they would say". Mrs Smith believes that the purpose of learning and playing is very different, therefore, the balance of power has to be different.

Most of Mrs Smith's comments support a binary view of power, describing how the children have the power during play and she has the power during structured learning. When I explicitly asked her if there is ever a time that power is shared, Mrs Smith said that she thinks the power is equal when they play games:

> We do Chinese Whispers or Pass the Smile or Pass the Squeeze or Musical Chairs - we do lots of games. I feel that that is where our power balance is really quite equal, because they often choose the game, they often will have a say in how it will evolve. [Mrs Smith]

While the students would enjoy some measure of power in having a say about some decisions made when playing the game, a whole-class game with mandated participation is still a fairly teacher-directed activity. This suggests that, while Mrs Smith feels the power is balanced during shared games, she may be unaware of the extent of her power and the impact this has on her students.

Frequently, Mrs Smith mentioned the importance of teacher-student relationships in her class. Mrs Smith credits her "Reggio [Emilia] influence" as inspiring her strong beliefs around relationships. She asserted:

> If you don't have a positive, reciprocal relationship with children, or anybody for that matter, but let's stick with children, they are not going to respond to whatever you do. [Mrs Smith]

Mrs Smith makes a point of ensuring her students know that she is there for them, that they feel safe, that they can make mistakes and try new things. She acknowledged that this can only happen if the children are in a space where they feel that they belong. I asked Mrs Smith if the felt that there is a difference between the opportunities for relationship-building in a play-based environment as opposed to a structured, formal classroom environment, and Mrs Smith responded:

> Yes. There is a big difference in my mind, because in this environment, when I know that a child is not interested or able to achieve something that I've asked, it's okay to say, "That is okay, why don't you go and find a

> space where you want to go and play?" I think that makes the children feel incredibly relaxed, and they don't feel threatened. [Mrs Smith]

Furthermore, Mrs Smith believes that building strong relationships with her students has an impact on the power dynamic in the class. She explained how a student's sense of agency, quality of learning and general wellbeing are connected, and all stem from a positive student-teacher relationship.

Difference between teaching philosophy and classroom practice

A clear theme that emerged throughout Mrs Smith's interviews was a difference between her teaching philosophy and her practice. This theme was particularly strong in her first interview. Mrs Smith frequently mentioned a desire to improve her practice to move it more in line with her play-based philosophy. She remarked:

> I think there's quite a big gap from where my emotional space is, where I think children should be, to what is actually happening here. [Mrs Smith]

One factor impacting Mrs Smith's classroom practice was the feeling of being pulled between her belief in the value of play and the need to prioritise formal learning. Mrs Smith felt that with increasing academic demands, she was being forced to "be proactive about creating those moments when you can give the children some time" to follow their interests through play. She described a lack of teacher agency, wondering what she might be allowed to let go of:

> Something has to give, and I think that's what I'm trying in my own head to find out what can I let go, and what I will be allowed to let go, to include something that I've noticed that the children are interested in. [Mrs Smith]

Mrs Smith believes that one of the biggest obstacles to enacting a play-based pedagogy is "too much formal stuff going on". She explained that she does not believe five-year-olds are ready to do formal learning for any period of time, and that accordingly, mat time is when the behavioural problems arise. Mrs Smith described formal learning as "a hundred things that actually they really don't need at this age" and listed social skills, personal responsibility and resilience as being "far more important than knowing whether it's an 'A' or a 'B'". While the children are playing, Mrs Smith finds that her time is being taken up listening to children read instead of scaffolding their learning during play and described this as "problematic".

Mrs Smith feels similarly limited by entities beyond her school, saying she doesn't have the knowledge of what her school will allow her to do, and that she "Probably needs to find out more about what the restrictions as far as the school or the health and safety and Ministry stuff are." She said that interference from entities beyond her classroom is particularly prominent during formal learning, which is "all decided for them". When asked what opportunities her students have for student agency during formal learning, Mrs Smith said:

> Very little, I would say. I think the progressions that need to be achieved dictate what happens in the classroom. No, I think they have much less agency at that stage. [Mrs Smith]

Mrs Smith recounted an investigation into rubbish and recycling that her students were busy working on, but added that, "from my understanding that has not come from the children. This is a topic that's been chosen by the school, and so all the children are going to learn about this". She hoped that as her students get older, they may be able to have more say in what they want to learn than when they were young.

Mrs Smith reported that the one of the main barriers to developing student agency in her classroom was access to resources. This prevented her from providing students with ample opportunity to have agency in their classroom. When asked if she felt student agency is important for her students to have, Mrs Smith replied:

> I feel it's absolutely important. And that's one of the conflicting things for me, because I don't think I have the resources to really put that in place. That's where my two poles are. I feel pulled apart a little bit by that. [Mrs Smith]

In her first interview, Mrs Smith partially attributed this to being new to the school and being unaware of what resources the school possessed. This forced her to "sort of have to work with what's here". Mrs Smith also outlined the time it takes to find out what resources the school had available, particularly when other staff members aren't sure of what the school has, either:

> Sometimes I ask for something and the answer is, "Well, we don't actually know if it's here". I asked for New Zealand puppets the other day and they said, "Oh, well, we don't actually know whether there's any New Zealand puppets in the school". So, then you've got to make that journey to find if there is some, and if there isn't, then you've got to rethink what you can actually offer. [Mrs Smith]

Mrs Smith noted an improvement in her access to resources in her second interview, after having an extra year of working at her school. However, she still protested the "rigamarole" of ordering supplies.

> I think it's better for me this year, although I do find the whole process of ordering stuff incredibly arduous. You know, you've got to apply for something and then sometimes if you want to order something large, you've got to get a number. The rigmarole is just huge. [Mrs Smith]

On a wider scale, Mrs Smith noticed that there was a difference between the school's play-based learning philosophy and some teachers' practice. A lack of clarity around how exactly a play-based classroom should operate and what the teacher's role is in the classroom resulted in quite a variation in teaching practice from class to class. After a frank conversation with the school about what their expectations were for how the morning play-based block should run, Mrs Smith still observed a range of interpretations between staff members:

> I know the other teachers all had that same message, but everybody interpreted it in a different or their own way shall I say, because when I walk past classrooms, sometimes I still see teachers taking reading groups, and that's fine. That's their decision. [Mrs Smith]

Mrs Smith also described a drift in the school's play-based learning philosophy over time, saying that "because not everyone is quite as passionate about learning through play, it sort of took a different turn". Even those teachers who are passionate about play-based learning still have differing ideas about what it entails and what a teacher should do while the children are playing. Mrs Smith explained:

> I think for some of the teachers, learning through play is 'we put something out and the children play', whereas for me it's about me as an adult, how I don't have to play with the children, but I would like to see what they are doing, how they are working through the social relationships, how they are discovering the numbers and the alphabets through what is around them, what are they surrounded by. [Mrs Smith]

Later, she pointed out the different expectations another teacher had of her students during playtime. In another class, the teacher would ask the children where they want to go, and that is where they would have to stay for the remainder of the time. Mrs Smith commented, "Now, that doesn't sit with my philosophy at all" and empathised with the children because she also would not want to stay doing an activity that she had had enough of.

Mrs Smith believes that differing classroom expectations may make nurturing agency at a young age unfair. She said that, ideally, children would begin having agency at a young age, which could be built upon and extended throughout their primary and secondary schooling. However, due to a lack of continuity throughout schooling and differing teacher expectations and pedagogies, Mrs Smith feels that children are not able to get that opportunity. She described this as "offering them a carrot, but then in the next minute it has been taken away because they go to a different class and there's a whole different expectation". Mrs Smith summed up her difficult position: "Do you do them a favour to offer them more agency and more of their own voices? Or do you support them now already knowing that that's going to fall away?"

Summary

In summary, this chapter outlined five broad themes that emerged from the data. These themes featured perspectives from both the children and the teacher involved in the classroom studied. The data were grouped into the following broad themes:

- Perceptions of children's choice-making opportunities at school
- Views on 'learning' versus 'playing'
- Children pursuing their interests during play
- Perceptions of who should make the choices at school
- Difference between teaching philosophy and classroom practice

These themes will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings outlined in Chapter 4, drawing on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The discussion is organised according to the research questions that have guided this study:

- What does student agency look like in a junior primary classroom?
- How do junior primary children and teachers perceive the balance of power in the classroom and what impact does this have on student agency?
- To what extent do play-based learning contexts provide the environment for increased student agency?

Each research question forms a subheading under which relevant findings and literature will be discussed.

What does student agency look like in a junior primary classroom?

This research question emphasised that student agency has particular characteristics in a junior primary classroom and sought to identify what these are and how they may be manifested. In Chapter 2, student agency was defined as *students having the ability to influence relevant decisions in their educational setting or wider world, and knowing that they can have a say and make a difference.* This definition was reached by examining definitions of student agency in the literature and consolidating them succinctly. Contributing to this definition were these more specific agentic behaviours:

- students actively participating in making decisions that affect them within their educational setting or the wider world (Bron et al., 2016; Cook-Sather, 2019; Kim, 2022; Mayes et al., 2018; OECD, 2019; Quinn & Owen, 2016);
- students knowing their voices will be heard and having a reasonable expectation that their ideas will make a difference (Cook-Sather, 2019; Mayes et al., 2019);
- students demonstrating autonomy by deciding what they would like to learn and how they would like to learn it (Adair, 2014; Hopwood, 2022; Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2019a; Zeiser et al., 2018); and
- students demonstrating organisational and interpersonal skills by selecting resources, setting goals, collaborating with others and reflecting on their learning

(Kim, 2022; OECD, 2019; Vaughn, 2018).

