A cultural-historical study of collective play for the development of emotion regulation in an institutional care setting in China

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Abstract

There has been a number of institution-based interventions aiming to tackle the adverse effect of orphanages on child development, but few have focused on the development of emotion regulation (ER). Conversely, research shows that early childhood is a critical time for ER development and imaginative play is an effective tool. Therefore, this paper aims to explore whether and how collective play can support ER development of the young orphanage children. Based on the cultural-historical theory of emotion and ER development, we implemented an educational experiment (Hedegaard, 2008b) of collective play for ten weeks in an orphan-care institution in China. Diandian (pseudonym), aged 4.5 years, was observed as she expressed fear towards a "scary" cleaner in her everyday life and participated in the collective play activities. 78 hours of digital video data were collected and analysed. The findings demonstrate the process where the raw emotion of fear was made conscious through enacting and re-enacting play roles, which eventually led to Diandian's regulation of fear in play. We argue that even though an orphanage is not comparable to typical family settings, there are still possibilities for a dynamic social environment to be created for its children where ER development is supported pedagogically.

Keywords: institutional care, collective play, emotion regulation

1. Introduction

The latest statistics from a total of 142 countries reveal that an estimation of 2.7 million children worldwide between the age of 0 and 17 are living in orphan-care institutions (Petrowski et al., 2017). Over the past twenty years, as de-institutionalisation and family-oriented care alternatives are still not yet attainable (McCall, 2013), a limited number of institution-based interventions have been developed to tackle the adverse effect of orphanages (Johnson et al., 2006) on the children in their care, particularly their social and emotional development. They include structural changes (St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team, 2008), staff training (Lecannelier et al., 2014), preschool

enrichment programmes (Cotton et al., 2007), enhancing responsive caregiver-child dyadic relationship (McCall et al., 2010), and structured play (Taneja et al., 2002).

However, what appears to be missing in the literature is institution-based interventions focusing specifically on the children's development of emotion regulation (ER), even though literature on emotional development unanimously show that early childhood is a crucial time for ER development (Bronson, 2000). Young children need to be able to manage their emotional experiences and expressions to some extent in order to build and maintain relationships with others, and to negotiate societal demands (Denham, 2007). When they are able to manage and adjust their emotions effectively, they are more likely to succeed in social relations and learning (Denham et al., 2012). Adaptive ER at an early age predicts social emotional competence even later in school (Eisenberg et al., 2007). By contrast, a lack of appropriate ER skills is associated with hardships in executive functioning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), peer relations and school adjustment (Herndon et al., 2013).

Among the multitude of intervention programmes, imaginative play has been identified by researchers from different theoretical backgrounds as an effective tool for supporting ER development in preschool-aged children (Fein, 1989). It provides young children opportunities to comprehend reality in their own ways and to learn and manage failure and emotionally difficult situations in a safe context (Bretherton, 1989). It also creates conditions where young children can learn ER-related skills and strategies from adults and peers who are involved in play (Gioia & Tobin, 2010). Children who spend more time in pretend play display better ER competence than their peers (Gilpin et al., 2015). Conversely, Lillard and colleagues (2013) claimed it was inconclusive whether a causal relationship between imaginative play and children's ER development existed. However, their findings are questionable because, in addition to the ambiguous definition of play offered in their research, only four studies, three of them published before 2000, were discussed in relation to play and ER development. Moreover, all of these selected studies were conducted in experimental settings, instead of the naturalistic and familiar everyday situation of the child. Further, the child was engaged in play alone in most cases rather than in a shared imaginary space, and adult participation and support in play was absent. In contrast, studies in the cultural historical tradition have shown that collective play, where adults and children are actively engaged in a common imaginary situation together, creates conditions for children's emotional development. Bodrova (2008) argued that collective play promotes children's self-regulation of behaviour and emotions, especially when supported intentionally by adults. Fleer and Hammer (2013) theorised how collective, fairy tale-based imaginative play supports ER development for young children through telling, retelling, and role-play of the story, which was implemented and evaluated by Hermann (2017). Unfortunately, these interventions were all designed for early childhood centres and family contexts, which are

drastically different from the social situation of an orphanage. As children's developmental trajectories are shaped by the cultural practices of their community (Rogoff, 2003), their ER development is also culturally-formed, dependent on their social and cultural environment (Holodynski, 2013), rather than a universal process.

