

Teacher participation in young children's dramatic play

Journal of Early Childhood Research
2024, Vol. 22(4) 598–611
© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1476718X241258604
journals.sagepub.com/home/ecr



Sarah Young 
University of Melbourne, Australia

Susan Edwards 
Australian Catholic University, Australia

Joce Nuttall
University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Abstract

Socio-dramatic play is an everyday occurrence in early childhood education as children create narratives together in shared imagined worlds. The teacher's role in this type of play is less clear and this paper draws on a study using Lindqvist's "playworlds" approach to gain insight into how teachers participate in children's play. In applying Kravtsov and Kravtsova's concept of children's "double subjectivity" in dramatic play, the paper argues that teachers can also maintain dual affect roles—those of teacher outside the play, and co-player within the play—to co-create with children in their dramatic play narratives. In this study, four teachers in Melbourne, Australia participated in weekly playworlds with the researcher in their kindergarten rooms, resulting in identification of a third affect role for teachers—that of "public performer." This third affect was found to hinder teachers' capacity to maintain simultaneous subject positions of themselves as teacher and a co-player, thereby minimizing the improvised narrative trajectory and potential of the dramatic play. We argue this third affect should be acknowledged to support teacher participation in children's play.

Keywords

teacher role, dramatic play, play pedagogy, dual subjectivity, playworlds, affect

Corresponding author:

Sarah Young, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, Level 3, 100 Leicester Street, Melbourne, VIC 3010, Australia.
Email: sry@unimelb.edu.au

Introduction

This paper engages with the complexities of the teacher's role in young children's dramatic play. Dramatic play provides a context for the learning and development of young children's language, social, imaginative, and self-regulation skills (Yogman et al., 2018). During socio-dramatic play, children engage with peers as they take on roles and symbolically transform objects for alternative meanings creating shared narratives (Gmitrova, 2013). This is particularly evident in play as pedagogically deployed in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings with young children aged 3–5 years. However, the role of the early childhood teacher in children's dramatic play remains contested with respect to the limitations and/or affordances adults contribute to play (Fleer, 2015; Grieshaber, 2016; Loizou, 2017). In this paper we contribute to this debate by first examining the roles of teachers in dramatic play—teacher outside the play and co-player within the play. We then propose a third role—that of “public performer”—and consider its implications for teachers' participation in children's dramatic play.

From a cultural-historical perspective play encompass an imaginary situation positioning players in dual roles of self and other (Kravtsov and Kravtsova, 2010; Vygotsky, 1976; Vygotsky, 1930/2004). Play requires players to become someone else, whereby children express and embody ideas and actions beyond their own experience (Bateson, 1976; Kravtsov and Kravtsova, 2010; Vygotsky, 1976). Children move between self and a character role creating a double subjectivity involving the known and pretend (Kravtsov and Kravtsova, 2010). Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010: 29) argue that to understand play you need to “research play through the simultaneous stance of taking two positions.”

Literature on dramatic play

During dramatic play children experiment with time, space, and role as they enact and communicate their ideas with others through verbal and physical expressions (Vygotsky, 1930/2004). Children take elements from their day-to-day experiences and combine these experiences into new invented realities in the play (van Oers, 2013; Vygotsky, 1930/2004). Yet, despite the adoption of dramatic play as an important element in play-based pedagogies, the role of the ECEC teacher in dramatic play remains contested, and generally teachers do not participate as co-players with children (Edmiston, 2017; Grieshaber, 2016). Instead, the literature concerning teachers' role in children's play canvasses activity on a spectrum from freely-chosen and child-centered play to adult-directed and guided play for learning (Weisberg et al., 2013) Teachers' non-participation is historically understood in the context of adult involvement in children's *free play* (Grieshaber, 2016; Trawick-Smith, 2012; Wood, 2013).

Researchers have conceptualized adult participation in play through notions such as intentional teaching (Epstein, 2007) and sustained sharing thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) but these concepts do not explicitly explain how teachers might *participate* in children's dramatic play. Devi et al. (2018) examined teacher's involvement in children's imaginative play using Kravtsov and Kravtsova's (2010) ideas about subject positioning. Subject positioning describes the child and adult as subjects in play, while positioning identifies how the child and adult relate to the play and each other. An adult can be in an “up” position relative to the child, meaning the adult actively contributes ideas and information, or they can be in an “under” position, whereby they feign incompetence so that the child has to lead the play. Devi et al.'s (2018) study used cameras to capture the teacher's involvement in children's play in everyday settings as well as interviews with the teachers. Findings suggested teachers valued children's play and were involved as “observer, inquirer, instructor, and material provider,” thus preferring to be on the periphery in their subjective

positioning (Devi et al., 2018: 308). In other research, Pyle and Danniels (2016) interviewed 15 teachers from kindergartens in Ontario, Canada and undertook observations of children and teachers during play. They found teachers had diverse views about their roles in play, with some teachers believing that adults should not intervene in play, while others guided and extended children's play based on children's interests. All teachers reported challenges focusing on academic outcomes during play-based learning with children (Pyle and Danniels, 2016).