Therefore, to describe what student agency looks like in a junior primary classroom, the instances where children demonstrate they are active participants in decision making, know their voices will be heard, are able to make choices about what and how they want to learn and are able to use organisational, interpersonal and problem-solving skills were identified.

A particularly strong theme evident in the findings of this research is that play-based learning contexts encourage student agency by providing more choice-making opportunities. The children participating in this research were able to freely choose what they wanted to play with, where they wanted to play and with whom. For example, during one observation, Maddy chose to make a sheep in the 'tinkering area'. She independently chose the resources she needed to make her sheep and collaborated with the children around her to create a small flock. Students' freedom to make choices according to their passions during play is similarly exemplified in Briggs and Hansen's (2012) work, which identifies that prioritising students' interests is a core attribute of play-based learning. Similarly, Mraz et al. (2016) notes that play removes boundaries between young children and their inherent desire to learn about the world around them. The child-centredness of play aligns with one of the key attributes of student agency - providing students with the opportunity to co-construct the curriculum alongside their teachers, so that their passions and interests can influence what they are taught (Bron et al., 2016).

In my research, Mrs Smith described several instances where students' passions were revealed through play and influenced classroom learning. One such instance was an inquiry into rubbish and recycling that was inspired by one child's interest in rubbish trucks, which even led to a visit to the local recycling plant. This is an example of student agency being shown through play, as the children had the freedom to follow their interest in rubbish trucks, making choices around what and how they were learning, and the teacher worked alongside them as a facilitator. Expanding on their idea of choice for children, Pyle and Danniels' (2017) *Continuum of play-based learning* depicts how, as the degree of teacher involvement decreases, the level of child-directedness increases. This means that the less teacher involvement is present, the more the child's interests can take centre stage and the more say the child has in what

they want to do. This relationship is evident in the findings of my research, as the children identified that they have the freedom to independently make choices according to their interests during play, but that this freedom rapidly declines when the teacher is in charge again and 'learning' commences. Classrooms operating within the 'free play' sector of the continuum, as in Maddy's sheep scenario, or 'inquiry play' sector, as in the rubbish truck scenario, would likely find that the children in those classes enjoy far more opportunities to make choices and follow their interests due to the increased child-directedness evident in these sectors.

Making choices is not the only component of student agency that play-based learning allows for – play-based learning also prioritises the development of organisational, interpersonal and problem-solving skills (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Briggs and Hansen (2012) note that contributing to the personalisation of learning experiences through play requires children to draw on problem solving and organisational skills to develop a plan. The findings of this research identify several occasions when children referred to making a plan for their play, which, according to Briggs and Hansen (2012), is a process that would have required the integration of a variety of creative, mathematical, scientific and literacy skills. For example, Ben claimed he did not need any help to make his maths and phonics book because he "Made [his] own plan", and James patiently waited several days to put his plan for a marble maze into action. Ben's book required scientific and mathematical skills to plan out how to position the staples, fold the paper and construct the front and back covers. Coming up with the idea of making a book required creative thinking skills, and writing the title and filling out the pages, as well as communicating his thoughts with his peers, required him to use his literacy skills. The development of these skills is in accordance with the OECD's *Conceptual framework: Key competencies for 2030* (2016) and the Ministry of Education's *National Education and Learning Priorities* (2020), both of which call for skills-based pedagogies to help students develop the competencies necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing future. While these documents do not specifically identify play-based learning as the skills-based pedagogy required, instead favouring student agency as the vehicle for these skills to be developed, the literature and the findings of this research indicate that play-based learning has the potential to develop these skills in an appropriate manner for young children.

While the findings showed an increase in some facets of student agency, not all aspects of agency were exemplified in the play-based classroom studied. An integral part of student agency is children being active participants in decision making and knowing their voices will be heard. This aspect of agency was not strongly represented in the findings. In fact, the children specified that they did not feel their teacher listened to their ideas around what resources they would like available in their class and expressed a sense of futility around having discussions of that nature with their teacher. The children felt that they were not included in the decision-making process in their classroom. This contradicted Mrs Smith's assertion that she openly listens to her students and values their input. From Mrs Smith's interviews, it appears that she does value her students' input but that this is not explicitly communicated with her students. Ensuring young children know their voices will be heard can be difficult to achieve (Mayes et al., 2019). In their study, Mayes et al., (2019) found that five- and six-year-old students struggled to voice their ideas to their teacher clearly. It was also found that younger students struggled to understand the concept of 'having a voice' beyond its literal interpretation, thinking that 'having a voice' equates to speaking more loudly.

One method the literature suggests to effectively incorporate children's voice is by building quality relationships between teachers and students (Loizou & Charalambous, 2017). Taylor and Boyer (2020) also note this, stating that play-based learning has "the potential to support and enhance the relationship between the educator and each child" (p. 132).Furthermore, in their study into relational pedagogies with young children, Loizou and Charalambous (2017) found that play suspends traditional power hierarchies between adults and children and creates a "participatory space" (p. 450) by providing the context for children to be "actively involved, to construct and deconstruct, to participate, to problem solve, to reflect, to resist, and to question and shape decisions." (p. 450). The fluid nature of power in the play-based context described by these authors resulted in children frequently being asked their opinions, their opinions being valued and considered, and the children and adults entering into a relationship of shared decision making and responsibility.

However, there are some barriers to implementing student agency and play-based learning into a primary classroom. Teachers may struggle to have their teaching

philosophy match closely with their classroom practice. This was true of Mrs Smith's difficulty in enacting her play-based philosophy. She lamented the gap between her "emotional space" and the reality of her classroom practice and frequently expressed the desire to improve the quality and nature of the play-based learning in her class. She similarly expressed the desire to increase opportunities for agency, but felt limited in this due to several external factors, most notably the pressure that the New Zealand teachers are under to meet the requirements of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). Her need to 'tick all the boxes' limited her ability to provide her students with ample opportunities to make choices and follow their interests, simultaneously inhibiting play and student agency. This concern is evident in other countries as shown by Bubikova-Moan et al.'s (2019) meta-synthesis of 62 studies of teachers' experience of play-based learning, which similarly identified that a significant obstacle to the successful implementation of a play-based pedagogy is the impact of national policy mandates and the pressure to cover an already crowded curriculum. This finding is also apparent in United Nations' *General Comment No. 17* (United Nations, 2013), which was released in response to the inconsistent recognition of Article 31 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989). *General Comment No. 17* acknowledges that increasing academic demands interfere with children's time spent at play, which is mentioned as a contributing factor to the poor utilisation of Article 31. Pyle and Danniels (2017) also express their concern, warning of the 'push down' of literacy and numeracy skills taking up valuable play time with academic learning.

Teachers not only have to withstand pressure from the Ministry of Education to meet academic demands, they must also negotiate parental expectations. In her interviews, Mrs Smith partially attributed her students' separation of learning and playing to the "societal opinion" of play-based learning, claiming that some parents do not recognise the educational benefit of play, seeing formal learning as the only way children learn. Parents can contribute to the 'push down' of formal learning by incorrectly believing that starting academic learning earlier will lead to greater achievement and success throughout their child's schooling (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Parental expectations of early mastery of literacy and numeracy is similarly described in Keung and Cheung's (2019) study into the implementation of play-based learning in early childhood centres

in Hong Kong. Keung and Cheung (2019) note that some parents view play and learning as dichotomous, making it difficult for teachers to convince parents of the benefits of play. This is in line with the findings of my research that suggest children also view learning and playing as dichotomous, perhaps in part because of the influence of their parents' beliefs on the subject. This view is shared by Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019), who found that some teachers described parents as unwilling to acknowledge the value of play. In some cases, this exacerbated teachers' feelings of uncertainty towards play-based learning. Conversely, Keung and Cheung's (2019) study found that when parents are supportive of play-based learning and are actively involved, this can result in positive outcomes for all parties.

Opposition to child-centred pedagogies such as play-based learning and student agency has been growing in recent years. The *New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC), once heralded as world-leading in its dedication to the development of transferrable skills, is now being equated to by some as "21st century snake oil" (Partridge, 2018, para. 9). Increasing dissatisfaction with what some view as an "Imbalance between knowledge and skills in the NZC" (Hughson, 2022, p. 62) is one factor that led to the curriculum refresh currently underway. This refresh will see greater focus on specific knowledge students must come to understand, rather than the relatively open-ended, skills-based focus of the 2007 iteration of the NZC. This may serve to exacerbate some parents' misconception of the dichotomy between play and learning, which in turn can contribute to teachers' uncertainty of the merits of play-based learning (Keung & Cheung, 2019). Furthermore, the findings of this research align with the literature that identifies a crowded curriculum as being one of leading barriers to enacting child-centred pedagogies (see, for example, Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Decreasing teacher agency by increasing the prescriptiveness of the curriculum may only serve to intensify this barrier, making student agency an even less attainable outcome.

