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# **The ‘Player’ Role of the Teacher in Playworld Creates New Conditions for Children’s Learning and Development**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines how teachers in the Indonesian context create motivating conditions for children’s learning and development. Sixteen hours of digital visual observations on 38 children (mean age 4.4 years) were selected from a larger dataset of video observations, focus group discussions, and teacher interviews. Using the cultural-historical conception of play as the frame, the findings reveal that in the Playworld, the teachers’ ‘player’ role creates motivating conditions for learning by being inside the play together with children to unify imagination, cognition, and emotion in the play. Imaginary play transforms into experiences where children can learn mathematical concepts and develop self-regulation. This takes place within imaginary play. The teachers’ ‘player’ role creates dynamic interactions for supporting children’s learning and development. Therefore, it should be promoted as a new play pedagogy that can encourage degrees of freedom for players and support children’s play and learning.

Keywords: teacher practices; play pedagogy; children’s learning; cultural-historical theory; Playworld

## **Introduction**

Play as learning in practice is highly controversial. Some see that its benefits focus principally on social and emotional growth, while a growing argument has highlighted the potential of play for academic learning. Therefore, a dichotomy between play and learning has emerged that is problematic in early childhood practices (Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012). Learning is defined as the activity that happens in a classroom with teacher involvement, and

play is thought of as a free activity that is initiated by a child without adult intervention (Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). However, different studies have demonstrated that play can contribute to children's learning and development (Fleer, 2011b, 2018), and therefore that play should be part of early childhood pedagogy and curriculum.

The developmental or maturational perspective of play determines that the origin, commonness, and development of play has the same pattern regardless of the social context (Göncü, 1999). This perspective has influenced early childhood education in Indonesia, being one of the dominant policy discourses (Formen & Nuttall, 2014). Similar to Western communities, in the Indonesian context, play which is described as pleasure or surplus energy for children (Spencer, 1897) has become a common view among Indonesian early childhood educators (Erfayliana, 2016; Rohani, 2016). The dominant perspective of play in early childhood practices in Indonesia is based on both the biological and maturational perspectives and Piaget's (1962) cognitive view. In other words, play activities are designed with careful attention to the child's cognitive level as well as their current knowledge and experiences with the natural world. Therefore, the implementation of play in the Indonesian context is more structured (Utami, 2020a), following the stages of play observed by Parten (1933) and Smilansky (1968). It is noted that the children's freedom is limited, with them only following the instruction in the play (Utami et al., 2020a). In addition, the Western conceptualisation of play as being initiated by the child, focused on the child without any rules enforced, and more oriented to entertaining or performing situations of play (Fleer, 2011b) is also found in play practices in Indonesia. Such limited freedom appears to contradict the practical assumption of play-based concepts in Western countries, where the child could orient themselves to engage in more entertaining or performing situations without following any rules enforced (Fleer,

2011b). In the Indonesian context, it is significant to consider how the roles of teachers take place within such a concept, as their involvement should not be left as an instructor. Furthermore, there are also demands on teachers for academic outcomes that are focused on cognitive development, such as literacy and numeracy skills, while disregarding other aspects of a child's development (Fridani & Lestari, 2008).

At the same time the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC, 2014) require that play be the core of children's learning, and that it should be the strategy for implementing the early childhood curriculum. However, teachers have problems achieving the academic outcomes through play (Formen & Nuttall, 2014). Therefore, in Indonesia, play is structured to achieve targeted developmental goals, where the key to pedagogical practice is teachers planning and directing play (Utami et al., 2020a).

The high expectations of academic performance and pro-social behaviour which are set cause the teachers to apply firm discipline that puts pressure on the students and neglects play in children's learning (Fridani & Lestari, 2008). Little research is available to support the teachers to meet play-based expectations. A strategy for addressing the requirements for both play and learning is urgently needed for teachers in Indonesia. Consequently, this paper introduces a Playworld as a possible pedagogical model for connecting play and learning to support teachers in meeting Indonesia's societal demand of implementing play-based learning.

