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A cultural-historical study of emotions in play: catharsis and perezhivanie in an institutional care setting

Abstract

As a critical developmental goal, emotion regulation (ER) for young children in orphanages has yet to be fully understood. This paper explores how co-experiencing of dramatic interactions in playworlds supports a child's resolution and regulation of emotions in an institutional care setting in China. 49 hours of video data were analysed with the cultural-historical concepts of catharsis and perezhivanie. Findings show that catharsis as a crucial aspect of ER development takes the form of a triadic relationship between emotions, imagination, and drama. Together they create conditions for the child to reorganize the person-environment unity, which helps shape the child's further development.

Key words: play, catharsis, perezhivanie, emotions, institutional care

Introduction

There is a consensus in the early childhood literature that the development of emotion regulation (ER) as a key aspect of social and emotional competence (Eisenberg, 2001) is crucial during early years. An overwhelming body of evidence demonstrates that effective ER abilities in young children are connected with children's emotional wellbeing, social relations, and academic performance. First, being able to recognise and manage one's own emotions facilitates good mental health and self-esteem (Moore, 2006, as cited in Barblett & Maloney, 2010). Second, young children who can effectively regulate their emotions tend to be well accepted by their peers (Denham, 2006) and teachers (Graziano et al., 2007), have less behaviour problem and better social competence (Eisenberg, 2001), and be more likely to engage with conflict resolution (Saarni et al., 2006). Third, competence in emotion regulation supports school readiness (Denham, 2006) and educational achievement (Denham et al., 2012). In contrast, delays and challenges in ER during early childhood are likely to lead to social rejection, learning difficulties, and elevated aggression (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). ER difficulties early in life may also expose the child to an increased risk for mental health issues later in life, such as internalising and externalising disorders (Dvir et al., 2014). In sum,

ER has been recognised as a key developmental outcome in the early years, especially for children who are faced with disadvantages and vulnerabilities (Perry & Gunnar, 2019).

One group of children at great risk are children living in institutional care settings, such as orphanages, and their emotional development has been a major concern and area for improvement (McCall, 2013). Although institutions vary greatly in resources and their quality of care, institutionally reared children tend to suffer from long-term and severe problems with ER development (Julian et al., 2019). ER challenges may continue taking its toll on the children even after institutionalisation (Batki, 2018). Existing institution-based interventions vary greatly in their foci and characteristics. While few in the literature specifically targeting ER development, a number of interventions broadly aim at emotional development in early childhood. Examples include foster care placement (Nelson et al., 2007), implementation of preschool curriculum (Sparling et al., 2005), structural change and staff training (St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team, 2008), caretaker-child dyadic relationship enhancement (McCall et al., 2010), and occupational therapy (Daunhauer et al., 2007). Collectively, as Julian and colleagues (2019) pointed out, apart from a few of the interventions that were implemented systematically in the natural and everyday setting of the orphanage, most of them were short-term studies applied by specialists, rather than regular caregivers with ER intervention training. Furthermore, while the majority of the studies are limited to changing the social environment of the orphanage, the child's experience and engagement in the interventions has yet to be valued in the literature as an area of research. The study reported in this paper makes a contribution to this better understanding ER in the context of orphanages.

Relevant to the focus of this paper is how the early childhood literature has informed us that sociodramatic play is beneficial for the child's ER development, unfortunately, it rarely takes a central role in institution-based interventions (Authors, under review). What is known, is that children who frequently engage in play display better ER skills than their peers who do not (Gilpin et al., 2015). Play was found to be an especially effective tool for ER development for children facing poverty (Harris & Berk, 2003, as cited in Berk et al., 2006), foster care (Haight et al., 2006), hospitalisation (Williams et al., 2019), war and refugee crisis (Gürle, 2018), and for children with high impulsivity (Elias & Berk, 2002) and poor ER skills (Thibodeau-Nielsen & Gilpin, 2020). Additionally, a growing body of literature acknowledges the role of the others in the children's ER development through play, for example, parents (Ambrose, 2013), teachers (Bodrova & Leong, 2018), and peers (Choi & Ohm, 2018). However, most of these studies focused on correlation testing, often in a controlled environment, instead of understanding the complexity of the dynamics between the child and the other play partners in relation to the child's ER development. These factors are significant for researching in orphanage contexts.