Extensive curriculum requirements, parental expectation and difficulty in accessing resources all contribute to the unclear picture of what play-based learning and student agency looks like in a junior primary class. The ongoing challenges that teachers face to ensure their implementation matches their intent makes it difficult to proclaim what student agency looks like in a junior classroom, as the potential best practice may not be practically achievable. Perhaps it is more pragmatic to posit what student agency

could look like, as opposed to misrepresenting the reality teachers face in New Zealand classrooms. The findings of this research are closely aligned with the literature that suggests play-based learning allows for more freedom for children to make choices, follow their interests and 'have a say' in what they would like to do or learn at school, all while simultaneously developing self-management and interpersonal skills (Briggs & Hansen, 2012; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). While the teacher involved in this research tended to keep play and learning as separate, thus limiting the opportunities for increased student agency to only the designated play sessions, Pyle and Bigelow's (2015) study reveals that teachers who feel more confident enacting a 'play as a vehicle for academic learning' pedagogy have a more integrated approach to play and learning, which could result in greater opportunities for student agency throughout more of the school day. Therefore, in principle, a play-based pedagogy aligns with what student agency could look like in junior primary classrooms. Whether this principle is properly actualised in practice is a different question altogether, and something that may merit its own research.

How do junior primary children and teachers perceive the balance of power and what impact does this have on student agency in the classroom?

The findings from this research show that the children and the teacher appear to view power in their classroom as being distinctly binary. The children described their activities during play using "I" statements and described their learning using "We" statements. The "We" statements the children used always referred to just the children and never to the children and the teacher combined. This hints at an 'us versus them' mentality, where the teacher is on a different level to the children. There appears to be a distinct absence of "We", meaning 'us and the teacher together' when the children talked about any aspect of their schooling. This is significant because it shows how the children may not perceive any times when they are on the same 'level' as their teacher, in terms of power and authority. My interactions with the children suggest to me that the children see power as always belonging to either one or the other, but never both together. This upholds the misconception that power is a "zero-sum game" (Mayes et al., 2017, p. 16) in which one group 'winning' the majority of the

power comes at the expense of the other group 'losing'. Kecskemeti et al., (2017) write that a potential pitfall to student agency is when teachers' views of power either support a traditional hierarchical structure or swing too far the other way by giving their students full control. This warning is also pointed out in Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) work, who describes both of these positions as "untenable" (p. 8).

When there are misconceptions around power in a classroom, this can create difficult in establishing a nonbinary power dynamic (Kecskemeti et al., 2017). The teacher involved in this research believed that power was equal in her classroom during whole class games. This suggests that she may not fully understand the nuance of power dynamics and may be unaware of the inherent authority she exudes over her students. According to Pyle and Danniels' (2017) *Continuum of play-based learning*, 'learning through games' falls under the play-based learning umbrella, but it sits firmly at the most teacher-directed end of the continuum. There are several other points on the continuum that are defined as 'collaborative' – 'collaboratively designed play' or 'inquiry play', for example. 'Learning through games' still requires the teacher to be in charge, monitoring behaviour, ensuring whole-class participation and upholding the rules of the game. The literature warns that renegotiating the balance of power in a classroom will require a shift in adults' understanding of power, so that reciprocity, respect and responsibility become the foundation of student-teacher relationships (see, for example: Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Cook-Sather 2019; Higgins et al., 2019; Taylor & Robinson, 2009). Viewing power as a binary has the unintended consequence of perpetuating the notion that teachers 'allow' students to have agency in contexts deemed suitable (Kecskemeti et al., 2017). Rather than agency being an attitude towards teaching and learning that permeates every aspect of a classroom, agency becomes something limited to certain times of the day or certain activities when the teacher 'gifts' some power to their students. As Quinn and Owen (2016) explain, the effectiveness of student agency hinges on teacher authenticity. Teachers must be genuinely committed to valuing student voice or the whole exercise is at risk of being deemed tokenistic (Holdsworth, 2017; Quinn & Owen, 2016). Mediocre attempts at 'allowing' students to be agentic only when convenient would not constitute a genuine commitment to student voice. Once students begin to suspect their involvement is

tokenistic, it is not likely any positive outcomes will be achieved (Quinn & Owen, 2016).

An interesting finding of this research was that the students did not want to increase their opportunities for making choices. They felt perfectly content being limited to making choices while playing. Charteris and Smardon (2019c) found that some students prefer not to have the opportunity to be agentic because they would rather have the teacher be the "hardest working in the room" (p. 103). The children participating in this research also preferred that the teacher made the majority of the choices, but for different reasons. They expressed a desire to be 'good' by following the teacher's orders and trusted their teacher to make the right choices for them to keep them safe. Furthermore, in the children's minds, this division of power made perfect sense because they viewed children as experts at playing and teachers as experts at learning, so it is only natural that they each make the choices within their areas of expertise. As a result, the children's reluctance to engage in more significant choice-making is one of several challenges teachers face when encouraging agency in young children.

When describing this influence adults have over young children, Charteris and Smardon (2019c) caution that children may ventriloquise what they think the adult wants to hear, rather than expressing their true thoughts. This certainly proved to be true throughout my work with the children. When initially asked what choices they make at school, several children focused on telling me how they made "Good choices" by listening to the teacher and being kind to others, instead of telling me about the things they chose to do because they wanted to. It is possible this is because they wanted to give me the 'right' answer to be perceived as 'good' in lieu of telling me their honest thoughts and ideas. To combat this, McNae (2017) asserts that care must be taken to ensure young children develop an "authoritative voice" (p. 5), which can be achieved by facilitating children's active participation in decision making. Similarly, Mayes et al., (2019) and Whitty and Wisby (2007) caution that adults must endeavour to carefully listen to, understand and affirm children's ideas to encourage them to articulate their thoughts. These authors help to contextualise this research's finding that children may not immediately embrace the opportunity to be agentic, making the comments of the children in this research entirely reasonable, or even expected.

On the other hand, Briggs and Hansen (2012) maintain that children will only respond positively to the opportunity to make choices if they are in an environment where they feel a safe sense of control. Requiring a safe sense of control as a prerequisite for increased agency creates a grey area for teachers because the definition of 'safe' may vary greatly from child to child. In this research, one of the greatest worries the children expressed about making choices was their perceived lack of safety should they take charge. Maddy preferred that the teacher makes the choices at school because she trusted her teacher to keep her safe, lest she make the choices and end up being eaten by a crocodile. While being eaten by a crocodile is a decidedly extreme scenario, Maddy's words still show her apprehension around stepping up and making choices, and the safety she feels when an adult is in control. Maddy clearly did not feel a 'safe sense of control', despite what appeared to be a very happy and settled classroom environment. This suggests that a 'one size fits all' approach may be unsuitable when deciding on what level of agency is appropriate for five-year-olds. What one group of children view as liberating and empowering, another may view as unsupported or unsafe, depending on the children's confidence and previous experience with decision making.

At its core, student agency is about valuing student voice (Mayes et al., 2019). Perhaps teachers and policy makers should prioritise teacher responsiveness, rather than generally pushing for increased student agency. If teachers take the time to carefully listen to the needs, concerns and suggestions of the students in their class, they could tailor the opportunities for agency according to the readiness of the children. This commitment to listening supports Kecskemeti et al.'s (2017) idea of a partnership pedagogy, where it is understood that power is fluctuating and that students and teachers both have important but differing roles. In this way, teachers could help to find a balance between agency and security, and their students could feel their voices can make a genuine impact.

To what extent do play-based learning contexts provide the environment for increased student agency?

The findings of this research initially appear to highlight that children are able to have an increased level of student agency in a play-based environment than they might in a

traditional classroom environment. Both the children and the teacher noted the freedom that children have to follow their interests and choose what they want to do during play-based learning. However, to accurately ascertain whether a play-based environment provides the context for increased student agency in its entirety, the definition of student agency must first be re-examined. While the findings seem to demonstrate an increased incidence of choice-making opportunities during play-based learning compared to traditional academic learning, it must be noted that making choices is only one aspect of the multi-faceted phenomenon that is student agency.

In Chapter Two, student agency was defined as *students having the ability to influence relevant decisions in their educational setting or wider world, and knowing that they can have a say and make a difference*. This definition was decided upon by reviewing and amalgamating the various definitions presented in the literature. As noted in Chapter 2, arriving at an accurate and all-encompassing definition of student agency can be a formidable task, due to the many facets of student agency and the multitude of existing, sometimes slightly contradictory, definitions. The intricate nature of student agency may be play-based learning's downfall if endeavouring to combine student agency and play-based pedagogies. While the children mentioned that they get to freely make choices while they play, they also remarked that they did not feel their teacher listens to them when they make requests for resources they would like to be available. This contradicted the teacher's assertion that her students are always welcome to ask her for help and that she greatly values her students' input. Clearly, despite enjoying the relative freedom of a play-based environment, the children did not feel that they could influence relevant decisions or that their ideas could make a difference. This denotes how play-based learning may allow for an increase in some aspects of student agency, but not all. In their definition of agency, Charteris and Smardon (2019a) break down student agency into several subcategories called 'dimensions'. These so-called 'dimensions of agency' are spatial agency, curriculum agency and dialogic agency. Charteris and Smardon's (2019a) dimensions of agency could be used as a guide to measure the comprehensiveness of student agency in a space, identifying the areas in which a play-based environment enhances or reduces agency.