Debates in the literature on the conception of play have influenced current pedagogical practices. The studies highlight an evolution from the classical theories to a biological understanding and to a cultural-historical perspective (Fleer, 2014). These perspectives influence play in practice through the forms of play, such as free play and

structured play (Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Utami et al., 2020a). In this study, play is conceptualised using cultural-historical theory. The paper explores how play contributes to children's learning and development in Indonesia, introduces Playworld as a pedagogical approach as originally initiated by Lindqvist (1995), and discusses its further development as a Conceptual PlayWorld, to bring in the learning of concepts within children's play (Fleer, 2018). Since Lindqvist's (1995) conception of Playworld, the literature on Playworld has provided theoretical and practical insights into the Playworld implementation in different situations in many countries, seen as a pedagogical strategy where teachers are positioned as the children's play partner (Ferholt & Lecusay, 2009; Fleer, 2020). However, limited study has been conducted in the Indonesian context (Utami et al., 2020a, 2020b).

Although Playworld has been practised in early childhood education, the specific Playworld pedagogical characteristics that support children's learning and development still require investigation. To address the research question, "How do teachers in Indonesia create motivating conditions for children's learning and development?", this paper focuses on teachers' unique pedagogical practices as play partners who engage children in learning activities in the Indonesian context of Playworld. The concepts of play and the social situation of development are used to explore how the social situations created within the Playworld support children's learning of concepts and self-regulation.

### **Cultural-historical conceptualisations of play**

The cultural-historical theory helps to understand how play relates to children's learning and development. It defines play as "a unique relation to reality", thereby creating an

imaginary situation, which is the “basic unit of play” that contains rules of behaviour and where children and adults change the meaning of objects and actions to give them a new sense within the imaginary situations (Elkonin, 2005, p. 13; Fler, 2014; Vygotsky, 1966, 1998, p. 267). Thus, “why a child plays must always be interpreted as the imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires” (Vygotsky, 1966, p.8). Therefore, play is distinguished from other forms of children’s activities by the imaginary situation and meaning making, wherein abstract thought is developed, development takes place, and the possibility arises for a child to “jump above the level of his [sic] normal behaviour” (Vygotsky, 1966, p, 16).

In the imaginary situations, children learn about roles and rules in society by giving new meanings to objects and actions from what is seen to what is imagined (Fler, 2011a, 2014, Vygotsky, 1966). “A child’s play is not simply a reproduction of what he [sic] has experienced, but a creative reworking of the impressions he has acquired” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 11). Thus, rather than just being a prototype of children’s everyday life, the process of creating meaning in play is complex, and involves external and internal actions that create movement towards reality and away from reality (Elkonin, 2005). Children use an object as a pivot to separate the meaning from the real object (Vygotsky, 1966). This separation of meaning enables children to act “other than” and think beyond the concrete situation to act “as if” as they play a role (Vadeboncoeur, 2016). This process is known as the dialectic of play, where children transcend an object’s physical appearance, give a new meaning to an object, and create new actions based on this new meaning (Fler, 2014; Vygotsky, 1966).

Studies have shown that the movement towards reality is created in children’s play to explore how roles in society work, and the reality is reproduced by creating “models of human relations” in play (Elkonin, 2005, p.23; Vygotsky, 2004). At the same time, an

understanding of the roles and rules in society results in the children moving away from reality to produce their own play (Elkonin, 2005; Fler, 2018; Vygotsky, 2004). Moving away from reality occurs when children create new meanings for objects by seeing the object or action beyond its physical appearance and constructing a new social reality in their imagination based on their understanding, needs, and desires (Fler, 2014; Vygotsky, 1966, 2004). The movements towards and away from reality show the dialectical relationship between imagination and reality, and link to the dialectical relation between concrete and abstract in learning, which is achieved by creating new meanings (Fler, 2011a). The creation of concrete-abstract relations as a conscious act by the child in imaginary play is the key to learning, as imagination results in the child's thinking development (Fler, 2011a). Fler's (2018) Conceptual Playworld was developed to link play and conceptual learning through imagination by highlighting the unity of cognition and imagination in play. In this way, meaning-changing is the basis of the conceptualisation of play and acts as a pedagogical tool that aims to develop a collective imaginary play in children's learning (Fler, 2011b). Therefore, play and learning are intertwined.