Therefore, the research question of this paper is whether and how the child's ER development is supported through collective play in the group setting of an orphanage. To answer this question, the first part of this paper is a theoretical discussion about the cultural historical understanding of the dialectics between emotion and feeling, and of emotion regulation. This is followed by the details of methodology and study design. The findings highlight the process of transformation of a focus child, Diandian (pseudonym), as she experienced and tried to cope with fear in both everyday situations and the imaginary situations of collective play.

2. A Cultural-historical Perspective of Emotion Regulation

In line with the focus of this paper, the theoretical discussion focuses on emotion and emotion regulation, particularly from a cultural-historical perspective. Unlike many of the other theoretical traditions, the cultural-historical theory highlights the dialectical relations between emotions and feelings and foregrounds the consciousness of experienced emotions as feeling state in the ER development (Vygotsky, 1999). It can help us unpack the very process of ER development through the child's interactions with the social environment in play.

The debate about the definition of emotion can be traced back to as far as Plato and Aristotle (Barrett, 2006). Even today, when there is an abundance of research focusing on emotion-related topics, the precise definition of emotion and emotion regulation have yet to reach a consensus (Camras & Halberstadt, 2017). Interestingly, what seems rather unanimous is that the word "emotion" and "feeling" are usually used interchangeably (Hourigan et al., 2011). In most cases, emotion tends to be theorised as either in the mind or in the body (Vygotsky, 1999). However, drawing upon Spinoza, Damasio (2003) argues for a distinction between the two words, because "turning emotion and feeling into separate research objects helps us discover how it is that we feel" (p. 28). He proposes that while emotion precedes feeling and represents an external and visible bodily reaction, feeling represents the private idea, or awareness of the physical state caused by the raw emotions (Damasio, 2003). In other words, by separating emotion and feeling, we can theorise the emoting process as the bodily reactions and the mental process of conscious awareness separately and in relation to each other. This dialectical relation echoes Vygotsky's theorisation of emotion that "every feeling has not only an external, physical expression, but an internal expression associated with the choice of thoughts, images, and impressions" (Vygotsky, 2004, pp. 17-18).

Differentiating these two concepts helps draw out the consciousness of experienced emotions, which lies at the heart of emotion regulation (Fleer & Hammer, 2013). Vygotsky rejected the Cartesian or dualistic view of emotions, and highlighted the very relation between the physical expression and the consciousness of it as the core of his theory of emotions and emotion regulation (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 160).

Vygotsky argues that two aspects are involved in the development of human emotions and emotion regulation, that is, consciousness of our own emotions and our relations with the surroundings (Vygotsky, 1997b). First, the consciousness of the raw (the instinctive, reactive, and unprocessed) emotions—is key to emotion regulation. When we think about how we feel, this consciousness then places our experienced emotions in relation to our complex system of concepts, which, in turn, reshapes our emotions as an integral part of our mental life (Vygotsky, 1997b). Vygotsky (1999) states that regulating our emotions can be achieved

> "Only indirectly, creating a complex system of ideas, concepts, and images of which emotion is a part, can we arouse the required feelings and, in this way, give a unique, psychological colouring to the entire given system as a whole and to its external expression." (p. 243)

Second, the consciousness of emotions as part of the cultural development is a result of our dynamic encounters with the environment (Vygotsky, 1997b). In Vygotsky's (1999) view, consciousness arises from social experience, for example, interacting with family members, and the development of emotion and emotion regulation as higher mental functions is the product of participation in social life. Consequently, emotional development stems first from social relations, or inter-psychologically, and the way the surroundings is refracted in the mind, before it becomes an intrapsychological function. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1999) contends that emotional development, like that of all other higher mental functions, is not a continuous or a linear progression, but, a reorganisation of a new system of emotions from the old.