While play is contested in terms of the adult role for pedagogical purposes, an alternative approach used in drama pedagogy includes the teacher as an active participant. Drama pedagogy is based on practices of teacher-in-role with students. The teacher acts as a guide in the drama, "leading the way while walking backwards," so as to include the children in all aspects of the story (O'Neill, 1995: 67). Loizou et al. (2017) researched drama pedagogy with a teacher (who had drama expertise and experience) and a cohort of 17 pre-service student teachers (who had some drama pedagogy training). The research found the main behaviors of all participants were aligned with guidance in adult-supported, child-centred play, and they used the drama technique of teacher-in-role, whereby they became a character in the play narrative. Loizou et al. (2017) identified how teachers mainly used and preferred indirect guidance strategies to support children's participation in dramatic play, where more direct guidance to enhance the play was used less. This study demonstrated the direct strategies used by teachers in children's dramatic play extended the play into "collective action and a form of dialogic interaction" (Loizou et al., 2017: 609).

Hadley (2010) examined the practice of teacher-in-role to highlight the dual roles teachers take *outside* and *inside* the flow of children's play. Outside the play involves observation and prompting, and inside the play involves narrative participation. In early childhood education playworlds have attracted attention as a pedagogical option for teachers outside and inside play. Playworlds have a long history in ECEC; originally developed by Lindqvist (1995), based on Vygotsky's (1930/2004) writings on play and imagination. Researchers have used playworlds to examine how adults engage with children in the construction of play narratives (Hakkarainen, 2010; Hakkarainen et al., 2013). Hakkarainen et al. (2013) used playworlds with 110 children aged between birth-5-years old over a 7-year period. The children, their families and student teachers were the research participants. The role of the adult revealed a contrast between, "successful or less successful joint play in the narrative play-world intervention" (Hakkarainen et al., 2013: 217). Findings revealed that successful interactions had qualities of spontaneity and creativity, in which adults were able to keep the play narrative interesting and engaging for the children. Less successful interactions saw the adults as observers of play, seemingly unable to connect or understand children's play, with children losing interest and the story dispersing (Hakkarainen et al., 2013).

Ferholt (2009) researched playworlds in a multiage school setting using the novel *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950). The classroom teacher, four researchers, and 20 children from 5.2 years to 7.2 years participated to "foster development in both the adult and the child" (Ferholt and Lecusay, 2009: 59). Playworlds were identified as a powerful means of supporting development, especially when the teacher became a "fellow actor" in the play (Ferholt and Lecusay, 2009: 61). More recently, Fleer (2017) has proposed "conceptual playworlds" in which ECEC teachers invite children into thematic based playworlds to solve problems aimed at enabling children's understanding about STEM learning.

Conceptual framework

The research reported here uses Vygotsky's (1976) theorization of dramatic play whereby children take on roles in the form of a character that can express and embody ideas and actions beyond their

own experience. Imagination is central to this play and from a cultural-historical perspective has four interrelated phases (Vygotsky, 1930/2004). First, children's imagination begins with *reality* informing their play and creating "a new active force" (Vygotsky, 1930/2004: 20). Second, a *combinational* phase amalgamates memories with the new active force. Third, combined memories and the active force enable the experience of *emotions* by children as their memories have feelings attached to them and they ascribed these memories to their new experiences. The fourth phase is *embodiment* where reality, memory and emotions become crystallized creating something new, typically in the form of a play narrative, that did not exist before (Vygotsky, 1930/2004).

In play children move between their character role and self which creates what is known as double subjectivity (Kravtsov and Kravtsova, 2010). Socio-dramatic play allows children to "express their imagination in action" with others in a social activity, noting that other players are also experiencing dual affect (Lindqvist, 1995: 40). Lindqvist's (2003) playworlds developed as an aesthetic drama pedagogy in which teachers and children improvise in an embodied narrative. The teacher brings an idea to the children and together they take on roles and develop a shared narrative.

Material and methods

The research was informed by previous studies that used playworlds to specifically examine how teachers and children engage in dramatic play (Ferholt, 2009; Hakkarainen et al., 2013; Lindqvist, 2001).

Participants

The participants were four early childhood teachers and the 4- to 5-year-old aged children in their kindergarten settings. The teachers were from four different ECEC services across Melbourne, Australia. Details of each teacher participant and the kindergarten settings are outlined in Table 1. This includes the teachers' early childhood teaching qualifications, teaching experience (ranging from 5 to 30 years), and whether they taught in either a stand-alone kindergarten (operating in block sessions to a total of 15 hours each week) or long day care service (offering the 15 kindergarten hours within a long-day child care model) (State Government of Victoria, 2022). The geographical regions included areas at decile 4, 6 and 9 (1 lowest and 10 highest possible decile) for socioeconomic status according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016). Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Table 1. Summary of teacher participants, service type and number of participating children per service.