### **Playworld approach as a pedagogical tool**

Lindqvist (1995) developed Playworld by drawing on cultural-historical theory and Vygotsky's (1966) aesthetic of play to combine the child's emotional experience and relation to real life. Lindqvist (1995) found the teachers' pedagogical roles in the imaginary play in the Playworld to be significant in supporting children's development. Playworld has specific practices and purposes that build an imaginary world based on folktales, where children and adults participate in different imaginary scenes that bring the characters and situations in the

narratives to life (Lindqvist, 1995). Specifically, Fler (2018) developed Conceptual Playworld to foreground imagination in bringing play and learning together.

Some key points in implementing a Conceptual Playworld need to be considered. First, to start a Playworld, it is necessary to think about the concepts that can be introduced into the Playworld when selecting the story (Fler, 2011a, 2018). This step is key to the success of a Playworld, where children and adults expand the imaginary scenes from the narratives to support children's learning and development.

Because active adult involvement inside the play is also a key characteristic of Playworld, it is important to plan how the teacher can not only enter and exit the Playworld to create opportunities for children to explore concepts and to support children's ideas, but also, as the children's play partner, how the play inquiry or problem scenario can create conditions that support the play, learning, and development (Fler, 2018). The richness of the play is achieved from the different subject positionings of the teacher and the teachers' dual roles when inside and outside of the imaginary play (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). Therefore, planning teacher interactions that can build conceptual learning is crucial when developing a Playworld (Fler, 2018).

The concept of drama is another Playworld pedagogical characteristic. Drama unifies emotions and cognition to address the development of children's feelings in reality and in the imaginary situation in Playworld based on dramatic stories (Fler, 2018; Lindqvist, 1995). Solving emotionally charged problems in Playworld offers opportunities for children to learn concepts, and for play and imagination to be used as pedagogical tools that support children's learning and development (Fler, 2018). These concepts of play offer a new understanding to link play and learning adding to the underpinning debate on play.



## **The social situation of development**

The concept of the social situation of development is used to understand how the social situations created in a Playworld become the children's social situation of development for learning concepts and self-regulation. Since play creates social situations, it is possible that a learning activity can arise when a social situation of development emerges during play.

Therefore, to reveal the unique Playworld pedagogical practices in Indonesia, the concept of the social situation of development is used to investigate the children's play experiences in the Playworld and examine how the imaginary situations created contribute to children's learning and development.

The social situation of development is one of the basic concepts used in cultural-historical theory to understand a child's development at different age periods (Bozhovich, 2009, Vygotsky, 1998). It is defined as "a completely original, exclusive, single, and unique relation, specific to the given age, between the child and reality, mainly the social reality, that surrounds him" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 198). The dynamic relationship between the child's internal processes and the social context creates contradiction, which is an emotionally charged situation that turns the social situation into the child's social situation of development (Bozhovich, 2009; Vygotsky, 1998). Therefore, this contradiction is the leading force in learning and development, and is important for understanding a child's development. A change in how a child relates to the particular environment can result from this dramatic collision, and can be studied in a Playworld by following the child's participation in these moments of dynamic interaction with concrete activity settings (Fleer, 2018; Hedegaard, 2012). This dramatised role play within the emotionally charged situation in the Playworld is a motivating condition that provokes developmental change and learning for the child.

## Study design

This paper presents the third set of findings from a larger study which used an educational experiment to study a Playworld approach as an intervention for supporting teachers to bring more play into their programs and to help children's learning of concepts (Utami et al., 2020a, 2020b). The educational experiment (Hedegaard, 2008b) was used to guide the intervention into how teachers create conditions for children's learning and development in an Indonesian context of Playworld. Specifically, Hedegaard's (2012) model for studying children's learning and development foregrounded the societal perspective, the institutional perspective, and the child's perspective of play. In this study, Hedegaard's model helped to examine the Indonesian societal perspective on how play is implemented to support children's learning, the institutional perspective on teachers' Playworld pedagogical characteristics, and the child's perspective on engaging in the Playworld where play and learning are developed. These different perspectives can provide a holistic insight into using Playworlds in Indonesia to promote children's learning and development.