Informed by the cultural-historical theory, this paper is part of a larger study that investigated the process of ER development through a ten-week adult-children collective play project in an orphanage. In this article, Vygotsky's (1966) theorisation of play is employed, where players create an imaginary situation, change the meaning of the object and actions, and enact roles that follow social rules. This paper brings forward how the child experiences emotions through dynamic interactions with the others in play in the everyday context of an orphanage in China. More specifically, we ask: How does co-experiencing of the dramatic moments in play create conditions for emotion regulation for children living in an institutional setting? This paper begins with a detailed presentation of two interrelated cultural-historical concepts, catharsis and perezhivanie, followed by the study design, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

In order to frame the study of ER of a child growing up in an orphanage in China, we first introduce the concept of catharsis. Although Vygotsky (1971b) did not link catharsis directly to young children's play, he briefly likened play with art, mainly because imagination was the distinguishing characteristics for both, and emotions evoked through both shared a common origin. Thus, the concept of catharsis has the potential to advance our understanding about how children experience emotions in play, which helps us answer the research question of this paper. Further, as theoretical concepts in the cultural-historical theory are all interconnected as a system of concepts (Fleer, 2015), the concepts of emotions, imagination, and drama are presented to support the theorisation of catharsis. Next, the relations between catharsis and perezhivanie will be discussed for its analytical power in shedding light on the child's process of play and ER.

The Concept of Catharsis

In the *Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky (1971b) argued that catharsis as "a complex transformation of feelings" (para. 31) was the essence of the emotional response to works of art. It arises because of the contradiction of emotions as we engage with artistic works, which keeps intensifying until eventually the conflicting emotions are released, resolved and overcome at its peak (Vygotsky, 1971b). In discussing how catharsis was understood historically, Vygotsky drew our attention to Freud's interpretation of the term in psychoanalysis. In the early stage of psychoanalysis, catharsis was viewed as part of a therapeutic method where the patient with the help of a psychoanalyst relives the traumatic

events from the past and discharges the repressed emotions and internal conflicts (Dafermos, 2018). That is, catharsis was treated as an end, leaving no further space for new. However, the way Vygotsky used the term went beyond mere release of tension and negative emotional energy, but as a transformative concept, a vehicle to reshape human experience (Leontiev, 1971, as cited in Fróis, 2010). It is a natural means for all human beings, not just those inflicted by trauma, to process and regulate their pre-existing emotions through works of art (Vygotsky, 1971b).

Catharsis and Emotional Transformation

Vygotsky defined emotion as “discharges and expenditures of unused energy” (Vygotsky, 1971a, para. 13), as the result of the inevitable imbalance between the individual and the environment. In citing Sherrington, he compared the human nervous system as a funnel where the wider end opens towards the environment while the narrower end towards individual action. Only a small fraction of what we receive from the environment is released through our behaviours and expressions, leaving the great majority inside, which seeks an outlet (Vygotsky, 1971b). That is, emotional imbalance is an unavoidable fact in life, and the human psyche requires that we release the pressure of our emotions just like opening the valve in a kettle, lest the “steam pressure exceeds the strength of the vessel” (Vygotsky, 1971a, para. 14). Through engagement with art, human emotions are discharged, regulated, and the psychological equilibrium is achieved again (Vygotsky, 1971a, 1971b). It is in the cathartic process that pre-existing emotions are unveiled, processed, transformed, and regulated (Vygotsky, 1971b).