Teacher participants	Qualifications	Teaching experience in ECEC	Service type	SES decile	No. participating children
Peggy	4-year Bachelor of Education (EC)	10 years teacher & 20 years assistant	Stand-alone kindergarten	6	19
Henrietta	3-year Degree Early Childhood Education	10 years teacher & 11 years assistant	Stand-alone kindergarten	6	15
Rosie	4-year Bachelor of Education (EC)	5 years teacher	Long day care center	9	15
Louise	4-Year Bachelor of Education (EC & Primary)	6 years teacher	Long day care centre	4	17

SES decile from Australian Bureau of Statistics, 0 is lowest and 10 highest.

Table 2. Methods and data collection.

Methods	Method type	Participants	Data generated
1	Semi-structured interviews × 4	Each teacher individually	Audio recorded and transcribed
2	Professional learning session × 1	All four teachers together	Audio recorded and transcribed
3	Playworlds × 12	Each teacher, the children in their kindergarten room and researcher (first author)	Videoed and transcribed
	Teacher written reflections	Teachers	Written
	Researcher journal	Researcher (first author)	Written
4	Group interview × 1	All four teachers together	Audio recorded and transcribed

Methods

Four methods were used, and data generated was written, audio and video recorded. Each method and aligned data is outlined and summarized (Table 2).

The study commenced with semi-structured interviews (Method 1) with each teacher to gain their perspectives (Yin, 2018) on children's dramatic play and their perceived role in such play. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Then a professional learning session (Method 2) jointly attended by all four participants was held to present the research themes (dramatic play, teacher's role, playworlds) to simulate discussion amongst the teachers regarding their perspectives about such play (Cohen et al., 2017). This professional learning session also informed the teachers of the playworlds drama method (see next section) that developed shared understandings of drama pedagogical techniques (such as teacher-in-role, children-in-role, shared and improvised narratives) to support co-creating with children.

Weekly playworlds (Method 3) were planned with each teacher and the researcher (first named author). These were informed by the children's play interests and enacted within their respective kindergarten settings. Each teacher and their group of children took part in a weekly playworld that lasted approximately 50–60 minutes, each week for 3 week (12 in total). Playworlds as an indicated method was used for engaging the teachers, children, and researcher in a shared narrative to understand how the dual subjectivity plays out with adults and children (Ferholt and Nilsson, 2017; Hakkarainen et al., 2013). The teacher and researcher were “improvising with the children, exploring fictional situations through various kinds of role-play. . . with all the players actively involved” O'Toole and Dunn (2002: 2). The researcher and teacher co-planned the first playworld with content that was of interest to the particular group of children, providing ready-made characters and settings (Dunn and Stinson, 2012; O'Neill, 1995).

Each week the researcher was introduced to the group by the teacher and together the teacher and researcher bought an idea to the children to start the playworld session. These ideas were first suggested by each teacher and drawn from the play interests of each group of children. The four services had different play interests that all came from popular culture motifs. A strong feature of young children's contemporary play is its connection to popular culture in the form of films, television shows, apps and computer games (Marsh, 2014). Children's popular culture motifs support “learner-led media-rich play” (Wohlwend, 2016: 2). Children's dramatic play is frequently infused with popular culture references and children are experts in using popular culture as “purposive cultural participants” (Wohlwend, 2019: 400). The play motifs were based on the television program *Octonauts*TM, the movie *Frozen*TM, and a well-known stable of superheroes (including *Spiderman*TM). The subsequent playworlds content was chosen by each group of children to adapt in response to their ideas and ongoing interests.

In each playworld the teacher, children and the first author were all active participants and took on roles according to drama pedagogy, including teacher-in-role and children-in-role (Dunn and Stinson, 2012; Hadley, 2010). These roles place children-as-experts utilizing their knowledge of the popular culture outside of the play (i.e., as themselves) and within the play in role (i.e., as a popular culture character). Using drama as a teaching and researching method meant the participants “balanced on the edge of reality and fantasy” creating a shared imaged world together (Brown, 2017: 167). Children were enabled to support the teacher-in-role, who was not always as proficient as the children in the required popular culture knowledge, to progress the narrative. Video-recordings were used to capture each enacted playworld in its entirety (Harris, 2016; Heath et al., 2010) and these were transcribed. After each playworld concluded, teacher reflections were conducted in written format to capture the immediate thoughts and feelings of the teacher participants (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Finally, after the 12 playworlds had been enacted a group interview (Method 4) with all four teachers was conducted to share their experiences and perspectives (Yin, 2015) within the playworlds and how this related to their understandings of being in children’s dramatic play. This interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

From the outset the first author’s professional history in drama education with young children was identified to the participants to make clear her “role and situated perspective” (Bresler, 2011: 322) within the research. A researcher journal recorded thoughts, ideas, and challenges arising from her participation (in particular the playworld method) to make sure there was consistent and systematic attention to researcher reflexivity (Cohen et al., 2017; Mukherji and Albon, 2018). This journal supported an ongoing ethical dimension to the project by documenting and making visible the interactions with participants and consequent project decision-making throughout (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Mukherji and Albon, 2018).