‘Spatial agency’ is concerned with the input that students have on the physical space in the classroom, their ability to manipulate the resources available and the impact spatial design has on relationships (Charteris & Smardon, 2019a). The findings of the research reported here show that the children did not appear to experience a marked increase in spatial agency within their play-based classroom, although it is possible that this is largely due to the teacher not explicitly communicating the influence the children have over her resourcing choices with her students. The children did not feel they could choose what resources were available and did not have complete freedom to reconfigure the resources within the classroom space. Yet, the children and the teacher did note that the children can move freely within the classroom and can independently make choices about where they want to play, what they want to use and who they want to work with. This indicates that students in the play-based environment observed in this study enjoy some aspects of spatial agency, but not all. This may not always be the case, however. Theoretically, play-based learning does seem to meet the criteria for spatial agency. A play-based context generally encourages children to be autonomous within the space by choosing the resources they need, choosing where they would like to play and choosing how they might rearrange furniture to best suit their play (Briggs and Hansen, 2012). Increasing transparency around decisions relating to the physical classroom environment could be an area of development for the teacher participating in this research.

Students have ‘curriculum agency’ if they have a say about what they learn so that the curriculum serves their interests and needs (Biddulph, 2011; Charteris & Smardon, 2019a). This is typically regarded as the most difficult dimension of agency to enact, due to pressure on teachers to cover the breadth of the curriculum and ensure high achievement levels (Charteris & Smardon, 2019a). Historically, schools have provided little opportunity for learners to engage with curriculum agency, with the curriculum “firmly under the control of government education policy” and its implementation “firmly in the hands of teachers” (Biddulph, 2011, p. 381). One of the potential benefits of play-based learning is the ‘space’ it creates for young children to engage in “thoughtful experimentation that leads to new understandings” (Mraz et al., 2016). This reveals the capacity play-based learning may have for children to begin having a say about what they learn. The findings of this research highlight many instances of

children pursuing their interests and influencing the curriculum during the play-based part of the day. However, all participants noted how this immediately stopped when the academic learning began. The pressure described by Charteris and Smardon (2019a) to cover all curriculum areas and improve achievement becomes apparent during formal learning, rendering curriculum agency a luxury that cannot be afforded.

'Dialogic agency' describes the ability students have to hold a reciprocal conversation with their teacher or peers concerning their learning and goals (Charteris & Smardon, 2019a). Play-based learning recognises that learning can occur informally during play and is not limited to traditionally academic pursuits, so dialogic agency in this context would mean the problem solving, planning, goal setting and reflecting that may occur during play. A key component of dialogic agency is the reciprocity of conversations between teachers and students (Charteris & Smardon, 2019a). A reciprocal conversation requires an even balance of power (Higgins et al., 2019), so both stakeholders are engaging in the discussion as equals. This depends on a reduced hierarchical structure, which this dissertation has already pointed out can be one benefit of play-based learning. In this study, Mrs Smith recounted a typical reciprocal conversation that might take place in a play-based environment. She explained that if a child is struggling to complete a task, they can discuss it together in a way that does not make the child feel threatened, and the child is free to move on to play elsewhere. This is one simple demonstration of dialogic agency that I observed. Others included when Mrs Smith required the children to specify where they were going to start playing each day, which required the children to think ahead and make a simple plan. Also, James shared with me his plan for a marble maze and Ben had a plan for a book he wanted to make. Instances of dialogic agency appeared to be frequent during my observations, indicating that play-based environments do cater for dialogic agency to be developed.

Charteris and Smardon (2019a) outline three dimensions of agency, but the findings of this research highlight a fourth dimension not explored by these authors. Another dimension of student agency is students having an influence over decisions in the wider world that may affect them. This could be labelled 'civic agency'. Even at a young age, students are able to observe things in the world that upset them, anger them or incite in them the desire to bring about change. In this study, civic agency took

the form of a student who had concerns about rubbish around the community inspiring a whole class inquiry into rubbish and recycling. Though this was a simple exercise that is unlikely to have made any discernible impact on the local litterbugs, the children experienced what it was like to identify a problem and work towards a solution. Regardless of the outcome, children can benefit from being given the opportunity to contribute to solving problems in their world. Payne (2015) writes that developing students' capability for civic agency gives them a valid sense of empowerment. In a later publication, Payne et al. (2020) warn that civic education for young children is often focused on conformity, obedience and individualism by overemphasising personal responsibility and being a 'good citizen'. This narrow view of civic action results in an equally narrow exemplification of young children's capabilities (Payne et al., 2020). In other words, when children are given the opportunity and guidance to engage in a meaningful showing of civic agency, they will inevitably rise to the challenge and exceed expectations.

To achieve this, teachers must examine their involvement in their students' forays into civic agency, and how that may differ depending on the context. For example, students exercising their civic agency by petitioning their school to change uniform mandates may require guidance and support from an adult, whereas students deciding to create and cello tape posters around their classroom encouraging other students not to litter may accomplish this independently. One could argue that the former demonstration of agency will have far greater impact than the latter, and the adult involvement amplifies the validity and reach of the project. This may suggest that there is a level of civic agency that students cannot surpass without adult involvement, and this threshold is likely much lower for younger children. A small child wanting to make changes in their school or community will likely need adult support much earlier to support their developing skills than an older student would. Payne et al. (2020) critique this perspective as unnecessarily viewing adults as the primary facilitator to the children's agency, comparing it to an apprenticeship model where children rely on adults for guidance. I would argue that Payne et al. (2020) are idealising children's civic participation and are minimising the positive impacts an adult can have. Children are not born possessing all the skills they need to be participating citizens - they must learn how the world works and how they may be change-making actors within the

existing civic structures. Interestingly, Hart (2008) also compares this level of adult facilitation to an apprenticeship model, but his was intended as a favourable comparison. He writes that child participation is not a new concept but one that has existed traditionally through a partnership between adults and children, in which the adult gradually concedes greater opportunities for the child to take on responsibility. This seems to be a far more pragmatic view of children's agency. What can be agreed upon, however, is Payne et al.'s (2020) call for a "broadening [of educators'] conceptions of young children's civic action" (p. 37), so that we may begin to shift our perception of young children from "citizens-in-training" (p. 37) to fully capable, contributing citizens in their own right.

A discrepancy between the level of adult involvement required is also evident in Hart's (1992) *Ladder of participation* and Pyle and Danniels' (2017) *Continuum of play-based learning.* Both models illustrate that adults can increase autonomy for children by 'stepping back', by having the area with the least adult involvement coinciding with the highest level of child initiation. One key difference between these two models is the relative absence of teacher presence on the most agentic end of Pyle and Danniels' (2017) continuum, compared to the conspicuous inclusion of adult presence on the uppermost rung of Hart's (1992) ladder. This points to the necessity of exploring the relevance of adult involvement during the most agentic sectors of child participation in these two models, which can be particularly difficult when young children are involved. To some, discussing the necessity of teacher involvement in student agency may seem oxymoronic, but the burgeoning skills of young students is a factor that cannot be ignored. It can be argued that the necessity of teacher intervention in a task indicates the inappropriateness of the task itself for the purpose of nurturing agency. In other words, if teachers are encouraging an exemplification of agency that cannot be carried out independently by young children, this may suggest that the task is an inappropriate choice for the skills and abilities of the child. For example, expecting a five-year-old to compare their piece of writing to an exemplar and set goals to improve their work, a common example of dialogic agency, is an activity that would have to be heavily scaffolded by the teacher. This may result in the child ventriloquising the goals their teacher feeds them so that they say the 'right' thing, rather than the child making their own genuine observations (Charteris & Smardon, 2019c). On the other hand, it is in the

nature of five-year-olds that they will need more support than their secondary school counterparts to undertake just about any task, so perhaps it is unrealistic to attempt to minimise the necessity of teacher intervention for such young students.

The question asked at the beginning of this section was: To what extent do play-based learning contexts provide the environment for increased student agency? The answer to this appears to be "To some extent". There appears to be a substantial increase in choice-making opportunities for children in a play-based context but, according to the definition of student agency laid out in Chapter 2, simply choosing between a set of pre-determined options does not constitute student agency in its entirety. Operating under such an oversimplified understanding of student agency would result in a manifestation of student agency that falls well short of what could be achieved. While play-based learning allows a high level of autonomy within the classroom, it does little to encourage students to exercise their civic rights. In defence of play-based learning, Briggs and Hansen (2012) mention that simply existing in a play-based environment will not immediately result in children having the skills to select resources, work collaboratively with others, reflect on what they know and make a plan to find things out. In other words, play-based learning does not automatically equal student agency. What it does provide, however, is the context for these skills to be developed by giving children "Not only time and space but also the necessary stimulating resources and initial questions to begin the process of exploring their learning." (Briggs & Hansen, 2012). Play-based learning would require careful scaffolding from a teacher to ensure children attain the skills aligned with student agency.