Catharsis and Imagination

Critical to the cathartic process, emotional transformation requires engagement with imagination, which is regarded as “the central expression of an emotional reaction” (Vygotsky, 1971b, para. 22). The dialectical interactions between everyday emotion and artistic, or imaginary emotion is illustrated through Vygotsky’s idea of “doubleness of emotions” (Vygotsky, 1971b, para. 22). Emotions generated through art stems from everyday life, but they are discharged and changed as the result of the person’s deep involvement in imagination (Vygotsky, 1971b). With the help of art, the abstract emotional energy from everyday life is given concrete forms as imaginary images or ideas, causing the person to experience and release certain emotions as if they are authentic (Vygotsky,

1971b). Vygotsky referred to the emotions embodied and expressed through imagination as the “second expression” of emotions, which are transformed, generalised, and eventually developed into higher forms (Vygotsky, 1971b, para. 22). Therefore, imagination in art provides a unique opportunity for the discharge and transformation of emotions, which is otherwise unlikely in our everyday life.

Drama in Catharsis

When analysing different forms of drama, Vygotsky drew our attention to the dramatic interactions in theatre, which leads to catharsis in the audience. He said, “[t]he substance of drama is struggle” (Vygotsky, 1971c, para. 24), and “... in any drama, we perceive both a norm and its violation” (Vygotsky, 1971c, para. 30). Emotional contradictions arise as the protagonist faces and deals with the struggle, and the emotional tension are released and resolved as the struggle ends. Moreover, Vygotsky mentioned in a later work that through drama, consciousness is raised interpsychologically, as “in drama the feeling of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ is created” (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 243). Although initially used to refer to human experience with art, later Vygotsky noticed that the influences of drama in art on the human psyche echoed impacts of drama in everyday life on the development of personality (Smagorinsky, 2011). Consequently, drama was used to describe the conflicts between the person and the environment in everyday life, the resolution of which, as a catharsis, leads to the development of higher mental functions (Mok, 2017).

To sum up, the concept of catharsis as developed by Vygotsky opens up new possibilities for us to further our understanding about children’s emotional process in play, where imagination and drama are inherent as in art. Unfortunately, Vygotsky did not develop this concept further beyond the *Psychology of Art*. However, he returned to the theme of emotions during the final stage of his life, when he discussed the concept of *perezhivanie* to explore the individual’s emotional response to dramatic encounters with the social environment in life (Smagorinsky, 2011). Up to this day, catharsis in the Vygotskian sense remains largely under-developed. In most cases, it was briefly mentioned without properly defined or theorised, and only some efforts have been made to carry it further, for example, Smagorinsky (2011), Blunden (2016b), and Connery (2010). Collectively, these theoretical works identify catharsis as a potentially important concept, closely connected to the concept of *perezhivanie*.

The Relations between the Concept of Catharsis and the Concept of Perezhivanie

Catharsis and perezhivanie as theoretical concepts existed during different phases of Vygotsky's academic life. In the *Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky had already started formulating relations between the individual and the environment as refraction. He wrote in the chapter "Art and Life" that the social world , "in its own way *refracts* and directs the stimuli acting upon the individual and guides all the reactions that emanate from the individual" (Vygotsky, 1971a, para. 23, our emphasis). This line of thought was developed in his later work, the *Problem of the Environment*, where he argued that not all objective characteristics of the environment determine the child's development, but only the parts that are emotionally significant to the individual are processed and serve as the source of development (Vygotsky, 1994). Perezhivanie is thus theorised as "the *prism* through which the influence of the environment on the child is *refracted*" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341, our emphasis).

The refracting prism represents the child's unity of intellectual understanding and intense emotional quality, particularly how the child perceives, interprets, and emotionally responds to a certain event (Vygotsky, 1994). Vygotsky gave an example, where different children in the same family responded to the same event (the mother having a drinking problem and psychological disorders) very differently. While the youngest child fell into depression and the middle child developed agonising inner conflict, the eldest child managed to rise above the family situation and demonstrated an elevated sense of responsibility to care for the family. This example illustrates very well the notion of the refracting prism, where a child's perezhivanie determines the nature of their relationship with the social situation through their emotional response and interpretation of the dramatic event, which, in turn, influences the next steps of their development (Fleer et al., 2017). However, what could be analysed further is the possible changes in the emotional quality of the child's encounter with the event, the cathartic process, in order to better understand the principle of refraction.