Adapted from Vygotsky's theory of inter- to intrapsychological functioning (Vygotsky, 1997a), Holodynski developed the internalisation model of emotional development to explain the process of transformation from the biological emotional reactions of a newborn to a system of higher psychological emotions through expression signs (Holodynski & Seeger, 2019). In this model, emotion is defined as "a functional psychological system involving the synchronic interplay of several components that serve to initiate and regulate a person's action", while feeling as a component of emotion is the consciousness of the experienced sensations and emotional reactions (Holodynski & Seeger, 2019, p. 1813). Therefore, children's ER development in this model emphasises the shift from using emotional expressions inter-psychologically towards intra-psychological regulation, where

consciousness of one's own emotions are the core (Holodynski & Friedlmeier, 2005). Moreover, three phases, based on children's biological age and shift in sign use, were identified in this model to explain the course of ER development in children, that is, expression as communicative signs for co-regulation, emergence of self-regulation, and finally, internalisation of sign use and appearance of emotional processing (Holodynski & Seeger, 2019).

However, a limitation here is to view ER development through a maturational line of phases and milestones. Vygotsky (1998) argued against the use of chronological age as the main indicator for development, and ER as a higher mental function is culturally determined and develops as a new system replaces the old. It may not be a straightforward and linear process that develops from the inter- to intra-psychological, but more dynamic and complex (Fleer & Hammer, 2013). This is also true for children who spend all their time inside an orphanage, where their social situation dictates that their developmental trajectories are drastically deviated from the standardised "ages and stages". Therefore, even though an abundance of studies has focused on children's ER development at home and in schools, research is still needed in order to understand and support the ER development in children living in very unique circumstances such as an orphanage.

Another line of inquiry into the ER development in children based on Vygotsky's inter- and intra-psychological functioning was proposed by Fleer and Hammer (2013) to theoretically explore how ER development can be supported collectively rather than individually through the imaginary situation of fairytales in group settings. In this theorisation, the unity of imagination, emotions, and cognition supports ER development through the repeated telling and role-play of fairytales (Fleer & Hammer, 2013). The emotionally charged situations and the dramatic moments highlight the emotional significance of the fairy tale, which create possibilities for it to be explored and reflected (Fleer & Hammer, 2013). Thus the consciousness of emotion as feeling state, enhanced by adult participation, represents the awareness and regulation of emotions as a result of the dynamic flow between the inter- and intra-psychological levels through drama (Fleer & Hammer, 2013). Subsequently, Hermann (2017) implemented a fairytale-based intervention in Germany, and concluded that collective imaginative play is an important channel through which young children learn social emotional skills. Herman's project provided structured and standardised modules of telling, retelling, and role-play based on fairy tales pre-determined by educators, in order to support the ER development of children universally, rather than focusing on children at-risk (Hermann, 2017). However, as children's development is largely determined by their cultural and historical circumstances, children living within the walls of an institution in China experience their world very differently as their social situation and physical environment are drastically different from Hermann's study. Therefore, the current study explores whether and how collective play supports the ER

development of orphanage children in China, particularly the process of making conscious of experienced emotions as feeling state through play in group settings.

3. Study Design

The study reported in this paper is part of a larger research project that focuses on play and the ER development of children living in institutional care settings. In this paper, we were interested to examine whether and how raw emotions are transformed into conscious feeling states through collective play as the key to emotion regulation for orphanage children. To answer this question, we designed an educational experiment (Hedegaard, 2008b), where collective play was used as an experimental intervention in the natural setting of an orphanage to provide theoretical understanding as well as practical implications for children's ER development.