Analysis

The unit of analysis (Yin, 2018) in this study focused on the role of the teacher with children during dramatic play. The written, transcribed interviews and video data were analysed in NVivo using both deductive and inductive phases (Gray, 2021; Yin, 2015). In the deductive phase, coding was based on when and how teachers were *inside* or *outside* the play (Kravtsov and Kravtsova, 2010) and this created the first codes. The inductive phase then identified further aspects of the phenomenon of interest (i.e., teacher roles inside and outside the dramatic play) (Gray, 2021), assigning second codes where aspects of teacher participation inside or outside of the play were identified, or where topics were repeatedly discussed or enacted by the participants (Saldaña, 2021). This second cycle of coding used *in vivo coding* that paid attention to the participants’ verbatim words or statements that become the codes, and *pattern coding* (Saldaña (2021) that identified persistent categories in the data. The deductive and inductive codes were aggregated together to develop major concepts (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Creswell and Guetterman, 2018) to capture how the teachers talked about and enacted their roles within the children’s play.

Ethics

This study was conducted with ethical approval by the University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education, Victoria. Informed consent for participation was gained from the teachers, and from adult family members on behalf of their children. Ongoing assent of children was sought, in which children were invited to participate in the playworld and children declining assent did not participate.

Results

The teachers were found to be both outside and inside the play simultaneously with children. Outside of the play was indicated by taking the teacher role, and inside the play by the teacher being in a co-player role. These roles required the teachers to organize the play from the teacher perspective and contribute from their character role perspective, with a focus on commitment to the imaginative contributions made by the children. The following playworld example (Method 3) highlights how Peggy was in role as Spiderwoman and the children were in role as the Ministers of Superheroes. In the developing play narrative the Ministers had been called to help Spiderwoman retain her lost powers.

- Peggy (teacher): Oh, I'm in big trouble, big, big, trouble. I've got no powers. Something's happened to me. My fingers, they just. . . (*Peggy wriggles her fingers*) I don't know they're just all flat and wonky and they don't do anything, they don't do anything.
- Sarah (researcher): What usually happens to Spiderwoman's fingers, can you please show me? (*The children talk and demonstrate the Spiderman/woman hand gestures by putting their index and little fingers out to make the web-making gesture. They stand up and show Spiderwoman and physically put her finger in the right place to shoot webs, but the fingers keep wobbling. Peggy starts to imitate the children's gestures.*)
- Peggy (teacher): I can't.
- Jamie (child): Spiderwoman, look see (*A different child gets up and demonstrates with his hands*). You put two ones with the fingers, and then you go put two things out like this. (*The child puts out their index and little fingers to make the gesture*).

Here Peggy stimulates the children's ideas by using her role to gain assistance from the children's expertise in their role. The contributions of the children, who know how spiderwebs are created via the hands and finger gesture, teach the Spiderwoman skills so the playworld narrative may progress. When the teacher operates from the simultaneous perspective of teacher and role, this affords them the opportunities to be in a shared imagined world with children. Using dual positioning allows for group problem solving and collaboration skills to be supported, capabilities that are just emerging in young children (Yogman et al., 2018).

Another example of the teacher's dual roles occurred in a playworld (Method 3) that combined the popular culture motifs of superheroes and the movie Frozen™. The co-playing teacher, Louise, was Queen Elsa, and the researcher was in-role as Queen Elsa's sister, Anna. The children were detectives, and their expertise was essential to solving the dilemma at hand, centred on how Queen Elsa had frozen all the superheroes in the land. The children, as detectives, wanted to convince Elsa to stop using her powers to freeze people.

- Sarah (researcher): Elsa, there's some people who want to talk to you (To Louise as Elsa)
- Louise (teacher): What brings them here?
- Sarah (researcher): I think you have frozen some people who are very important. I think you need to talk to them.
- Louise (teacher): Okay, let them in. (Researcher opens the imagined door and all the children enter as detectives and come in) What brings you detectives here today? What are you doing at my palace? What has brought you here to my palace Frankie, what has brought you here today?

- Frankie (child): I have a movie of you and see you on TV.
- Louise (teacher): You usually see me on TV. Oh, that's nice. But what brought you here today? Why have you come to see me?
- Darcy (child): Because we need to talk to you to stop freezing people.
- Louise (teacher): To stop freezing people?
- Children: Yes.
- Louise (teacher): Do you mean the superheroes that I froze?
- Children: Yes.
- Louise (teacher): But why? Why do I need to stop freezing them?
- Harley (child): Because that's not good.
- Louise (teacher): I think it's brilliant.
- Harley (child): They help people, it's 'cos we need them to save people.
- Louise (teacher): But I have a problem, I have a problem that I can't stop freezing people. How am I going to stop freezing them?
- Remy (child): Because you've got powers and you can't help the powers. You can't control your powers.