Importantly, perezhivanie as a refracting prism goes beyond merely "experiencing" an event. How emotions are released and transformed, how this emotional shift impacts development needs to be theorised. With the concept of catharsis, the very process of emotional change can be made visible, which helps further reveal the nature of the dramatic refraction process. This, in the context of this study, will help us understand how exactly a

child reared in the institutional setting emotionally relate and refracts what is happening, and how this shapes the next step in the child's development.

Study Design

The aim of this paper is to investigate how co-experiencing of dramatic moments in play supports the child's resolution of emotions and ER in the context of an orphanage in China.

Research setting and participants

This study was conducted in a care unit from the Children's Department inside a Social Welfare Institute (SWI) in China. This unit was one of the few run by the SWI in collaboration with a local non-government organization (NGO). The twelve children in this unit led a collective lifestyle. They shared a bedroom, followed the same schedule throughout the day, and had meals brought to them from the central canteen. While some were accepted into the school within the SWI, others had regular educational sessions and physiotherapy organised for them by the NGO. Unlike the typical practice of an SWI (Julian et al., 2019), children in this unit were varied in their biological ages and medical conditions. Ethical guidelines were strictly observed in this study with vulnerable children. A total of ten children and five adults from this unit were included in the data material.

Six staff members worked in this unit, including the educator who was also a researcher. This integrated role (Lewis, 2020) enabled a holistic understanding of the dynamics between the children and their social situation, both practically and theoretically. The project manager supervised all the units run by the NGO, and three caregivers and one physiotherapist cared for the children, documented their physical wellbeing, and kept the unit clean. While the physiotherapist and one caregiver worked long shifts daily, the other two caregivers lived in this unit, with their bedroom next door to the children's. All staff members took turns to have their weekly one-day off.

Focus child

The focus child, Feifei (pseudonym), male, six years and eight months old, was born with mild cerebral palsy, which caused slight mobility challenges on his right foot and led to his abandonment as an infant. Later, he was placed in one of the foster homes supervised and located inside the SWI. At the start of our project, he was transferred to this unit because of constant and unresolved conflicts with his foster father, who then refused to have him in the home. He was described as "defiant, angry, fussy, oppositional" by the foster

parents, according to the orphanage staff. His example was presented in this paper because the changes in his emotions through playworld helps answer the research question.

Playworld as an educational experiment

Consistent with the cultural-historical theory, Hedegaard (2008b) introduced the educational experiment as a synthesis of a planned pedagogical intervention and research method to investigate the potential impact of teaching activities on children's learning and development. In this educational experiment, a playworld was implemented as an educational intervention. The playworld approach (Lindqvist, 1995) features emotionally charged problem situations, which are intentionally created for children to imagine the emotional states of the roles in the story-based play plot (Marjanovic-Shane et al., 2011). The playworld in the current study was based on a well-known children's story in China, "*My Little Bunnies*". This story featured an emotionally charged theme, where the three Baby Bunnies prevented a Big Grey Wolf from entering their house and eating them while Mummy Bunny was away picking turnips.

The playworld sessions took place once a week, where the educator invited the children and staff members in the unit to participate. Every participant was able to choose a play role to enact and together they developed plots and co-experienced dramatic moments in play. The story and play plots were jointly decided by the adults and the children (see Authors, under review). Moreover, supplementary activities, such as book reading and imaginative play, were organised six days a week, according to the children's competence and schedules.

Data collection

Data presented in this paper was collected using digital video observation and fieldnotes. The visual data reported in this paper was collected with a GoPro, fixed on the wall of the Activity Room within the unit as the only safe option for the children and the equipment. Using GoPro as a motionless tool allowed the first-named author to collect data as a researcher while fulfilling her role as the educator fully engaged in the everyday practice of teaching and learning. A total of 56 hours of video data was generated.