The aim of this research was to determine whether play-based learning may be a developmentally appropriate means of developing student agency in young children. It has been pointed out that much of the research into student agency is focused on tertiary or secondary students and then extrapolated down to primary (Mayes et al., 2019). As a result, primary teachers are having to simplify expectations based on the ability of much older students to guide their own student agency practices. This challenges the notion of developmental appropriateness by making the assumption that both older students and younger students are capable of demonstrating agency in the same way when, in fact, younger students may have their own offerings of agency that deserve to be recognised. If we refute this assumption and base our expectations

solely on the needs, abilities and interests of young children, and enact this pedagogy in conjunction with deliberate teacher scaffolding, play-based learning could be an abundantly effective context for student agency in young children.

Summary

This discussion has closely examined the themes from Chapter Four in relation to this research's guiding questions:

- What does student agency look like in a junior primary classroom?
- How do junior primary children and teachers perceive the balance of power in the classroom and what impact does this have on student agency?
- To what extent do play-based learning contexts provide the environment for increased student agency?

Literature presented in Chapter Two was integrated into this discussion. Chapter Six will outline important conclusions and recommendations from the findings. Limitations of this study, suggestions for further research and a final reflection are shared in this closing chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and implications

Introduction

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from this study on the relationship between student agency and play-based learning. Following the conclusions, several recommendations are outlined, and the limitations of this study are discussed. Finally, my personal reflection on this journey brings this dissertation to an end.

An overview of this research

The aim of this research was to examine the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in a junior primary class in Auckland, New Zealand. This research was positioned within an interpretive phenomenological paradigm and employed a qualitative Mosaic approach to data gathering. Student voice was gathered through a series of focus group sessions and in-class observations designed to give the children multiple opportunities to share their ideas. Three semi-structured interviews were used to gather the teacher's input. Guiding this study was a set of research questions:

- What does student agency look like in a junior primary classroom?
- How do junior primary children and teachers perceive the balance of power in the classroom and what impact does this have on student agency?
- To what extent do play-based learning contexts provide the environment for increased student agency?

Conclusions

<u>Conclusion One</u> – *The extent to which student agency is provided for in a junior school classroom appears to be more linked to teachers' attitudes towards power than the provision of opportunities to make choices*

Oversimplified definitions often reduce student agency to 'the opportunity children have to make choices'. When attempting to sum up 'student agency' to non-teacher friends, I previously might have used this simplism. However, I now realise that student agency is more concerned with students' and teachers' attitudes towards power than the act of making choices. For student agency to exist, teachers must demonstrate a genuine commitment to it. Providing students with several options to choose between and then considering student agency to have been achieved does not

constitute a genuine commitment. When a binary view of power prevails, where the power resides distinctly with either the teacher or the students, student agency is limited to specific times when the teacher allows the students to take charge. As Holdsworth (2018) warns, this sort of tokenistic commitment to student agency will not result in positive outcomes. No matter how many opportunities for choices teachers provide during the students' 'turn' to have the power, the temporary 'gifting' of power undermines any agency the children might experience. Rather than focusing on increasing choice-making opportunities, teachers would do well to instead examine their attitudes to power, because it is from this that genuine opportunities for agency will be created.

Conclusion Two – Curriculum demands and parental expectation may be significant barriers to student agency and play-based learning

Teachers are under an immense amount of pressure to 'tick the boxes' of a crowded curriculum. This pressure is at odds with the provision of student agency and play-based approaches, both of which favour student-centred exploration over teacher-directed knowledge transmission. The United Nations' *General Comment No. 17* (United Nations, 2013) concurs with this conclusion, highlighting increased academic demands as one of the leading contributors to schools' and parents' poor implementation of a child's right to play. The Ministry of Education is not solely responsible for the increase in academic demands – pressure from parents for their young children's formal learning to commence also contributes to this barrier (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Keung & Cheung, 2019; Pyle & Danniels, 2017). Parents' misconception of learning and playing as dichotomous may contribute to the pressure teachers feel to favour early academics over explorative play (Keung & Cheung, 2019).

There does not appear to be any relief in sight for teachers struggling with a crowded curriculum. The curriculum 'refresh' currently underway seems likely to exacerbate this issue, with a return to the specific knowledge children must understand being heralded as one of the positive attributes of the new iteration. The current curriculum, which was previously praised for its commitment to transferrable skills, has the benefit of some 'wiggle room' within its relatively broad Achievement Objectives that teachers can utilise for the development of student agency and play. An increase in

prescriptiveness in the new curriculum may result in a decrease in the limited agency children currently have, which does not bode well for progressive pedagogies.

Conclusion Three – Play-based learning contexts are likely suitable environments to develop student agency, but teacher scaffolding is still required.

This research found that, to some extent, play-based learning is a suitable context in which student agency can be developed. The caveat exists because it was discovered that a play-based environment does not automatically result in the full extent of student agency being reached. While it does create a space where children may have increased opportunities to make choices than in a traditional classroom, scaffolding is still required to extend children's understanding of agency beyond making choices. Student agency must be an attitude that permeates the full school day. Restricting agency to the morning play session reinforces students' misconception that play is a child's domain and learning is an adult's domain, and that children's voice is only relevant in a specific context. Children need to understand the influence they can have not just over what they want to play, but also over decisions that affect them in their school, community and the wider world.

Recommendations

The conclusions of this research have led to several recommendations at a national, school and teacher level, which are outlined below.

National level

Recommendation One – That the Ministry of Education carefully considers student agency while redesigning the curriculum

There is a concern that the updated curriculum may drive a wedge further between teachers' practice and their favoured pedagogy due to an increase in prescriptiveness. I would encourage the Ministry of Education to consider the implications this may have on student agency, play-based learning and other progressive pedagogies that rely on student centeredness to improve educational outcomes. Practically, this might be achieved by creating more relaxed curriculum expectations, particularly in the junior primary, with a greater focus on developing key competencies to aid school readiness. A curriculum designed with student agency in mind could also feature broad achievement objectives similar to those in the current New Zealand Curriculum

(Ministry of Education, 2007) that create space for children to explore their particular interests under a wider umbrella.

School level

Recommendation Two – That schools facilitate comprehensive professional development in the area of student agency and/or play-based learning, culminating in a school-wide definition and approach.

This research found that misconceptions and inconsistencies were evident in practice related to student agency and play-based learning. Both of these pedagogies are broad and varied, so schools would benefit from first facilitating professional development in one or both of these areas to address misconceptions, and then developing a school-wide definition and approach to minimise inconsistencies. Schools may also choose to implement a student agency 'progression' from Year One to Year Six to ensure each year builds upon the previous years' agentic growth, instead of schools falling victim to Mrs Smith's concern of offering children a carrot one year and taking it away the next.

Teacher level

Recommendation Three – That teachers make choice-making explicit in the classroom

One simple but effective recommendation is for teachers to explicitly draw attention to the opportunities children have to make choices in the classroom. Slight changes to the ways teachers address the class or give instructions can help to verbalise the choices that children can make throughout the school day. For example, telling a class:

- "At school, we get to choose where we like to work, as long as we focus on our work and do not distract others. Where are you choosing to work today?"; or
- "We are focusing on natural disasters this term at school. What natural disaster would you like to learn about?"; or
- "I see you have been spending lots of time building dinosaurs out of LEGO lately. Maybe you could help teach the class about dinosaurs today?"

Such prompts can help to reinforce children's understanding of the influence they have over decisions that affect them at school.

Recommendation Four – That teachers challenge their understanding of power

Lastly, I recommend that every teacher spend some time reflecting on their attitude towards power and how power is balanced in their classrooms. Renegotiating the

balance of power does not have to require a massive overhaul of classroom practice. Teachers in play-based or more traditional contexts can make small changes to their practice that can have a big impact on their students' sense of agency. One small change a teacher can make to shift the balance of power in their classrooms is to make a point of listening with an open mind to their students. Teachers can engage in conversations, discuss openly problems the class might be facing and listen without having a preconceived solution in mind (see Payne, 2015 for more on how to facilitate a classroom problem solving conversation). These simple changes in practice could result in a sizeable shift in classroom power dynamics.

Limitations of this research

The primary limitation of this study is its small sample size. Only one teacher and six students were involved, and all of these participants were from the same class at the same school. Due to the small number of participants, this research may not accurately represent the lived experiences of students and teachers on a wider scale. Fortunately, the goal of small-scale qualitative studies is not to make generalisations, so this limitation is to be expected and does not compromise the validity of this research.

Time also proved to be a limitation of this study. As I was teaching full time while undertaking this research, I had a very tight schedule for data collection according to the leave of absence my school approved. Had the timing of my data collection been more forgiving, I could have been more thorough during my interviews, focus groups and observations.

As I am sure many other researchers of late would have found, Covid-19 had an impact on this study. The data gathering, which had to take place in person, was forced to be delayed several times because of lockdowns. As a result, I had to slightly simplify my research methods to ensure the data could be collected and analysed in a timely manner. Furthermore, it is difficult to say what impact several years of intermittent lockdowns may have had on the students involved. At five years old, they would not have experienced a 'regular' early childhood experience uninterrupted by lockdowns and public health measures since they were two. This may have affected their understanding of their autonomy and their dependence on adults for safety and

security. It would be interesting to repeat this research on a different group of children once 'normality' has once again been established to see if any differences are evident.