The extract above shows Louise both in teacher role and as a co-player, that is, as Queen Elsa posing questions to elicit the children's ideas to build and guide the shared narrative (Sawyer, 1997, 2015). Here Louise took two points of view, as teacher and as character role, throughout the playworld. These interactions between the teacher and children were fluid and unpredictable, creating a "dialogic improvisation" (Sinclair, 2012: 50) with the creative process in constant flux (Engel, 2013; Vygotsky, 1930/2004). Louise's subsequent written reflection (Method 3) expressed her flexibility in moving inside and outside of the play flow (Hadley, 2010) accommodating the children's contributions.

- Louise (teacher): Today I felt more comfortable about my role in contributing and facilitating children's play without being worried about whether I was taking over too much control in their play and how the role of the educator can still lead whilst also incorporating their ideas and interests in the story being flexible.

These examples demonstrate how the teachers in this study used dual roles while improvising the unfolding narrative with children. Louise was able to construct "emotional responses to both actual and dramatic worlds" (Dunn et al., 2015: 1) balancing the dual roles typically associated with children in play, whereby her teacher-role outside of the play likewise contributed to her role as co-player within the play (Kravtsov and Kravtsova, 2010: 35). When teachers such as Peggy and Louise were flexible in their dual roles, a "spontaneous improvisation" could emerge (Brèdikytè, 2011: 153) to keep the play narrative moving.

However, in addition to these situations involving the documented roles of teachers being inside and/or outside the play, some situations were observed where teachers' participation did not have the resultant double subjectivity that children are known to use in their play (Kravtsov and Kravtsova, 2010; Vygotsky, 1976). To dramatically improvise requires people to experiment in a creative process (Sawyer, 2011a; Zaporozhets, 2002) which makes demands on their feelings and emotions (Greene, 1980; Vygotsky, 1926/1992). When teachers take on roles in children's play it "wakes up the adult's own imagination, [and] helps emotional involvement" (Hakkalainen et al., 2013: 223).

Nonetheless teachers in this current study found that sustaining their dual roles during children's play were influenced by others in the room. For example, in the ECEC context it is assumed there is no audience, although the presence of other adults who were not participating in the

activity created a feeling amongst these teachers of being observed. This sense of audience was found to be a hindrance to teachers' involvement and impacted their capacity to be a co-player. For example, in one particular playworld (Method 3) Henrietta (teacher) was in role as Elsa from Frozen™ and the children were in role as detectives. Everyone was traveling to a snowing landscape to find Olaf, the snowman. In this vignette the teacher had asked the children how they could travel, and one child suggested a sleigh, so she continued to elicit their ideas.

- Henrietta (teacher): We are going to get in the sleigh (a large piece of fabric on the floor).
Henrietta calls out children's names and they get up to sit on the fabric.
- Henrietta (teacher): What animal will be pulling the sleigh?
- Child: Rudolf.
- Henrietta (teacher): Yes, and what animal is Rudolf?
- 2nd teacher: A reindeer.
- Henrietta (teacher): Yes a reindeer. What are those things on a reindeer head?
- Child: Horns.
- Henrietta (teacher): They are like a horn. . .
- 2nd teacher: Antlers.

Here, Henrietta was trying to scaffold the children's ideas, however the children did not have time to contribute to advance the conversational turn taking (Kidwell, 2022). This was because the 2nd teacher, perhaps invested in supporting the children's learning, was also answering the posed questions. Working in groups in a creative manner is multi-leveled with a process including both "creative mental processes (at the level of the individual) and creative collaborative processes (at the level of the group)" (Sawyer, 2011b: 62). In this example, Henrietta, who is responsible for the collaborative process, is fragmented from her dual roles and her ability to improvise with the children was restricted.

The researcher noted in the journal after a playworlds session.

At the start of this *playworld* [the teacher] seemed nervous and uncomfortable. It took her a while to come and join the children and I on the mat which was the place where we began each week. I was unsure how the session would go as we needed to focus the group of children for the start of the playworld. Maybe it was because another educator in the room had joined us and sat by the side and watched. I remember in her interview she talked about people looking at her joining in children's play so this could be something that concerns her. . . Does this mean that my attention, the teacher's attention, and the children's attention were somehow fragmented? This imaginary space is fragile and seemingly small disruptions can puncture this state.

In the group interview (Method 4) the teacher's perceptiveness shed light on her experience.

- Henrietta (teacher): I suppose if people were laughing at me, I didn't care, I don't care about that. The way I found that people were blocking [in the playworlds] was when we were encouraging the children to provide their ideas, the other educators were answering the questions, so [the researcher] and I would be trying to encourage the kids to come up with an idea, I think one of them was we were trying to suggest to them what animal could pull a sleigh? And they were all saying Rudolf, they were saying things like that, and we were saying, oh, what's one of those animals, the ones with the big things on their heads? And one of the other co-educators went, oh, a reindeer, and I went, yep, that'll be the one. So, that's how I was finding a lot of them blocking the play.

Henrietta's notion of "blocking the play" illustrates how other adults, forming a type of audience, or perhaps trying to facilitate the play, could cause the teacher as co-player to withdraw from the shared imaginative endeavors of the dramatic play. Lindqvist (1995: 132) argues that, when the interest of other adults wanes, "this fact would influence the course of events" and in this example the effect hindered the teacher and children's improvised dialogue.