The researcher placed herself both as a researcher and a partner and balanced the positions in a way that would give her different perspectives of the play practices. The researcher positioned herself as a research leader who works with the teachers carrying out the intervention. As a research leader, the researcher needs to manage the research design, the data collection and data analysis process. The researcher is also positioned within the activity as a partner with the participants to examine how children contributed to their interactions with adults and other children in the situation in which they participated. By being a partner, the researcher aimed to capture the data from the inside perspective of the participants to establish a thorough understanding about the topic.

### ***Sampling and participants***

This paper uses data gathered from one participating childcare centre in Jakarta, Indonesia, where a Playworld was implemented as an educational intervention. The childcare centre's learning activities follow the Indonesian Early Years Learning Curriculum Framework (MoEC, 2014). Ten teachers and 38 children 3.5 to 5 years old (mean age 4 years, 4 months) were invited to participate in the study. Nine teachers had an undergraduate early childhood education degree and one teacher had a master's degree in early childhood education. All teachers had three to seven years' experience in teaching children. The parents of the children in the preschool were informed and full consent for the video observation of each child was obtained from parents after asking parents to explain the research to their children and ask their child if they would like to be involved. Full consent was also obtained from the teachers. Ethics approval was obtained from the researchers' university Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 10755).

### ***Procedure for data collection***

In the larger study of which this is a subset, two periods of data collection of video observations, video interviews, focus group discussions, and field notes were undertaken. The data used for this paper's study consisted of 16 hours of video observation data from the second period of data collection. These video observations documented the teachers' and children's interactions in the Playworld. Three cameras captured all interactions between the teachers and the children: the first camera followed the teacher, and the second and the third cameras each followed a focus boy and girl. The interviews were undertaken over two periods using open-ended questions, and selected video-recordings were used as a prompt in each interview session to discuss what was applied and what could be developed further. The

researcher conducted the first interview to obtain information on the teachers' conceptualisation and implementation of a play-based program before the intervention. The focus group discussion then developed into a discussion about the Playworlds concept. Specifically, teachers discussed how they would use the Playworlds approach and how it could be implemented in their classroom settings. Finally, the second interview was undertaken after the implementation of the Playworlds approach in the selected sites. This part of the interview focused on the teachers' perspectives, feedback, and comments on the Playworld intervention and its impact in early childhood settings.

To introduce a Playworld model and explain how it would work as an intervention in this study, the researcher conducted focus group discussions with the teachers. The focus group discussion was conducted to explore the ideas for a Playworld and to plan a Playworld implementation for the Indonesian context with the theoretical problem of how to bring play and learning of concepts together. In collaboration with the researcher, a Playworld design was developed by group brainstorming, design presentation, and demonstration.

With regard to the ethical considerations, the children were informed that they would be recorded, the teacher explained the purpose of the research, and the researcher obtained consent from teachers and parents for their children to participate in the research. The researcher in this study paid attention to the children's needs during the observation with an emphasis on minimising any potential for harm to the research participants at any stage. The participants' comfort during the video-recording and the interview sessions was prioritised, including the participants' right to withdraw at any time.

## **Data analysis**

Hedegaard's (2012) holistic model of analysis was used to analyse the data. It has three different levels of interpretation: the common-sense interpretation, the situated practice interpretation, and the thematic interpretation. The common-sense interpretation was undertaken to provide different understandings of Playworld pedagogical practices by reviewing the children's and teachers' perspectives of the Playworld without any influence from the theoretical framework used. Then, the situated practice interpretation was applied to reveal patterns in the Playworld pedagogical practices that related to the children's learning and development. The interaction patterns observed in several activities were then linked to undertake an in-depth analysis and provide an understanding of the Playworld pedagogical practices. Finally, a thematic interpretation was applied to formulate the findings based on a theoretical interpretation using the analytical concepts of the cultural-historical concept of play, social situation of development, and Playworld. Application of these concepts allowed identification of the pedagogical practices of the new activity settings, which made it possible to gain deeper insights into developing new conceptual relations and theoretical interpretations related to learning and development. Selected vignette examples are provided to highlight the interpretations and the findings.