Unlike the spontaneous and individualized play, collective play in the cultural-historical sense means a shared imaginary situation is created and shared among children and adults. It allows for negotiation and development of a common understanding of the evolving play plot while supporting the formation of a collective consciousness (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). Research on early childhood education in China suggests that educational innovations need to be adapted to the existing collective values and whole class-oriented practice traditions of a Chinese classroom (Fleer et al., 2020). As the context in this study was in a local orphanage, where the children were living a highly collective life style around the clock, a collective play approach appears to be consistent with this existing practice while still offering an opportunity for change. In addition to adults and children playing together, collective play in this study was also inspired by the playworld approach (Lindqvist, 1995) and the Conceptual PlayWorlds Model (Fleer, 2018). In this form of collective play, adults and children jointly create an imaginary situation based on a piece of well-known children's literature, and they go on an adventure together by taking character roles, during which time important themes and problems are raised and solved. Having a play plot based on a narrative supports children's play development, and teachers are essential in collective play as their active participation by being play partners, helps sustain the shared imaginary situation (Fleer, 2015).

The ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the authors' university, in which confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed. Consent for adults was obtained from the participating staff members, and that for children was granted by the leadership of the orphanage, who were the children's legal guardians. Assent as an ongoing process (Kirk, 2007) was ensured through both verbal communication and non-verbal observations of participants.

3.1. The Context of the Study

In this study, data were collected from an experimental care unit within a state-run orphanage in China. A total of five adults and ten children participated in this study. Apart from a manager, five other staff members worked six days a week in this unit. Two out of the three caregivers lived on site with the children, while the other one worked long day-shifts. The physiotherapist provided the children with both treatment and care. The educator working in this unit also collected data as a researcher. This dual positioning was consistent with the cultural-historical theorisation of the researcher, who should be an insider and outsider together in order to have a holistic understanding of the children's social situation of development (Hedegaard, 2008a).

Ten children from this unit between the ages of three and eleven participated in this study, all of whom were abandoned soon after birth because of various medical conditions and biological impairments. During the week, some of the older and "more capable" children attended the special education centre organised by the orphanage for the children and located within the walls of the orphanage. The children who did not have access to the special education centre stayed with the caregivers and the educator in the unit.

3.2. The Focus Child

The children in this unit present differently because of the wide range of medical challenges and therefore no universal developmental pathway suits all of them. However, following one focus child can give insights into the impact of collective play on the ER development. Diandian (pseudonym) was a 4.5-year old girl who had been living in this unit for over a year. She was born with a mild hemiplegia on one side of her body, and the only physical challenge presented was very limited mobility on one of her hands. She was chosen to be observed because she repeatedly talked about her fears in casual conversations both with adults and with other children. It would be interesting to find out whether and how the collective play intervention could be helpful for her.

3.3. Procedure

My Little Bunnies, a very well-known children's story in China, formed the basis of the collective imaginary play situation. How this story was selected will be elaborated further in the Discussion Section. The story was about three little bunnies staying at home while the Mummy Bunny was away picking turnips. Then the Big Bad Wolf came to knock on the door, pretending to be Mummy in order to come into the house and eat the bunnies. The bunnies refused to open the door and eventually they played a trick on the Wolf and pinched his tail with the door, and he ran away screaming.

The educational experiment reported in this paper was carried out once a week, usually on a weekend afternoon when all of the children were in the unit and there were no volunteers nor visitors. The children and caregivers were invited to participate in the collective play by taking different character roles, and the adults and the children jointly chose (and extended) the theme and plot. Each child was free to decide whether to participate or not, and what role to play. The participating caregivers and the educator also took up roles such as one of the bunnies and entered the play with the children. The adults modelled, instructed and supported the children in their play roles. This collective activity was supplemented with imaginative play, book reading, and drawings in smaller groups of children, depending on their schedules and competences.