In the following exchange in the group interview (Method 4) the teachers expressed how the "performance" aspect of being in children's play as co-players impacts on their involvement. Although being a co-player was viewed as essential to their practice (Hakkarainen et al., 2013), it also carries the risk of judgement.

- Peggy (teacher): People will look at me and say, "Oh, look at that dill over there," basically. I think you just feel uncomfortable. Whereas with the children, they're non-judgmental, you can just get in there and be yourself.
- Henrietta (teacher): Oh, yeah, thousands of people do. I don't care if parents are looking through the window going, "Is she teaching my children, or is she a lunatic?" Whatever, I don't . . . that's just part of my role, I think, to be able to get down on my hands and knees or walk on my tippy-toes, be a giant if that's what they want of me, . . . whatever it is they want me to be, I will.
- Louise (teacher): I have a great time with them, and I get so engrossed in what I do with them that a lot of the time, as I said, people must walk in and just watch what I'm doing and go, "She's on another planet."

Hakkarainen et al. (2013) found that when the adult becomes an observer *outside of the play* they lack sufficient coordination of their own emotional and physical contributions to the play. This leads to the play narrative being broken. Further evidence of the impact of the audience on teacher dual roles was found in the teachers' comments in the group interview (Method 4) about other educators being in the classroom.

- Peggy (teacher): Adults in the room who. . . snigger or look. . . because you're right into it, and you're happy to be right into it, but you look across and hear or perceive what they're thinking.
- Rosie (teacher): Educators or parents?
- Peggy (teacher): Educators.
- Sarah (researcher): Peggy, you've used the word "snigger." What do you mean?
- Peggy (teacher): Just their body language.
- Rosie (teacher): Is this co-educators?
- Peggy (teacher): Yeah, it's not overt, it's . . .
- Rosie (teacher): So, it's subtle?
- Peggy (teacher): Yes, but then, is that my perception of what I think that they're thinking?

Peggy's concerns about what others may be thinking as they watch shifts her own focus to the audience, prompting a *third* affect role, which we have called "public performer." The experience of public performer existed for the teachers when adults not directly involved in teaching or participating in the playworld were in the classroom.

Discussion

The results from this study suggest that teacher's participation in children's play is not an individual pursuit but one that is collaborative with children and influenced by the environment, including children's interests in popular culture and digital media. Teacher skills in eliciting children's ideas meant that multiple voices added to the shared improvised narrative. In this study, the adults did not dominate (Pyle and Danniels, 2016); instead, the children and teacher were able to guide and be guided in the collaboration (Sawyer, 1997, 2015). Being a teacher outside of the play and co-player inside the play are particularly connected when listening to and incorporating children's contributions. This requires teachers to improvise alongside the children and be comfortable in the unpredictable nature of children's play. Improvisors are "open to ideas, accept other people's suggestions and support each other as players" (Loizou and Michaelides, 2020: 97).

Brèdikytė and Hakkarainen (2011: 64) argue it is challenging for teachers "to be spontaneous; to improvise, to have the courage to make mistakes." Sawyer's (2015) work with actors suggests even skilled improvisors can feel a terror-like state when things are not going well. An unpredictable environment experienced as public performer means "group creativity can be frightening because failure is public" (Sawyer, 2015: 253). Thus, teachers can be pulled away from the dual affect that supports dramatic play by a third affect, that of being a public performer. The teachers in this study described how the kindergarten environment in which other adults can be present contributed to an uneasy audience-induced state, traveling "from the flow zone into an anxiety zone" (Sawyer, 2015: 253). Being in such anxiety zone, alongside the demands of trying to maintain the dual affect in the face of the third affect typically resulted in teachers being unable to support children's unfolding narratives.

This research makes a novel contribution to existing understandings about ECEC teacher participation in children's socio-dramatic play via the limiting impact of a third affect, which we have labeled "public performer." Our findings suggest that, when teachers are simultaneously outside the play as teacher, and inside the play as co-player, they maintain double subjectivity as both a teacher and within a role (i.e., teacher Louise as Queen Elsa). Teacher maintenance of dual affect during dramatic play can sustain the play narrative with a group of children, although this is a challenging proposition even for experienced teachers (Hadley, 2010). However, the introduction of a third affect—that of public performer—may be too much to sustain, meaning that double subjectivity becomes impossible. Our data offer no explanation for why some teachers find the presence of an audience difficult to bear. We simply note that simultaneously being a teacher, co-player, and public performer is a significant challenge for anyone other than experienced drama educators.

Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest the use of double subjectivity as enacted within a playworld is important for players of all ages as it ensures the presence of the self and the capacity of the imagined character to do what otherwise is impossible. However, our findings also suggest that in ECEC settings, a third affect—that of public performer—can arise for teachers when other adults are in the classroom, compromising the achievement of double subjectivity through the anxiety associated with a potentially judgemental audience. When this occurs the capacity of playworlds to support adult-child interactions during play is jeopardised. Given the historical traction playworlds have in the ECEC literature as mode of supporting adult-child interaction via play-based learning (Fleer, 2020) the problem of the public-performer requires attention. If teachers are uneasy with their contributions to a playworld the pedagogical intention of the world itself may not be well

sustained. Further research could investigate the extent to which the third affect is most effectively addressed for educators within their own kindergarten settings.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Sarah Young  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9515-4982>

Susan Edwards  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5945-0597>

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) Socio-economic indexes for areas (SEIFA). Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2033.0.55.001> (accessed 6 June 2019).
- Bateson G (1976) A theory of play and fantasy. In: Bruner J, Jolly A and Sylva K (eds) *Play - its Role in Development and Evolution*. New York: Penguin, pp. 119–129.
- Brèdikytè M (2011) *The Zones of Proximal Development in Children's Play*. Oulu: University of Oulu.
- Brèdikytè M and Hakkarainen P (2011) Play intervention and play development. In: Lobman C and O'Neill B, E. (eds) *Play and Performance: Play and Culture Studies*. Lanham, MA: University Press of America.
- Bresler L (2011) Arts-based research and drama education. In: Schonmann S (ed) *Key Concepts in Theatre/ Drama Education*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 321–326.
- Brown V (2017) Drama as a valuable learning medium in early childhood. *Arts Education Policy Review* 118(3): 164–171.
- Cohen L, Manion L and Morrison K (2017) *Research Methods in Education*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Creswell JW and Guetterman TC (2018) *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. Sydney, NSW: Pearson.
- Creswell JW and Poth CN (2017) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Devi A, Fler M and Li L (2018) 'We set up a small world': preschool teachers' involvement in children's imaginative play. *International Journal of Early Years Education* 26(3): 295–311.
- Dunn J, Bundy P and Stinson M (2015) Connection and commitment: Exploring the generation and experience of emotion in a participatory drama. *International Journal of Education & the Arts* 16(6): 153–170.
- Dunn J and Stinson M (2012) Dramatic play and drama in the early years: Re-imagining the approach. In: Wright S (ed) *Children, Meaning-Making and the Arts*, 2nd edn. NSW: Pearson, pp. 115–134.
- Edmiston B (2017) Changing our world: Dialogic dramatic playing with young. In: Bruce T, Hakkarainen P and Bredikyte M (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of Early Childhood Play*. New York: Routledge, pp. 137–150.
- Engel S (2013) Flux and flow in children's narratives. In: Taylor M (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of the Development of the Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 212–223.
- Epstein AS (2007) *The Intentional Teacher: Choosing the Best Strategies For Young Children's Learning*. Washington DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Ferholt B (2009) *The Development of Cognition, Emotion, Imagination and Creativity: As Made Visible Through Adult-Child Joint Play*. San Diego, CA: University of California.
- Ferholt B and Lecusay R (2009) Adult and child development in the zone of proximal development: Socratic dialogue in a playworld. *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 17(1): 59–83.
- Ferholt B and Nilsson ME (2017) Aesthetics of play and joint playworlds In: Bruce T, Hakkarainen P and Bredikyte M (eds) *The Routledge International Handbook of Early Childhood Play*. New York: Routledge, pp. 58–69.
- Fler M (2015) Pedagogical Positioning in Play - Teachers Being Inside and Outside of children's Imaginary Play. *Early Child Development and Care* 185(11–12): 1801–1814.