## **Findings**

### ***The context of an Indonesian Playworld***

By focusing on the teachers' Playworld pedagogical practices, this study aimed to examine how teachers create motivating conditions for children's learning and development that are considered to be unique to the Indonesian context of a Playworld. Two vignettes from two time periods of the Playworld implementation that was based on an Indonesian folktale are

presented to show the development of the teachers' practices and elucidate how the emerging Playworld created developmental opportunities for the children. The story used was about the life of Kemuning, a princess who lived in a palace and later went missing. There are king, princess, soldier, and *inang* (servant) characters in the story.

These vignettes show how the teachers used their play partner roles to create motivating conditions in the Playworld to support children's learning and development. By focusing on what the teachers did in their play partner roles, the video data analysis reveals two themes in their Playworld pedagogical practices. The first theme highlights a directive teacher player role in creating unemotionally charged maths learning conditions. The second theme shows how the teachers used their player role to foreground the unity of cognition and emotion in the play for supporting maths learning and self-regulation development. Each theme shows how the teachers used their player roles differently, and how the different teacher-children interactions resulted in the solving of the imaginary problems created in Playworld, which developed the children's learning experiences. Thus, the different development of the children's play led to different processes of conceptual learning.

### ***The directive teacher player role***

The common-sense interpretation was done by reviewing the children's and teachers' perspectives of the Playworld disregarding the theoretical framework used, specifically in Vignette 1, which occurred in the first week of the Playworld, that shows how the teacher introduces a problem and engages students in the imaginary play situation. It also shows how the conditions for learning are created by the teacher in their play partner role as an *inang*

character. The teacher presents a problem situation linked to learning mathematical concepts, particularly counting and classification.

Further, the situated practice interpretation was applied to reveal patterns based in the data generally, and this illustrative vignette shows the pattern on how the teacher created conditions in Playworld by being in a player role to support the development of an imaginary play situation of cooking in the palace kitchen. Inside the imaginary play, her role in the kitchen was intended to link the play to the children's learning of the maths concepts of counting and classification. Thus, in their play partner role, the teacher used a Playworld storyline to present the children with situational problems and invite them to participate in imaginary cooking with ingredients and cooking tools. However, rather than introducing the children to a problem situation, the practice only prepared the children to play with the ingredients and limited the children's choices in developing their play. In relation to the degrees of freedom, where children have room for their own initiatives in play (van Oers, 2010), the teacher seemed to direct the play through the player role. Thus, the directed ways in which the teacher provided the learning content influenced the play and limited the children's degrees of freedom to explore the play. Despite the teacher trying to explore her play partner role to support the development of play and learning and use her player role to stimulate the children to inspire cooking ideas, there was a tendency to direct the play to focus on the maths concepts that she wanted to develop. The play implicitly appeared to be a superficial maths activity for learning classification, counting, and number concepts through the imaginary cooking processes.

Also evident is that when interacting with the narrative of the Playworld, the children were passive and followed the teacher. This response may have been due to the lack of

emotional engagement in the play, which resulted in a less meaningful situation for the children to respond to. For example, when the children pretended to cook the rice, new meaning was given to small rocks for rice, and the children used their ideas to cook Indonesian dishes, such as colourful yellow rice, which required the children to classify the rice based on its colour. In this sense, the maths concept of classification began to emerge; however, it was not developed further. Later, the concepts of counting and numbers emerged when another child counted the ingredients used to make *martabak*. Although the teacher supported the cooking idea by asking about other materials that could be used as ingredients, the teacher continued to orient the play to the children's learning of maths concepts by focusing on, for example, how many eggs she needed rather than undertaking any further exploration. This example highlights the challenges for teachers in implementing a Playworld, as they need to develop the play whilst enhancing the children's deep understanding of the concepts being learned. The teacher's practice limits the children's degrees of freedom and impacts on the play expansion and children's learning possibilities. This observation emphasises both the importance of pedagogically valuing play and how the teachers and children participate in the play.