Additionally, field notes as a supplement documented the researcher's reflections, questions, and information beyond the permission for video recording, for example, when a child gestured to indicate refusal for being recorded.

Data analysis

Data relevant to the focus child and his interactions with his social surroundings in the emotionally charged situations in play and in real life were selected from the overall data set for analysis.

Hedegaard's (2008c) three levels of analysis was applied in this study. First, the common sense interpretation sought to understand the focus child's behaviour and emotional expressions in relation to his social environment in *each* emotionally charged situation. Second, the situated practice interpretation focused on data-analysis across settings to identify patterns. Here concepts of drama, imagination, catharsis, perezhivanie, doubleness of emotions, and from inter- to intrapsychological functioning were used as analytical tool to understand the progressive change of Feifei's role preferences and the way emotions were expressed, lived through, and regulated over time. Third, the thematic interpretation links the theoretical concepts, data, and the research aims to answer the research question of this paper. New conceptual relations between the concepts of catharsis and perezhivanie were formed to better understand the child's experience of emotions through playworld and his ER development.

Findings

The findings of this study bring forward how the cathartic process in playworld makes the ER process visible. Examples of this ER process are discussed in the context of a child's perezhivanie. First, we present an overall trend of how the child's choices of play roles changed over time (Figure 1). Then three vignettes from the implementation and the post-experiment data are presented to capture the process of ER development of the focus child. Taken together, the data illustrate the cathartic process of emotional transformation as a key aspect of ER development supported through the co-experiencing of dramatic moments in playworld.

Shifts of play role selections throughout the educational experiment

Figure 1. Feifei's engagement with different play roles

Figure 1 below illustrates the overall trend of Feifei's role engagement in play throughout the playworld, which was grouped into four periods according to his role preferences. Period 1 included the first three weeks, when he chose not to participate, but watching others play or being alone. However, he already identified with the role of the Big Grey Wolf by voicing his choice without hesitation during a discussion. Then starting with Period 2, he became increasingly involved in play as the Wolf, which he acted passionately and determinedly for three weeks, as illustrated in Vignette 2 below. This was followed by a short period (Period 3), where he remained active in play, but without explicitly showing, physically or verbally, what role he was playing. The final Period 4 demonstrates a stark difference, where he seemed to have lost interest playing the Wolf and found himself a new role of a caring Daddy Bunny. As a whole, Figure 1 shows that in the playworld, Feifei was engaged with different play roles with distinct emotional qualities. The shifts of role selection over time helps shed light on the changes of emotions in Feifei, which will be explained further in the Discussion section.

Vignette 1

Vignette 1 below was collected during Week 1 of the implementation. The educator, two of the caregivers, and the children were getting ready for their first playworld session, where the Bunny named Short Tail, enacted by the educator, was to celebrate her birthday. The children were very excited, as they had just had a birthday celebration a few days before. Feifei chose not to participate and stayed out of the Activity Room where the collective play happened.

A while later, the cheerful noise of the group drew Feifei back into the room. After watching others play for some time, he tried to draw the educator's attention, but she was busy playing Short Tail and did not see him. So Feifei *threw himself onto the floor, screaming, kicking, and waving his fists in the air, while looking at the educator from time to time.*

The educator, sitting with the other children, pointed to Feifei and said, "Look, the kid over there looks upset. Let's invite him to our birthday party!" The boy acting as a Wolf nodded and said, "Okay!" The boy as Wolf shouted, "I am Big Grey Wolf" as he crawled to

Feifei's side. Feifei *screamed* and *tried to run away*, and the Wolf caught up and slapped him on the back. Feifei got *really angry, frowning* and *hitting him back really hard with both hands*. "No hitting others!" He *yelled* as he was *striking* the Wolf *repeatedly*. The educator went to check on him while having conversation with another child as two Bunnies. Feifei, already *rolled away* from the group, was *lying on the floor*, and kept *kicking and screaming*, while *looking at the educator*. Then he *sat up* and *shouted*, "Big Grey Wolf!" Before the Wolf reached for him, Feifei *threw himself onto the floor* again and *started screaming*. The Wolf went back to singing "Happy Birthday" song with the others, and Feifei's scream became *sharper and louder*. As the others were "blowing candles", he *rolled around* and gave out *piercing screams*. A caregiver went to check on him and see if he wanted to join in the play. He *rolled further away* and said, "No!"