Suggestions for future research

This research has brought to light several interesting opportunities for future research. They are as follows:

- It could be beneficial to repeat this study in a traditional classroom that does not utilise play-based learning to see how those students described their opportunities for agency during the school day. These data may provide an interesting juxtaposition to the data from this study.
- It would be interesting to study how gender affects student agency. In this research, the girls tended to be more concerned about safety and conformity, while the boys were generally more eager to embrace opportunities for autonomy. Further research might discover if this is a commonly occurring theme, or if was just coincidental in my small group of participants.
- There is negligible research on student agency through a cultural lens. It would be worthwhile to investigate different cultural understandings and demonstrations of student agency.
- As previously mentioned, the small scale of this study was a limitation. Repeating this study on a larger scale may result in more reliable and generalisable results.

Final reflection

Engaging in this research journey has challenged my philosophy and practice as a teacher. I began this research hoping to shed some light on what student agency could look like in a junior primary classroom and provide a bit of a roadmap for teachers unsure of where to begin. I now find myself arriving at an unexpected conclusion. I no longer think that telling teachers specific methods of developing agency in their classroom is particularly useful or appropriate. I have learnt that there are simply too many variables to make sweeping generalisations. What this research has made clear to me is the importance of listening to students. Emphasis is often put on student voice but less often on teacher listening, regardless of the fact that you cannot have one without the other. When I consider my own practice, I am now painfully aware of

my own shortcomings in terms of listening to students. In undertaking this research, I spent approximately two hours in total with six children and no distractions, with the express purpose of asking them questions about their experience and listening openly to their answers. By the end, I felt like I knew and understood them more than my own students, whom I had taught for three terms at that point, simply because I had taken the time to listen to them speak. Unfortunately, spending uninterrupted hours listening to students is a luxury that is largely untenable in a classroom with an already packed timetable, but the essence of the activity may be recreated in small moments throughout the school day.

This research also made clear the opportunities play-based contexts provide for the building of relationships to a degree that may not be as achievable in a traditional classroom. Play-based learning provides somewhat of a 'level playing field', where the children are guaranteed a dedicated period of time every day to make choices and follow their interests. It may be possible to achieve this level of autonomy in a traditional classroom, but it would likely be more difficult and less intuitive for the children. An important takeaway from this research is that it is not enough for a teacher to create a play-based context and declare student agency to have been achieved. What is needed is a constant openness to listen to the children, a readiness to observe students' interests, confidence and opportunities for leadership; the humility to be prepared to forego the natural power afforded to junior primary teachers; and the explicit verbalisation of students' choice-making opportunities and instances of power. With these things, classrooms may begin to change the children's definition of 'We', meaning 'The children versus the teacher', and transform it into 'We' - 'The children and the teacher together as one'.

Student agency requires the use of complex skills and thinking that can wrongfully be deemed inaccessible for young children. This study has shown how able young children are of mastering this 'big thinking', when the context is correct. A play-based context can bridge the gap between young children's natural inclinations and the agency they are immensely capable of experiencing, helping to make big thinking for little people a reality.

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Appendix A: School Principal Information Sheet

School Principal Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

17 April 2021

Project Title

Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.

An Invitation

My name is Emma van Hoffen. I have been a primary teacher for five years and have spent most of that time working with students in years 1 and 2. I am a student at AUT and am in my final year of a Master of Education. This research will help me meet the requirements for this qualification. I am looking undertake a study of a school in Auckland that is passionate about both student agency and play-based learning. Your school came to my attention through discussions with colleagues as meeting that criteria. Last year, my school had some professional development from a member of your staff, Rebeccah Smith, that further cemented your reputation as a school that values both student agency and play-based learning. Your school would be an excellent context for my research to occur.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research aims to examine the relationship between play-based learning and the development of student agency in junior primary students. Student agency, a term that describes students having power and influence over decisions that affect them, has been an increasing focus of the education sector in New Zealand. However, traditional methods of developing agency that appear in the literature generally relate to older students and are not necessarily appropriate for younger learners. There is a particular need for research in this area to be carried out in a New Zealand context, as most of the existing research takes place overseas. I would like to conduct a study of a classroom within a school that espouses a dual focus on student agency and play-based learning in their junior programme.

How was my school identified and why are we being invited to participate in this research?

You have received this information sheet because your school came to my attention through professional networking as having a school-wide focus on student agency and utilising a play-based learning approach.

How do I agree that the school may participate in this research?

The school's participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose for the school to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw the school from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to the school removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

If you agree that the school may participate, please fill out the attached Consent Form – School Principal and send it back to me via email. I will then arrange with you an appropriate time for me to visit your junior teams to briefly share with them the aims of my research and appeal for any teachers who would like to participate.

What will happen in this research?

This research will involve one class teacher and six students from his/her class. The teacher will take part in two approximately one-hour long interviews focused on their understanding and experience of student agency in their junior classroom in relation to play-based learning. These interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed.

The students selected to participate will take part in a range of fun activities centred around their decision-making at school. They will play a game, do some drawing, take some photos of people making decisions and share their ideas about what choices they get to make at school and when these occur. I will also spend some time in their class observing how and when the selected students make decisions while they play. Their small group sessions will take place in a safe, public and familiar location at their school and will involve voice and video recording.

What are the discomforts and risks and how will they be alleviated?

It is expected there will be very little risk for your school since the topics under discussion are unlikely to prove personally intrusive. Any identifiable information about your school will be changed.

The boundaries of the children and teacher will be respected at all times. They will not be required to answer any questions they do not want to, and are free to withdraw at any stage.

What are the benefits?

The children who participate will have the chance to take part in a series of fun and engaging activities. They will be able to share their opinions and know that their contributions are valued.

The teacher who participates in this research will have the opportunity to have their voice heard and share their ideas and perceptions of student agency and play-based learning. Their participation may also encourage deeper reflection on their teaching philosophy.

This research will also benefit myself as the researcher by giving me the opportunity to develop research skills, including creating a research design, collect data and analyse data. The findings of the research may also lead to changes in my teaching practice. This research will also allow me to complete the requirements for a Master of Education.

This research may benefit junior primary teachers who are interested in the concept of student agency and are looking for guidance on how to practically achieve it in a junior classroom. This could have a positive impact on their students' experience of school and their attitude towards learning.

How will my privacy be protected?

Pseudonyms will be used for the names of participants, the selected school, and any people or organisations to which participants may refer, to ensure confidentiality. Any identifiable information about the participants or school will be changed. Any photos of the children and teacher that may be included in the completed dissertation will be pixelated so that they cannot be identified.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The cost associated with participation is your students' and teacher's time.

The students will be required for four focus group sessions, each of approximately 20 minutes, for a total of approximately 80 minutes over the course of three days.

The teacher will be required for two one-hour long interviews (which will take place outside of school hours).

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

If you are happy to participate then please respond to this email with your completed Consent Form – School Principal within the next fourteen days.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

A summary of the findings will be provided to you. A copy of the finished dissertation will be available online on the AUT library website: https://library.aut.ac.nz/

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Alison Smith, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, *ethics@aut.ac.nz* , (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Emma van Hoffen, hwh0723@autuni.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Alison Smith, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 29/06/21, AUTEC Reference number 21/120

Appendix B: School Principal Consent Form

Consent Form – School Principal: Permission for researchers to access organisation school staff / students

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

○ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 17/04/2021.

○ I give permission for the researcher to undertake research within ________________________________

○ I give permission for the researcher to access the staff / students of ______________________

Principal's signature: ....

Principal's name: ....

Principal's CEO's Contact Details :

....

....

....

....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 29/06/21

AUTEC Reference number 21/120

Note: The head of the organisation should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix C: Class Teacher Information Sheet

Class Teacher Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:
17 April 2021

Project Title
Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.

An Invitation
My name is Emma van Hoffen. I have been a primary teacher for five years and have spent most of that time working with students in years 1 and 2. I am a student at AUT and am in my final year of a Master of Education. This research will help me meet the requirements for this qualification. I am looking undertake a study of a school in Auckland that is passionate about both student agency and play-based learning.

What is the purpose of this research?
This research aims to examine the relationship between play-based learning and the development of student agency in junior primary students. Student agency, a term that describes students having power and influence over decisions that affect them, has been an increasing focus of the education sector in New Zealand. However, traditional methods of developing agency that appear in the literature generally relate to older students and are not necessarily appropriate for younger learners. There is a particular need for research in this area to be carried out in a New Zealand context, as most of the existing research takes place overseas. I would like to conduct a study of a school that espouses a dual focus on student agency and play-based learning in their junior programme.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?
You have received this information sheet because you meet the selection criteria for this research. This research requires one teacher participant who:

- Is a New Entrant or Year One teacher,
- Has taught for at least three years, and
- Uses a play-based approach in their classroom

How do I agree to participate in this research?
Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.
If you agree to participate, please email me at hwh0723@autuni.ac.nz and we can discuss a time to meet for your first interview.

What will happen in this research?
This research will involve one staff member and six students from his/her class. You will take part in two approximately one-hour long interviews focused on their understanding and experience of student agency in their junior classroom in relation to play-based learning. These interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed.