Despite the limitations seen in the teacher's role, this vignette shows that in a Playworld, through the teacher's player role, opportunities are created for learning mathematical concepts. However, because the play and learning were disconnected, the children's mathematical concept development was superficial and the deeper level of mathematical learning was not achieved. The teacher undertook the role as play partner in a directive way, and the lack of emotion resulted in static play interaction. These conditions were to some extent due to the teacher only beginning to understand how to use the



Playworld pedagogically, as it is quite different to the usual teacher-directed model used in preschools in Indonesia (Utami et al., 2020a). This example shows the importance of exploring a new tradition in Indonesia of the teacher taking a player role in the play to enable rich learning opportunities for children's development.

The Playworld continued for over a month, and the development of the teachers' player roles was captured. Vignette 2 occurred in the third week and shows how the play led to learning through the development of unity of imagination, cognition, and emotion.

#### *A teacher's player role as part of the play*

As might be expected, the Playworld had expanded and was more substantial. The findings show that the children were more familiar with the Playworld as a regular activity, and the teachers' roles as play partners had improved.

As part of the common-sense interpretation, the review of vignette 2 shows how the teacher as a play partner created a social situation in the Playworld that involved the children in an adventurous jungle mission. It demonstrates that the teacher was part of the play and emotionally engaged in her player role. In addition, the problem the teacher presented was an emotionally charged problem that oriented the children to develop their self-regulation by obeying rules in order to participate in the collective imaginary adventure. Furthermore, the mathematical concepts involving maps and location were embedded in the play and explored by reading a map and following the strategy to save Princess Kemuning. Some children were excited and brave, but other children were afraid and worried. However, the teacher encouraged the children to undertake the mission by planning a strategy based on the map they had. The children paid attention when the teacher discussed the mission and asked some

questions. All of the children appeared to be motivated and, after preparing themselves, they started the journey.

The social situation was created in which the children and the teacher were involved together in the play. Within the social situation created, the emergence of drama created the possibility of a social situation of development for each child. This vignette shows that by participating in the play, the children experienced different emotions and could share their feelings about the jungle mission with others. The situated practice interpretation reveal the pattern on how the teacher created conditions in Playworld by being in a player role to support the development of an imaginary play, specifically in Vignette 2 related to the teacher's active role resulted in dynamic play interactions that enhanced the children's learning and self-regulation through drama as they applied the map-following concepts to move through locations and pass obstacles within the play.

A dramatic moment developed when one child, Dani, was cursed by breaking the jungle rules. This shocked the other players causing different responses. The teacher and children helped Dani to recover. Then, they remembered and applied the strategies and rules they had discussed for their journey. This vignette shows how the drama that resulted from the dynamic interaction becomes the leading force in learning and development (Hedegaard, 2012). Through the drama of breaking the rules, the children develop self-regulation, which is shown particularly through obeying rules. Notably, the emotional engagement in the dramatic moment that emerged in the play situation when Dani broke the jungle rules and was cursed, led to children's learning and development of self-regulation by managing themselves to avoid breaking any rules in the imaginary situation. In this way, the dramatic moments act as motivating conditions for children's self-regulation development.

This vignette exemplifies how the Playworld develops unity of imagination, cognition, and emotion by the creation of motivating conditions presented by the teacher in a play partnership role. The collective imaginary play situation enhanced the children's mathematical concepts and self-regulation abilities, as demonstrated by examples such as developing spatial knowledge by reading maps and considering locations. In this case, the teacher's role as a play partner provided the social situation, including the dramatic moment, that influenced the children's role in the play and supported the play development. Furthermore, the emotionally charged moment supported the children's self-regulation development in obeying the rules. This second vignette demonstrates that the teacher's role as the children's play partner in the Playworld provided opportunities to develop dynamic interactions that supported the children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. They were encouraged to learn concepts in different ways through the social situations experienced within the shared play scenario.

## **Discussion**

The study results reflect Vygotsky's (1966) concept of play, where an imaginary situation necessitates the meaning-changing of objects and actions. Based on the thematic interpretation, such situations were seen in the vignettes, for example when the teachers and the children created new meaning from objects and actions, such as the small rocks becoming rice (Vignette 1) and trampling the plants in the jungle became a cursed action (Vignette 2). A dual role of imagination and reality (Vygotsky, 2004) was also captured. Imagination is based on the reality of jungle life and reality itself is based on imagination, which in this case was imagining being in that jungle going on an adventure.