Then he *stood up* and went to the Wolf, *pressed him hard on the shoulders*, and *kicked him on the back*. The Wolf groaned but did not fight back. The educator went over to check and comfort the Wolf boy. Feifei *screamed*, and then he *snorted* and *left the room*.

This vignette shows a typical everyday moment of drama of Feifei where he expressed his dissatisfaction and anger with screaming, rolling on the floor, and physical aggressions. The raw emotions were expressed impulsively and fiercely, leaving little space for reflection. He got into conflicts with other peers like this on a daily basis, which, in turn, made it hard for the others to form positive relations with him.

Vignette 2

Vignette 2 below demonstrates how Feifei typically behaved during Period 2, where he devoted himself to the role of the Big Grey Wolf and acted fiercely and aggressively in the playworld. Over these three weeks, Feifei's emotional expression gradually intensified and eventually peaked in play as the Wolf. Through participating in the emotionally charged situations in the playworld, he was able to express and share his anger through his voices and actions of a Wolf, which facilitated the processing and transformation of his emotions through dynamic interactions with others in play.

This playworld episode happened in an afternoon during Week Four of the implementation. All the participating adults and children were inside an imaginary situation where the Big Grey Wolves wanted to catch the Bunnies.

As soon as it began, Feifei *stood straight, his hands in the air and his fingers spread wide open* towards the children before him, “[I am Big Grey Wolf! I am going to eat you up!” He claimed with a *determined voice* and started running around catching Bunnies.

“Let’s go! Quickly!” Mummy Bunny helped a Baby Bunny stand up to escape from the Wolves. Feifei went to *grab* the Baby Bunny *by the hand*, which made her cry. Seeing the Mummy Bunny was protecting her baby, Feifei went over with another Wolf, and he *pushed Mummy Bunny hard onto the padded floor*. Mummy Bunny *screamed angrily*, struggling to stand up. The educator stopped him, “Feifei! Feifei!” Feifei walked away, *marching with exaggerated strides* to the mirror, looked at himself in the mirror as he *howled*. He said loudly to himself, “I am not listening!”

After a little while, Feifei returned to the play. “I must catch all of the bunnies!” He exclaimed loudly, kneeling on the floor, *claws extended*. Again and again, he *raised his claws* at the bunnies. “[I am] Big Grey Wolf! Charge!” Shouted him towards the Bunny acted by a caregiver, claws in the air, “Let me eliminate you first!” He went to push her. Then he turned to another Wolf and declared, “[I am] Big Grey Wolf! I will eat all of the bunnies!”

Then he charged at a Bunny acted by another caregiver. Mummy Bunny tried to pull him away, and both of them fell onto the floor. He turned and *bit Mummy Bunny on her ankle*.

“No biting! No Biting!” Said the caregivers loudly.

“We are just pretending. Don’t give real bites!” The educator told Feifei. He smiled, stood up, and *raised his claws* again at another Bunny, and then another. Every now and then, he *went to the mirror to adjust his Wolf headband*, and returned to the play as a fierce Wolf, charging, pushing, and even scratching the Bunnies.

This vignette reveals that the previous raw emotion of anger, as described in Vignette 1, was processed and culturally expressed in the imaginary situation through the role of the Wolf. The previously hidden emotions can now be expressed with imaginative actions, such as extended claws, words through gritted teeth, loud voices of yelling and howling. The shared emotionally charged situations in the playworld changed the dynamics between

Feifei and the others. The dramatic interactions in play also created conditions for his emotions to be made visible and reflected through the play role.