3.4. Data Collection

Digital video observation and field notes were used as the main method to generate data presented in this paper. Two cameras, a handheld video camera and a GoPro, were chosen strategically to document the dynamics in the play sessions and everyday interactions. The GoPro was placed on the wall of the Activity Room (within the unit, right next to the children's bedroom) as there was no safe spot for a tripod and a camera. Though it was not used in a conventional way, but static, it enabled the first-named author to collect data as a researcher while interacting with the children as an educator, especially when she was often the only adult in the room with the children. Moreover, it helped to capture the wholeness of the situation in which the educator/researcher was an integral part. Meanwhile, the handheld camera was used outdoors, held by the researcher, and indoors, in the room where a chest of drawers was available for placing it on a tripod. Taken together, a total of 78 hours of video data were generated. Field notes in this study were used to record reflections of the researcher as well as supplementary documentation, especially when the cameras could not be used, for example, outdoors when other children (not part of the study sample) from the orphanage were present.

3.5. Data Analysis

In this study, the dialectics between emotion and feeling in the collective play is used to explore the process of ER development for orphanage children. Data were first organised chronologically into separate folders and recorded into research logs. The researchers then watched the video recordings repeatedly and created video clips which were copied into separate folders for analysis. Specifically, data were analysed using the three levels of interpretations (Hedegaard, 2008c). During the first level, the common-sense interpretation, the researcher watched all of the data closely for the emotionally charged situations both in the everyday moments and in play, for example, when Diandian talked about the "scary" cleaning man nervously. Then, as the second level, the situated practice interpretation, the child's recurrent interaction patterns when facing fear-related scenarios

were identified. After this, in the thematic interpretation, the findings were theorized using the analytical concepts to address the research question.

4. Findings

The findings illustrate Diandian's transition from the raw expression of emotions and spontaneous coping to the conscious awareness of her own feeling states and the emergence of regulation strategy through the educational experiment in collective play contexts. We tried to explore whether and how collective play created conditions for the child's ER development through emotionally charged situations. This paper specifically examines the very process where the raw emotion of fear was made conscious through enacting and re-enacting play roles in the dramatic moments, which eventually led to Diandian's regulation of fear in play. In this section, two vignettes, one from baseline data before the implementation of the educational experiment, and the other from Week Ten of the educational experiment, are presented and contrasted in order to demonstrate how collective play as an important cultural device supports the ER development for children in institutional care.

4.1. Expression of raw emotions and spontaneous coping—Baseline data

This section presents Diandian's everyday practice of reacting and dealing with fear, which appeared as a major theme in Diandian's everyday experience and casual conversations with others. Table 1 below is a summary of the sources of her fear expressed in the random dialogues with her during baseline data collection. Vignette 1 below describes a dramatic moment that happened on the outdoor playground, which revealed two aspects of Diandian's encounter with fear: expression of raw emotions as she accidentally saw the cleaner from afar, and her subsequent coping strategy in relation to the book, "My Little Bunnies".

Table 1

Diandian's sources of fear

Period	Fear-inducing objects	Setting	Illustrative example from the data set (key sentence)
Baseline	"Tiger" in the storage room	Lunchtime	"Don't take the tiger when we go out!" (B1_1MT)
		Naptime	"Tiger! Tiger! Tiger inside! … Tiger will eat you!" (B1_BNTS)
	The cleaner with a very serious face who came daily to collect rubbish	Dinnertime	"I am scared of the one on the lawn. He does like this (stretching out her arms)…" (B1_XTAF)

			Outdoor playground	"Don't! Big Bad Wolf will come." "Wolf will come and eat me." (B2_WOP)
				"Don't let [the cleaner] in." (B2_XWOP, also in Vignette 1)
			Dinnertime	Said with fearful look, "[The cleaner] will come after dinner!" (Fieldnote 02O)
		a legendary man whom she believed would come take away little children	Free play time	"… or else he will come and take me away" (Fieldnote 04O)

Vignette 1: Several children, including Diandian, and the educator were having fun on the outdoor playground. Seeing the cleaner appear in the distance, Diandian immediately went to close the gate to the play area and shouted with *a nervous look* on her face, "don't let Yi (pseudonym) in!" The gates kept swinging open, and she persisted until she figured out a way to keep the gates shut. Then happily, she told the educator, "don't let Yi… [whisper] don't let the Big Bad Wolf in!" "Ah, just like in 'My Little Bunnies'!" She smiled, approached the educator and whispered, "Let the little bunnies in. Alright?" She left with a big grin. She then walked around and said out loud, "Big brother[1], don't come in. Ok? Little bunnies can come in!" "Little white bunnies, come in!"