As part of the thematic interpretation, additionally, the teachers' 'player' role in creating possibilities for the children's initiatives and their concept development can be better understood when the concept of degrees of freedom (van Oers, 2010) is used to theorise how the Playworld creates opportunities for different kinds of interactions to emerge. These vignettes show a development in how the teachers' roles in the play supported the children's development and learning of mathematical concepts. However, at the beginning of the Playworld, the teachers found it challenging to design their roles so that they provoked the children to learn different concepts in the play (Vignette 1).

In Vignette 1, while still new in her role as a play partner, the way the teacher played her play partner role to develop the imaginary situation and provide the learning content was directive and lacking in emotional engagement, which limited the children's initiatives in contributing to or directing the play. Thus, the degrees of freedom available in the Playworld were limited, and the children passively following the teacher's indirect instructions, which resulted in limited interaction and exploration.

Although play has been used as a pedagogy in early childhood practices in many countries, including Indonesia (Utami et al., 2020a), cognitivisation has become a problematic issue in the practices (Fleer, 2011b). Specifically, while the Indonesian Government has emphasised implementing learning through play, implementation of play-based learning has been challenging due to the demand for academic outcomes (Fridani & Lestari, 2008). Vignette 1 shows that the content of the discipline area is something that teachers currently focus on, as the teaching of content really matters in Indonesian early childhood practices. However, as Hedegaard (2012) explains, the two important features that facilitate children's learning in activity settings are demands from the surroundings and the

engagement of more competent people. In Vignette 1, the demands were made of the children while the teacher acted as a player in the Playworld, but the academic demands resulted in a lack of engagement of the teacher as a player. Therefore, the opportunities for children's learning and development were not created in the imaginary play. The lack of emotional engagement in Vignette 1 meant that the play did not develop, resulting in only a superficial learning of the maths concept. Deeper exploration of the concept was not undertaken and the imaginary play situation was not explored further to develop the concept. Therefore, imagination, cognition, and emotion must be conceptualised in unity in play.

Vignette 2 shows the development of an important pedagogical practice, as the teacher had developed her role as a play partner after being in this role for three weeks. Teacher interaction is the key to building conceptual learning and the role can be formed in different ways by playing different characters in the play and being a role model through the characters (Fleer, 2018). In Vignette 2, the play was rich with emotion, and the maths concepts of mapping, spatial relations and a location orientation were evident. In the player role, the teacher presented problem scenarios that encouraged children's learning and development of mathematical concepts. The teacher was emotionally engaged in introducing a problem situation of needing to find the missing princess, which provided a social purpose for engaging with the map and created an emotionally charged conceptual problem. The children responded with a more dynamic play interaction, resulting in the motivation to use maps and develop mapping skills. This practice exemplifies the value of creating unity of imagination, cognition, and emotion in play that links the play and learning, as the children's imaginative play developed as their imaginative thinking developed. The Playworld appeared to realise this unity.

Vignette 2 also shows how the teacher welcomed the children's initiatives, and it exhibits a widening of the degrees of freedom for the children that resulted in a change in the children's role in the play. The children showed agency because there were more opportunities for them to do something and it enhanced their degrees of freedom, which is an important condition for the emergence of imagination in play (van Oers, 2010). By encouraging more degrees of freedom, the teacher enabled the children to exercise more autonomy in the play decision making, which did not appear in Vignette 1. This encouragement is a unique pedagogical practice of Playworld in Indonesia, as traditional practices commonly implement structured and teacher-directed play (Utami et al., 2020a). However, Vignette 2 shows that the Playworld provides teachers with the opportunity to change how they play as a play partner, and how this new pedagogical practice can impact on the children's responses. The Playworld allows the teachers to create more degrees of freedom for the children, which increases the children's agency, and the dynamic teacher-children interactions result in emergence of children's learning and development.