You will be asked to compile a list of students from your class whom you feel would be confident and articulate enough to participate in this research. I will randomly select six students from the list you provide. The students selected to participate will take part in a range of fun activities centred around their decision-making at school. They will play a game, do some drawing, and share their ideas about what choices they get to make at school and when these occur. I will also spend three approximately one-and-a-half hour sessions in class observing how and when the selected students make decisions while they play. Their small group sessions will take place in a safe, public and familiar location at their school and will involve voice and video recording.

What are the discomforts and risks and how will they be alleviated?
It is expected there will be very little risk since the topics under discussion are unlikely to prove personally intrusive. Any identifiable information about your school will be changed.
The boundaries of the children and teacher will be respected at all times. They will not be required to answer any questions they do not want to, and are free to withdraw at any stage.

What are the benefits?

The children who participate will have the chance to take part in a series of fun and engaging activities. They will be able to share their opinions and know that their contributions are valued.

The teacher who participates in this research will have the opportunity to have their voice heard and share their ideas and perceptions of student agency and play-based learning. Their participation may also encourage deeper reflection on their teaching philosophy.

This research will also benefit myself as the researcher by giving me the opportunity to develop research skills, including creating a research design, collect data and analyse data. The findings of the research may also lead to changes in my teaching practice. This research will also allow me to complete the requirements for a Master of Education.

This research may benefit junior primary teachers who are interested in the concept of student agency and are looking for guidance on how to practically achieve it in a junior classroom. This could have a positive impact on their students' experience of school and their attitude towards learning.

How will my privacy be protected?

Pseudonyms will be used for the names of participants, the selected school, and any people or organisations to which participants may refer, to ensure confidentiality. Any identifiable information about the participants or school will be changed. Any photos of the children and teacher that may be included in the completed dissertation will be pixelated so that they cannot be identified.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The cost associated with participation is your and your students' time.

The students will be required for four focus group sessions, each of approximately 20 minutes, for a total of approximately 80 minutes over the course of three days. The times the students will be removed from class for focus group sessions will be at a convenient time decided in advance by the researcher and teacher.

You will be required for two one-hour long interviews (which will take place outside of school hours).

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

If you are happy to participate then please send me an email within the next fourteen days.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

A summary of the research findings will be provided.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor,

Dr Alison Smith, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, *ethics@aut.ac.nz* , (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

RESEARCHER CONTACT DETAILS:

Emma van Hoffen, hwh0723@autuni.ac.nz

PROJECT SUPERVISOR CONTACT DETAILS:

Dr Alison Smith, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *29/06/21*,
AUTEC Reference number 21/120

Appendix D: Class Teacher Consent Form

Consent Form – Class Teacher

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

- ○ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 17/04/21.
- ○ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ○ I understand that notes will be taken during the two one-hour long interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ○ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ○ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ○ I agree to take part in this research.
- ○ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes○ No○

Participant's signature: ....

Participant's name: ....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 29/06/21

AUTEC Reference number 21/120

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

Appendix E: Parent/Caregiver/Whānau Information Sheet

Parent/Caregiver/Whānau Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

17 April 2021

Project Title

Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.

An Invitation

My name is Emma van Hoffen. I have been a primary teacher for five years and have spent most of that time working with students in years 1 and 2. I am a student at AUT and am in my final year of a Master of Education. This research will help me meet the requirements for this qualification. Your child is invited to participate in this research. Participation is entirely optional and, whether or not they participate, there will be neither advantage or disadvantage to them.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research aims to examine the relationship between play-based learning and the development of student agency in junior primary students. Student agency, a term that describes students having power and influence over decisions that affect them, has been an increasing focus of the education sector in New Zealand. However, traditional methods of developing agency that appear in the literature generally relate to older students and are not necessarily appropriate for younger learners. There is a particular need for research in this area to be carried out in a New Zealand context, as most of the existing research takes place overseas. I would like to conduct a study of a school that espouses a dual focus on student agency and play-based learning in their junior programme.

How was my child identified and why are they being invited to participate in this research?

You have received this information sheet because your child is in a play-based New Entrant or Year One class, and your child's teacher identified them as someone who is able to confidently communicate and share their ideas in a group. Only six students from the class have been chosen to participate to ensure that the selected children have ample opportunity to have their voices heard.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

Your child's participation in this research is voluntary (it is the choice of you and your child) and whether or not they participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage them. They are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If they withdraw from the study, then you and they will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to them removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of their data may not be possible.

If you and your child agree that they can participate, please fill out the Consent Form – Parent / Caregiver / Whānau that is attached. You will also have been given a Child Consent Booklet. Please read through this with your child to help them understand what I will be doing in their class. There is a space for them to indicate their consent to participate if they would like to take part. Please hand the completed Consent Form – Parent / Caregiver / Whānau and the Child Consent Booklet in to your child's teacher at school.

What will happen in this research?

Students will take part in a range of fun activities centred around their decision-making at school. They will play a game, do some drawing, take some photos of people making decisions and share their ideas about what choices they get to make at school and when these occur. I will also spend some time in their class observing how and when your child makes decisions while they play. Their small group sessions will take place in a safe, public and familiar location at their school and will involve voice and video recording.

What are the discomforts and risks and how will they be alleviated?

It is expected there will be very little risk to your child since the topics under discussion are unlikely to prove personally intrusive. Your child may find taking part in the research enjoyable.

The boundaries of the children will be respected at all times. They will not be required to answer any questions they do not want to, and are free to withdraw at any stage.

The decision to participate in this trial will not affect your child's to be involved in any activities in this environment other than those solely related to the research. If you or your child decide not to participate and information about them is unintentionally collected, for example if they are recorded talking in the background, their data will be removed from the data set and not used in the analysis and reporting of this trial.

What are the benefits?

The children who participate will have the chance to take part in a series of fun and engaging activities. They will be able to share their opinions and know that their contributions are valued.

How will my privacy be protected?

Pseudonyms will be used for the names of participants, the selected school, and any people or organisations to which participants may refer, to ensure confidentiality. Any identifiable information about the participants or school will be changed. Any photos of your child that may be included in the completed dissertation will be pixelated so that your child cannot be identified.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The cost associated with participation is your child's time. Your child will be required for four focus group sessions, each of approximately 20 minutes, for a total of approximately 80 minutes over the course of three days.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

If you are happy for your child to participate then please return the completed Consent Form – Parent / Whānau / Caregiver and the Child Consent Booklet to your child's teacher within the next seven days.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

A copy of the finished dissertation will be available online on the AUT library website: https://library.aut.ac.nz/

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor,

Dr Alison Smith, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, ethics@aut.ac.nz , (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Emma van Hoffen, hwh0723@autuni.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Alison Smith, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Appendix F: Parent/Caregiver/Whānau Consent Form

Parent/Caregiver/Whānau Consent Form

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

- ○ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 17/04/2021
- ○ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ○ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews, games, discussions and in-class observations and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ○ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw my child/children from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ○ I understand that if I withdraw my child/children from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to my child/children removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of our data may not be possible.
- ○ I understand that the photographs will be used for academic purposes only and will not be published in any form outside of this project without my written permission.
- ○ I agree to my child/children taking part in this research.
- ○ I understand that my child is able to refuse to give assent to take part in this research.

○ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes○ No○

Child/children's name/s : ………………………………………………………………………………

………

Parent/Guardian's signature: ……………………………………………………………………………

Parent/Guardian's name: ………………………………………………………………………………

Date:

Appendix G: Child Assent Booklet

Thank you for completing this form. Please can your parent/caregiver to sign here if they feel that you understand what the project is about. Please give this to your teacher at school tomorrow.

_ (signature)

_ (Date)

Researcher Name: Emma van Hoffen

WHAT DO I DO IF I HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT THIS RESEARCH?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Alison Smith, alison.smith@aut.ac.nz, 09 921 9999, ext. 7363

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, ethics@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext. 6038.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *29/06/21* AUTEC Reference number 21/120.

BIG THINKING FOR LITTLE PEOPLE: AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENT AGENCY AND PLAY BASED LEARNING IN AN AUCKLAND PRIMARY SCHOOL

INFORMATION SHEET AND ASSENT FORM FOR CHILDREN

(parent/caregivers please read to children)

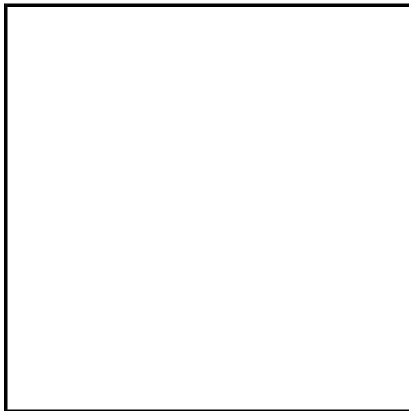
This form will be kept for a period of 6 years

Hello! My name is Emma.

I would like to spend some time in your class looking at all the exciting things you are doing! I would also like to talk to you about what you are learning and hear your ideas about what choices you make when you are at school.

When I am there we will sit down with some other people in your class and talk together. You can ask me questions and we can get to know each other. You can ask me about my work whenever you want to. Sometimes I might use a voice recorder or camera. You may feel happy, fine, not sure or worried about this. Circle the word that matches your feelings, then draw a picture of yourself showing me how you feel.