A short while later, when the gate was open again, Diandian looked *genuinely concerned*. She carefully closed it and then left with satisfaction.

This scene describes how Diandian responded when confronted with a fear-inducing subject in her everyday life before the educational experiment. There was the raw emotion of fear that was felt upon the sight of the person from a distance, as she had a nervous look on her face, and quickly and persistently tried to create a structure to keep herself safe by closing the cleaner out. Furthermore, Diandian automatically linked this emotionally charged situation with the story of "My Little Bunny". She positioned herself inside an imaginary situation of her own, as she voluntarily assigned a play role to the cleaner by calling him the Big Bad Wolf. However, she was quickly flickering (Elkoninova, 2001) in and out, that is, crossing borders between reality and the imaginary situations of the storyline, when she used "big brother" in the real sense and "little bunnies" to signal the imaginary situation. It seems the story gave Diandian inspiration and strategy for self-protection against a

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[1] A culturally appropriate way to address a young man by a child.

fearful person, as in the story, the three bunnies kept the door shut so that the Big Bad Wolf was unable to go in. However, the fear as raw emotion was still existing, as shown from the worry on her face when the gate was open again. In other words, without enacting and re-enacting in the group imaginary situation, which will be elaborated in the following section, what the child was able to achieve independently was limited to the everyday practice. It also shows that storytelling itself was helpful to some extent, for example, for Diandian to imitate the actions of a character in the story, but it was not helping her regulate her emotion of fear.

4.2. Collective play creating conditions for emotion regulation

The educational experiment was implemented over a period of ten weeks, and Diandian volunteered to play Mummy Bunny for most of the sessions. Through the enacting and re-enacting of the same scene, where Diandian as the Mummy Bunny and her Baby Bunnies were in the house together when the Big Bad Wolf appeared, Diandian's play role as a mother developed and her response to the Wolf changed, as shown in Table 2 below. Vignette 2 demonstrates how the dramatic moment in play supported Diandian to be conscious of her own emotional expressions and to regulate her fear. Four significant conditions were identified from the educational experiment that supported the child's ER development: consciousness of feelings through play roles, storyline and play role as pivot, pathways between emotional expressions and feeling states, and support from adults.

Table 2

Diandian's changes through collective play

	Diandian as Mummy Bunny
Week 1	Said she wanted to protect her baby bunnies against the Wolf, but agreed for the Wolf (acted by a boy) to bite the educator/a bunny, "Yes, eat you!". (GOPRO0198)
Week 4	Screamed at the sight of the Wolf (acted by a caregiver), gave her a push and ran away to hide behind the educator/a baby bunny. (GOPRO0207)
Week 5	Actually cried when attacked by the Wolf (acted by a boy). (SONY_W5_LSXT)
Week 6	Stood beside the Wolf (acted by a boy) and laughed excitedly as he pretended to attack the others, and runs to hide behind a caregiver.
Week 7	Asked, "Don't bite me!"
Week 9	Screamed first at the Wolf (acted by the educator), but faced up and eventually punished the Wolf.

The data shown in Vignette 2 were collected in an afternoon during Week Ten, where the educator and children were playing "My Little Bunnies" together. This scene was about the Big Bad Wolf knocking on the door of the Bunny House and trying to eat the Bunnies. It had been repeated many times, but the children loved it and still asked for it. This time, Diandian asked to be Mummy

Bunny as usual. A boy decided to be Daddy Bunny (an invented role), while the other children were all Baby Bunnies sleeping on the floor. Each of them had a sensory integration equipment on them as quilts. The educator was the scary Big Bad Wolf trying to eat the little bunnies.