Vignette 3

Data in Vignette 3 was collected during one of the post-experiment visits. By this time, Feifei had not played the Big Grey Wolf for several weeks, but consistently preferred to play the role of the Daddy Bunny and the play plot of “Bedtime for Bunnies”, where he watched Baby Bunnies as they slept and kept the Big Grey Wolf from entering the house.

This very short vignette happened during children’s free play time, and Feifei was observed to be placing some stuffed animals onto one of the shelves, and covering them up with sensory integration equipment. When asked what he was doing, he replied, *“I am Daddy Bunny. I am covering up my Baby Bunnies with quilts!”*

Figure 2. Feifei covering up baby bunnies with quilts

Discussion

The findings presented above explained through the concept of catharsis revealed in the form of a triadic relationship between emotions, imagination, and dramatic interactions helps readjust the way the child emotionally interacts with the environment. Catharsis as processing and transformation of emotions drives the reorganisation of the person-environment unity. In Feifei’s example, we can see that his relations with the surrounding world changed as his anger and frustration were repeatedly discharged through the role of the Wolf during Period 2 (Figure 1). Over time, his play motive changed as his choice of roles and plots shifted to ones with completely different emotional qualities. Much contemporary research reports that children are motivated to use play for release of unresolved emotional tension acquired from emotionally stressful life events (Vadeboncoeur & Collie, 2013). The release and working over of emotions through play leads the child to a completely different intellectual understanding and relationship with the

social environment, transforming both what is emotionally important to the child and how it is refracted through the child's *perezhivanie*. This renewed unity of affect and intellect leads to changes in the child's selection of the emotionally significant events, which in turn shapes how they perceive and interact with the social environment. Consequently, their social situation of development, that is, what is refracted through the child's *perezhivanie*, becomes different.

Moreover, drama serves as the impetus for change in the cathartic process. Drama is the key factor in Vygotsky's (1997) general genetic law of cultural development. What is critical about this law is that development is not a process of passive internalisation of environmental characteristics, but the resolution of dynamic contradictions between the social and the individual (Michell, 2015). While the resolution of drama retains the child's motive for further development through reorganised social relations and renewed competence, failure to resolve drama may cause the child to stay fixated with the same social relations and interaction styles (Hedegaard, 2008a). In Feifei's example, the reported conflicts between him and his foster father left him to keep his ER and interaction patterns with the others even though he was in a different environment. Under these circumstances, play with intentionally embedded drama provided an alternative to resolution of previous drama and his source of ER development. Fein (1989) highlighted that it was the emotionally charged situations in play that created conditions for children to express their emotions, reveal the unresolved issues, and reflect on their experiences, that is, catharsis. Playworlds with drama embedded in them "creates a condensed and amplified experience for children" (Fleer et al., 2020, p. 57), where ample opportunities are available for the resolution of drama and transformation of emotions. Moreover, although even the most ordinary, everyday interaction can be counted as a drama, for it to matter to development, it has to be emotionally significant to the individual (Blunden, 2016a). Elkoninova (2001) further argued that for children to be engaged in play, the intensity of the dramatic events need to be aligned with the psychological structure of the children. For example, the drama introduced in the playworld of the current study corresponded with Feifei's struggles with anger, which offered opportunities for catharsis. This is particularly important for children reared in institutional care settings, where the social situation does not necessarily support the children's ER development (McCall, 2013).

It is from the shared imaginary space in the playworld that the drama is experienced repeatedly through catharsis, and the child begins regulating their own emotions. First, imagination enables the forceful and hidden emotional energy inside us to emerge (Vygotsky, 1971b). Despite the fact that the play was imaginary by nature, the emotions expressed were real (Vygotsky, 1971b). In play, pre-existing emotions are manifested through roles and plots in the imaginary situation, as emotions seek corresponding representations and embodiments, “[t]he images of imagination ... provide an internal language for our emotion” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 18). Using the play role as a pivot, the private and unknown emotions are revealed, detached from the self and relived in play (Ferholt & Nilsson, 2016). In Feifei’s example, the inherent characteristics and emotional quality of the play role provided a concrete form and channel for him to release his emotional energy that had not been acknowledged or processed in the past. This “second expression” of emotions (Vygotsky, 1971b) thus enables the raw emotions to emerge, release, and transform (March & Fleer, 2016).