The findings are better understood when the Playworld is conceptualised as a component of the institutional practices in Indonesia. The new play pedagogy can reform the implementation process of play-based learning in Indonesia to meet societal demands through a model of practice that brings play and learning into unity. In this sense, the dichotomy between play and learning can be challenged. Due to the demand for academic learning, directed teaching, rote learning, and structured or teacher-directed play are often used in early childhood practices in Indonesia, and play is not recognised (Utami et al., 2020a). Vignette 2 shows that the Playworld allows for the content to be introduced differently, and different discipline content can emerge inside the play in a way that is personally meaningful for the

children. The children's active participation in the social situation is an important key in learning, as the change in social relations is an impact of the pedagogical practices that result in new activities and is defined as learning (Hedegaard, 2012).

Fleer (2011b, 2018) provides evidence that play and learning are dialectically connected and lead to children's learning that meets the demands for cognitive outcomes. It is crucial to develop learning as an integral part of the play or play and learning as a unity (Fleer, 2018). Therefore, Vignette 2 shows that learning can be carried out as a joint playful activity.

This study reveals that in the Playworld in the Indonesian context, the teachers position themselves as play partners differently in play with degrees of freedom for teachers and children that change their interaction. Thus, the teachers' player role can create conditions for children's learning and development. The interaction opens up zones of possibilities for learning and development because there is a greater space that provides more opportunities for children's learning and development. With the Playworld, the learning content is now introduced by the teacher from inside the play rather than from outside of the play. As highlighted, in many countries, including Indonesia, the role that adults have in early childhood practices places them mostly outside of the play as planners, modellers, observers, stage managers, and facilitators of play (Ilfiandra, 2011; Jones & Reynolds; 2011). However, positioning the teacher as a player develops and links the play and learning, and teachers are able to change their strategy for delivering the learning content, deepening the learning, and following up the children's responses through their degree of involvement in the play (Hakkarainen, 2010; van Oers, 2010). By giving degrees of freedom to both children and teachers, the Playworld creates new conditions for Indonesian teachers, allowing them to be

more playful in a new direction and to create a problem scenario inside the Playworld. The study shows how the teachers' roles developed and they were able to build their own strategy in play based on their understanding of the Playworld to create conditions to support children's learning and development.

The Playworld creates greater possibilities for different kinds of interactions. Vignette 2 shows how the teacher created a social situation through Playworld by being inside the play and opening up opportunities for a social situation of development of the children. By presenting a problem situation that related to maths concepts and children's self-regulation, the teacher developed play that enabled learning of concepts and social-emotional development. Vygotsky's (1966) view that play is not just play or pleasure is evident in Vignette 2, where the Playworld created social situations that resulted in emotions of excitement, fear, happiness, anxiety, and sadness, and the challenges presented through the drama supported the children's developmental changes. In particular, this vignette showcases the connection to the children's self-regulation, which resulted in a change in the children's behaviours through the drama. This emotional engagement created meaningfulness for the children in the play.

Furthermore, the child's social situation can be considered a social situation of development if it exhibits a dynamic interaction involving drama. This dramatic moment is especially important for creating emotional engagement in the play as it motivates the development of play that can lead to conceptual learning (Fleer, 2018). As Vignette 2 shows, some of the children were motivated to join the imaginary jungle adventure to save Princess Kemuning despite the fear they had. The dramatic moment became the motivating condition



that changed the children's social situation to a social situation of development of self-regulation, particularly in following rules and controlling behaviour.

## **Conclusion**

This study helps teachers by providing an alternative pedagogical approach to formal learning that can support them to meet the new societal demand for introducing play. The Playworld can be used as a pedagogical model for children's conceptual learning in Indonesia. This study also contributes new knowledge on implementing a Playworld to create dynamic conditions through imagination in play that act as a source of children's development and a pedagogical tool for teachers support children's learning and development. As a new model of play through imaginary situations, Playworld is an innovative strategy for early childhood practices that can support children's development. By applying Playworld in everyday practices, the teachers can build new perspectives of children's play, develop their role as play partners, and find a new way to dialectically connect play and learning. The findings are important as a foundation for further developing Playworld in different contexts who have different societal needs.

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