Vignette 2: "Quickly! Quickly! Quickly!" Mummy Bunny and Daddy Bunny shouted and rushed to cover a sleeping Baby Bunny with their bodies, while fixing their eyes on the Big Bad Wolf, who was taking exaggerated strides towards the Bunnies. With *a big grin*, Diandian as Mummy Bunny *screamed* and wrapped her arms around the Baby Bunny's neck, her upper body almost on the padded floor. The educator covered the side of her face with one hand as if whispering, but loudly, to Diandian,

"*Hey, Diandian, Mummy Bunny does not scream. Mummy needs to be **brave**.*"

Diandian sat up and *stopped screaming right away*. Daddy Bunny decided to lie down and sleep, and Diandian turned to look at him. The Big Bad Wolf sniffed around and said, "hmm, I can smell Little Bunnies…" immediately, Diandian turned back, guarded the Baby Bunny with her arms, and then pulled up the slipping "quilt". She looked directly into the Big Bad Wolf's eyes and shouted with an assertive tone, "no eating my [babies]!"

A minute later, "Oh, I am starving! I want to eat baby bunnies!" said the Big Bad Wolf to herself, her "claws" holding her empty stomach. "Knock! Knock! Knock!" The educator pretended to knock on the invisible door, and sang the Big Bad Wolf's song asking the Bunnies to open the door. "Are you a Bunny?" asked Diandian. She had moved in front of the other Baby Bunnies. "I am Baby Bunnies' auntie! Open the door and let me in!" Replied the Big Bad Wolf.

Mummy bunny waved her hand "No!" and said determinedly, "you are the Big Bad Wolf! You can't come in!"

The Big Bad Wolf managed to come into the house and wanted to bite the Baby Bunnies. Mummy Bunny ran to hide the Baby Bunnies behind her back one by one. Each and every Baby Bunny was protected by the mother. Even some Baby Bunnies had started protecting their siblings. The Big Bad Wolf was confused,

"*How come mummy and daddy always protect their babies?*"

After another round, the Big Bad Wolf was pushed to the corner again. This time, Mummy Bunny and Daddy Bunny asked her with a harsh voice to "stand still! Hands behind your back!

Face to the wall!" Loudly, they claimed to the very tall Big Bad Wolf, "<u>you are not allowed to</u> <u>eat my Baby Bunnies!</u>"

"*Mummy Bunny and Daddy Bunny are so protective of their babies!*"

Exclaimed the Big Bad Wolf, who was standing with her hands behind her back, face to the wall…

What is evident from the vignette above is that the collective play between adults and children created unique conditions for the emergence of the dialectics between raw emotion and conscious feeling state as the underlying mechanism of the ER process. First, the consciousness of feelings was achieved through enacting roles. The storyline introduces characters such as Mummy Bunny and Baby Bunny who had particular emotional roles, in this case, fear and then bravery, which made it visible for Diandian as she co-experiences the emotional expression with the educator as well as peers. This further supported her to recognise the emotion and to discuss it outside of play. As Diandian was reminded that Mummy Bunny was inherently brave and did not fear the Big Bad Wolf, Diandian followed the plot and played the Mummy's role according to the designated emotional feature. Her will to play Mummy Bunny opened up a unique opportunity for her to not only recognise her expression of fear but also to think about how to act being brave, which was unlikely in real life.

5. Discussion

The findings show how Diandian becomes consciously aware of her fears and overcomes them through participating in the educational experiment over ten weeks. From a cultural-historical perspective, ER development is conceptualised as the product of cultural development, rather than a biological process (Fleer & Hammer, 2013; Holodynski & Friedlmeier, 2005). Collective play as a shared cultural context between adults and children provides children with abundant opportunities to explore and experiment through the emotionally charged situations in the imaginary space. First, as a "mutual world of meaning" (Lindqvist, 1995, p. 77), the shared imaginary space is co-constructed by adults and children together, where children are not passive recipients, but agentic participants who actively choose the storyline that is meaningful for them. In this study, the choice was made when Diandian intuitively referred the person she was scared of as the scary wolf, as shown in Vignette 1, and closed the gate of the playground for protection just like in the story. Göncu (1993) in discussing intersubjectivity in pretend play argues that to establish shared interest in play requires that the play theme appeal to the emotional needs of the children.