Happy, Fine, Not Sure, Worried



If you are not sure or worried, come and talk to me about it or ask one of your teachers or your parents about this.

I am finding out about something called student agency. This is when children at school get to make choices about what they would like to do or learn, and how they would like to do it. I would like to find out which times of the day you get to choose things and which times you don't.

Please colour 'yes' if you would like to join in.

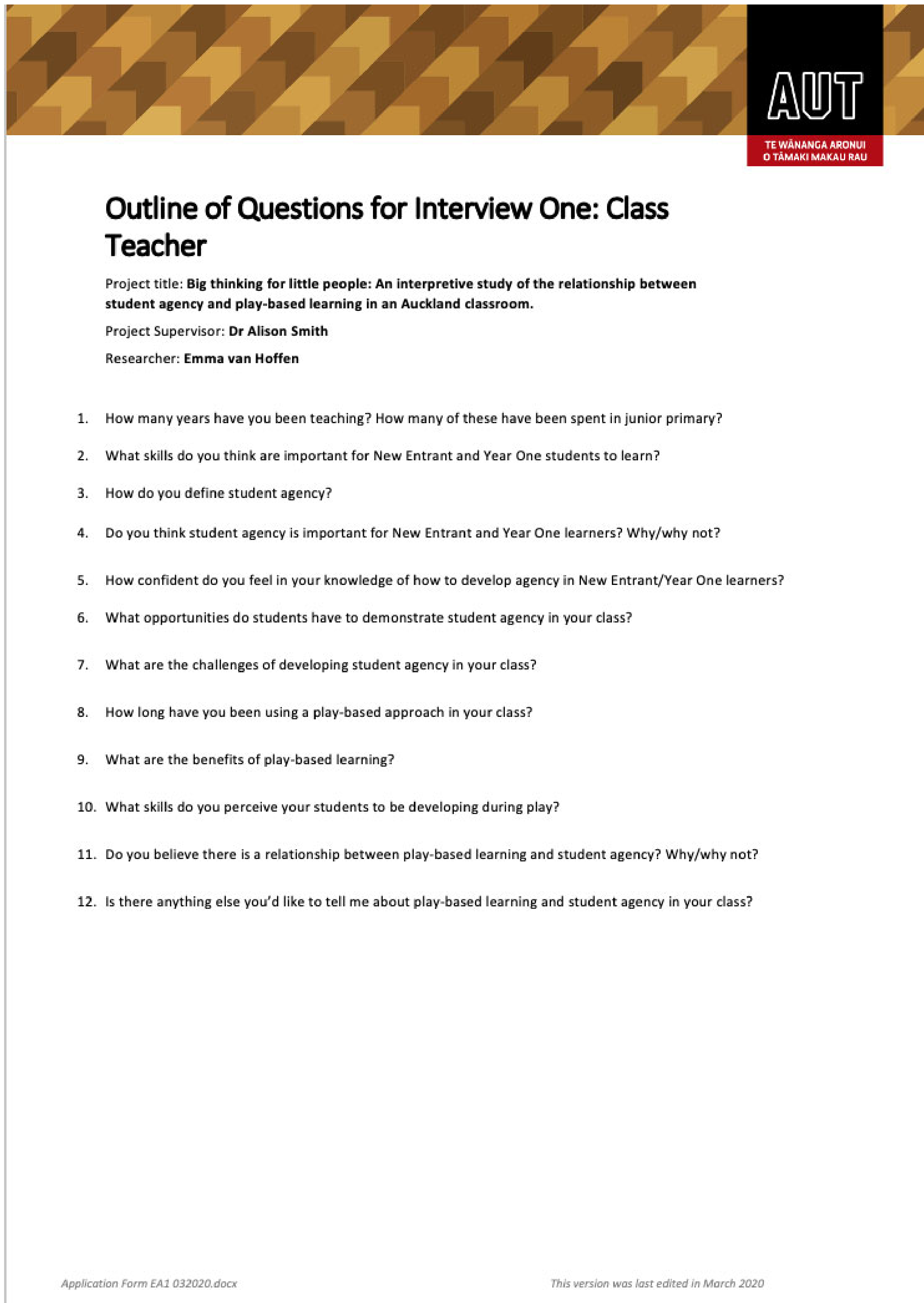
Yes

Please colour 'no' if you do not want to join in.

No

I hope we can do this together. Now that you have seen my photo, you can look out for me at school and say hello!

Appendix H: Interview One Schedule



Outline of Questions for Interview One: Class Teacher

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

1. How many years have you been teaching? How many of these have been spent in junior primary?
2. What skills do you think are important for New Entrant and Year One students to learn?
3. How do you define student agency?
4. Do you think student agency is important for New Entrant and Year One learners? Why/why not?
5. How confident do you feel in your knowledge of how to develop agency in New Entrant/Year One learners?
6. What opportunities do students have to demonstrate student agency in your class?
7. What are the challenges of developing student agency in your class?
8. How long have you been using a play-based approach in your class?
9. What are the benefits of play-based learning?
10. What skills do you perceive your students to be developing during play?
11. Do you believe there is a relationship between play-based learning and student agency? Why/why not?
12. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about play-based learning and student agency in your class?

Application Form EA1 032020.docx *This version was last edited in March 2020*

Appendix I: Interview Two Schedule

Outline of Questions for Interview Two: Class Teacher

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

The questions for this follow-up interview will be largely influenced by the time the researcher has spent in the Class Teacher's classroom and by the input of the focus group children. These questions will be focussed on:

1. Clarifying things the children might have said during a focus group (e.g., "A student mentioned that they get to help choose what the class learns about for Inquiry. Could you tell me a bit more about that?")

2. Discussing things the researcher noticed during her in-class observations (e.g., "I noticed that during the morning play session, some of the focus group children appeared to confidently choose what they would like to do but others seemed to struggle with making their own choices. Can you tell me about your experience with this?")

3. Following up on things the Class Teacher might have mentioned in the initial interview (e.g., "The last time we spoke, you mentioned that you don't feel that your students demonstrate student agency in your class. We didn't spend much time discussing that at the time, but I would love to hear some more of your thinking around that.")

Application Form EA1 032020.docx *This version was last edited in March 2020*

Appendix J: Observation Protocol

Observation Protocol

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

1. Only observations made of the children who have personal and parental consent will be noted,
2. All children in the class will be informed of the researcher's presence and what she is there to do before beginning an observation,
3. Children have the option to not be observed for any reason. The researcher will immediately respect the wishes of the child,
4. Observation data will include written notes describing relevant aspects of the classroom environment and pertinent quotes relating to the research aim made by the six child participants and teacher,
5. Photographs may be taken of the participating children and will only be used for academic purposes. Photographs will be taken on the researcher's phone.

Appendix K: Focus Group One – Playing a Decision-Based Game

Focus Group One – Playing a Decision-Based Game

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

Children will be introduced to the concept of making decisions by playing a game of "Would you rather?"

These are the questions they will be posed:

1. Would you rather have a pet dog or a pet cat? Why?
2. Would you rather only eat lollies or only eat vegetables? Why?
3. Would you rather be able to fly or be able to talk to animals? Why?
4. Would you rather only be able to whisper or only be able to shout? Why?
5. Would you rather have a purple nose, green ears or blue hands? Why?
6. Would you rather be an ant, a worm, a spider or a butterfly? Why?

Appendix L: Focus Group Two – Drawing

Focus Group Two – Drawing

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

Children will be asked to draw a picture of themselves making a decision during the morning play session. Afterwards, they will be asked:

1. What have you drawn?
2. What decision are you making in your picture?
3. Why did you decide to do that?

Other questions are likely to arise depending on what the children draw and their answers to the questions above.

Appendix M: Photography Protocol

Photography Protocol

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

1. Only children whose parents have given their written consent will be photographed,
2. The researcher will ask the child's permission before taking a photograph,
3. Photographs will be stored on the researcher's computer and will be password protected,
4. Once all photos have been downloaded onto the researcher's computer, all originals will be deleted from the device used to take the photographs.

Appendix N: Focus Group Three – Photo-Elicitation and Analysis

Focus Group Three – Photo-Elicitation and Analysis

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

Prior to this focus group session, two children from the focus groups will have been asked to work alongside the researcher to take some photos of the other focus group children while they make decisions during the morning play time.

During the focus group, there will be a general discussion around what the children notice about the photos and what they can see happening in them. Some questions that may be asked are:

1. What decision is being made in that photograph?
2. Who made that decision?
3. Why did they choose to do that?
4. What are some things we get to choose when we are at school?
5. What are some things we don't get to choose? What things might the teacher tell us we have to do?

Appendix O: Confidentiality Agreement

Confidentiality Agreement

Project title: **Big thinking for little people: An interpretive study of the relationship between student agency and play-based learning in an Auckland classroom.**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Alison Smith**

Researcher: **Emma van Hoffen**

- I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
- I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
- I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber's signature: ....

Transcriber's name: ....

Transcriber's Contact Details (if appropriate):

....

....

....

....

Date:

Project Supervisor's Contact Details (if appropriate):

....

....

....

....