- Fleer M (2017) Scientific Playworlds: A Model of Teaching Science in Play-Based Settings. *Research in Science Education* 49(5): 1257–1278.
- Fleer M (2020) A tapestry of playworlds: a study into the reach of Lindqvist's legacy in testing times. *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 27(1): 36–49.
- Gmitrova V (2013) Teaching to play performing a main role – effective method of pretend play facilitation in preschool-age children. *Early Child Development and Care* 183(11): 1705–1719.
- Gray DE (2021) *Doing Research in the Real World*. London: Sage.
- Greene M (1980) Aesthetics and the experience of the arts: Towards transformations. *The High School Journal* 63(8): 316–322.
- Griehaber S (2016) Play and policy in early childhood education in the Asia Pacific Region. *Asia-Pacific Journal Of Research In Early Childhood Education* 10(2): 7–28.
- Groundwater-Smith S, Dockett S and Bottrell D (2015) *Participatory Research with Children and Young People*. London: Sage.
- Hadley E (2010) Playful disruptions. *Early Years* 22(1): 9–17.
- Hakkarainen P (2010) Cultural-historical methodology of the study of human development in transitions. *Cultural-Historical Psychology* 4: 75–89.
- Hakkarainen P, Brëdikytë M, Jakkula K, et al. (2013) Adult play guidance and children's play development in a narrative play-world. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 21(2): 213–225.
- Harris A (2016) *Video as Method: Understanding Qualitative Research*. New York: Oxford.
- Heath C, Hindmarsh J and Luff P (2010) *Video in Qualitative Research: Analysing Social Interaction in Everyday Life*. London: Sage.
- Kidwell M (2022) Sequences. In: Church A and Bateman A (eds) *Talking with Children: A Handbook of Interaction in Early Childhood Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kravtsov GG and Kravtsova EE (2010) Play in L. S. Vygotsky's nonclassical psychology. *Journal of Russian and Eastern European Psychology* 48(4): 25–41.
- Lewis CS (1950) *The Lion, the witch and the Wardrobe*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Lindqvist G (1995) *The Aesthetics of Play: A Didactic Study of Play and Culture in Preschools*. Sweden: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- Lindqvist G (2001) When small children play: How adults dramatise and children create meaning. *Early Years* 21(1): 7–14.
- Lindqvist G (2003) The dramatic and narrative patterns of play. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 11(1): 69–78.
- Loizou E (2017) Towards play pedagogy: Supporting teacher play practices with a teacher guide about socio-dramatic and imaginative play. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 25(5): 784–795.
- Loizou E and Michaelides A (2020) Socio-dramatic play: Scenario and role development as enacted by children and as facilitated by pre-service early childhood teachers through drama. In: Kingdon Z (ed) *A Vygotskian Analysis of Children's Play Behaviours: Beyond the Home Corner*. Oxen: Routledge, pp. 92–112.
- Loizou E, Michaelides A and Georgiou A (2017) Early childhood teacher involvement in children's socio-dramatic play: Creative drama as a scaffolding tool. *Early Child Development and Care* 189(4): 600–612.
- Marsh J (2014) Media, popular culture and Play. In: Brooker L, Blaise M and Edwards S (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, pp. 403–414.
- Mukherji P and Albon D (2018) *Research Methods in Early Childhood: An Introductory Guide*. London: Sage.
- O'Neill C (1995) *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- O'Toole J and Dunn J (2002) *Pretending to Learn: Helping Children Learn Through Drama*. NSW: Longman.
- Pyle A and Danniels E (2016) A continuum of play-based learning: The role of the teacher in play-based pedagogy and the fear of hijacking play. *Early Education Development* 28(3): 274–289.
- Saldaña J (2021) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Sage.
- Sawyer K (1997) *Pretend Play as Improvisation: Conversation in the Preschool Classroom*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Sawyer K (2011a) *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sawyer K (2011b) Extending Sociocultural Theory to Group Creativity. *Vocations and Learning* 5(1): 59–75.
- Sawyer K (2015) Drama, theatre and performance creativity. In: Davis S, Ferholt B, Grainger Clemson H, et al. (eds) *Dramatic Interactions in Education*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Sinclair C (2012) Teaching for the aesthetic, teaching as aesthetic. In: Sinclair C, Jeanneret N and O'Toole J (eds) *Education in the Arts*. Victoria: Oxford University Press.
- Siraj-Blatchford I (2009) Conceptualising progression in the pedagogy of play and sustained shared thinking in early childhood education: A Vygotskian perspective. *Educational and Child Psychology* 26(2): 77–89.
- State Government of Victoria (2022) *Types of kindergarten programs*. Available at: <https://www.vic.gov.au/types-kindergarten-programs> (accessed 6 November 2022).
- Trawick-Smith J (2012) Teacher-child play interactions to achieve learning outcomes. In: Pianta RC, Barnett SW, Justice LM, et al. (eds) *Handbook of early childhood*. New York: Guilford Press, pp. 259–277.
- van Oers B (2013) Is it play? Towards a reconceptualisation of role play from an activity theory perspective *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 21(2): 185–198.
- Vygotsky L (1926/1992) *Esthetic education*. *Educational psychology*. Florida: St Lucie Press.
- Vygotsky L (1930/2004) Imagination and creativity in childhood. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* 42(1): 7–97.
- Vygotsky L (1976) Play and its role in the mental development of the child. In: Bruner J, Jolly A and Sylva K (eds) *Play - its role in development and evolution*. New York: Penguin, pp. 537–554.
- Weisberg DS, Hirsh-Pasek K and Golinkoff RM (2013) Guided play: Where curricular goals meet a playful pedagogy. *Mind, Brain, and Education* 7(2): 104–112.
- Wohlwend KE (2016) Who gets to play? Access, popular media and participatory literacies. *Early Years: An International Research Journal* 37(1): 62–76.
- Wohlwend K (2019) P(l)aying online: Toys, apps and young consumers on transmedia playgrounds. In: Erstad O, Flewitt R, Kümmerling-Meibauer B, et al. (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Literacies in Early Childhood*. Oxon: Routledge, pp. 391–401.
- Wood E (2013) Free choice and free play in early childhood education: troubling the discourse. *International Journal of Early Years Education* 22(1): 4–18.
- Yin RK (2015) *Qualitative Research From Start to Finish*. New York: Guilford Publications.
- Yin RK (2018) *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Yogman M, Garner A, Hutchinson J, et al. (2018) The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children. *Pediatrics* 142(3): e20182058.
- Zaporozhets AV (2002) Thought and activity in children. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* 40(4): 18–29.