Second, imagination allows for the “double expression of emotions” (Vygotsky, 1971b, para. 22) which creates motivating conditions for the child to stay engaged with the emotionally charged dramatic events in play. The more Feifei expressed anger and frustration through being the Wolf, the more joyful he was, as he was motivated and determined to play the Wolf even when everyone else around him was exploring something novel and mysterious. This emotional contradiction continued building up as the play plot repeated over the weeks, eventually reaching their peak and termination at the same time. As Vygotsky postulated, “Whenever an emotion finds its solution in images of fantasy, this ‘dreaming’ weakens the true manifestation of the emotion” (1971b, para. 22). Over time, as Feifei’s emotional discharge through the role of the Wolf was resolved, he was able to form new relations with the others, not as a fierce wolf against his prey, but as a loving Daddy Bunny protecting his babies.

Apart from the intense discharge of previously hidden emotions, renewed emotional awareness was supported through co-experiencing of the cathartic process. Play requires that the child be consciously aware and display the emotional quality consistent with the role and theme, and share it interpsychologically among fellow players which, with repetition overtime, becomes conscious feeling states on an intrapsychological level

(Zaporozhets, 2002). An implication is that in the shared imaginary situation, the child needs to constantly regulate the others while being regulated by other players, which precedes self-regulation (Bodrova & Leong, 1998). For example, as Feifei acted out his emotions through the actions of the Wolf, for example, raising his claws, dragging, or tackling the Mummy Bunny onto the floor, the others reacted to his behaviour with screams, complaint, fight-backs, and even tears. Not only were his raw emotions made visible to others, his emotional expressions were reflected back to him from others through their reactions, demanding him to be mindful and adjust his play actions in order for play to continue. As noted by Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010), the child ought to be simultaneously inside play as a participant and outside play as an observer, which gives possibility for emotional self-awareness and regulation. As Holodynski and Friedlmeier (2010) pointed out, emotional expressions serve as signs to communicate and regulate both how one interacts with the others and with the self. This dynamic interaction creates conditions for the child to gain a better intellectual understanding of the emotions that he feels. Therefore, this renewed unity of emotion and cognition leads to reorganisation of social relations. For Feifei, the role of the Wolf ceased to be emotionally significant, and what he could emotionally relate then became the caring and protective Daddy Bunny.

Conclusion

The current study sought to examine how co-experiencing of emotionally charged dramatic events in play supports the resolution and regulation of emotions in the child. This research question was analysed using the cultural-historical concepts of *perezhivanie* and catharsis. The concept of *perezhivanie* highlights the relationship between the child and the environment, particularly how the emotionally significant event in the environment is refracted through the child's *perezhivanie* and influences the child's further development. The significance is that the child's *perezhivanie* needs to be acknowledged as a relational whole (Fleer, 2016) that shapes how development proceeds. How emotions are processed, perceived, and worked through impacts this relationship, and further influences how the child develops, which lies at the heart of catharsis. Catharsis in the form of a triadic relationship between imagination, dramatic interactions, and emotional transformation is an inherent and important part of *perezhivanie*. It helps draw out the process of emotional transformation, which is key to the understanding of the refracting prism in *perezhivanie*.

and ER development. Catharsis is an important aspect of ER development, encompassing transformation and resolution of emotions through co-experiencing of emotionally charged dramatic events with others in play. This theoretical understanding contributes to the knowledge about children's experience of emotions in play in orphanage contexts as well as providing a cultural device to support their ER development.

It is a limitation of this study that because of the pre-determined time frame of this project, the educational experiment was limited to ten weeks. A longer period would potentially allow for observations of Feifei's further changes in ER. Additionally, given the word limit and capacity of a journal paper, only one child was featured in the empirical data. Further research on the child's catharsis in collective play is needed.

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