Second, within this space, the theme and the dramatic tension are emotionally loaded, but at the same time contained and predictable (Fleer & Hammer, 2013). Literature on adverse childhood experience informs us that predictability and stability of the environment are of utmost importance for children with disadvantages to heal and develop (Solodunova et al., 2017). Through repeated telling, singing, and enacting of the story, the children became very familiar with the storyline, and they knew very well that the Big Bad Wolf was defeated and safety restored in the end. This emotional anticipation through imagination offers a sense of safety and control, which frees players to try out various options of the play role and experience the different consequences for themselves as well as the others interacting with them in play (Zaporozhets, 2002). Although Orbach and colleagues (1993) found that scary characters in a story may increase anxiety levels in children, the defeat over the scary and villain character helps children cope with their own fear (Trousdale, 1989). As G. K. Chesterton (2009) elegantly states, the child "has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon" (para. 2). Similarly in this study, through acting out the story, the child gains a clear understanding of the possible victory over the scary figure. Playing out different roles and consequences, in turn, creates more conditions for players to negotiate, reflect, and make connections between different play roles, their respective emotional expressions, and the overall plot. This was what happened with Diandian, as through the role of Mummy Bunny, she responded in various ways towards the Big Bad Wolf, for example, screaming and escaping intuitively, following Grandma Bunny's (acted by a caregiver) advices, and eventually defending her "babies" against the enemy.

Agreeing with Nilsson (2010), we find that collective play is a space where the child's internal, emotional world meets the external, social world through emotional roles, where consciousness as "relation to the environment" (Marx, as cited in Vygotsky, 1998, p. 258) is supported. The storyline and the play role act as a pivot for the process of transitioning from raw emotions to conscious feeling state in children. The concept of pivot was introduced by Vygotsky (1967, p. 11) to signify the substitute that the child needs to separate meaning from the object, for example, the stick as a horse in the child's play. Similarly, in our study, we find that the play role (being a Mummy Bunny) with a designated emotional quality acted as a pivot for Diandian to be conscious of her own emotional expressions and to experiment other possibilities as part of the plot, which facilitated Diandian to emotionally regulate her own reactions to fear. Göncu (1993) pointed out that in the imaginary situation, players not only negotiate themes and plots of play, but also the emotional aspect of it. When Diandian's intuitive reaction to the appearance of the Big Bad Wolf was inconsistent with her role of a brave and protective Mummy Bunny, the educator as a player reminded her, which prompted her to consciously re-examine and change her actions from screaming to standing up, to

be more in line with the demands of the role. For example, the educator acted as a play partner, in this case, the Big Bad Wolf, with Diandian and the other children. Through the words of the Big Bad Wolf, the educator made it explicit to Diandian that being Mummy Bunny means standing up and protecting her babies. Then eventually, after repeated practice of protecting her babies, Diandian took a step further and punished the Wolf.

The realisation and the changed actions also changed the entire structure of relations between Diandian and the social world in the imaginary situation, which also shifted the course of development for the story. Through the role of Mummy Bunny, what Diandian experienced was conscious expressions of feelings, voluntarily standing up against a fearful figure, and eventually controlling it as she made the Wolf stand in the corner, facing the wall. Vygotsky (1967, p. 16) argues "a child's greatest achievements are possible in play—achievements that tomorrow will become his average level of real action and his morality". We can specifically say that play roles with emotional characteristics can potentially support the child's ER process, when it is not yet possible outside of play.

In collective play, it is constantly happening that the raw emotions and the conscious feeling states create pathways for each other. In Vignette 2, when Diandian acting as Mummy Bunny screamed at the sight of the Big Bad Wolf, the scream was Diandian's instinctive expression of fear at the sight of the scary figure. The physical expression of this raw emotion was caught by the educator, who reflected it back to the child, giving her opportunities to re-think about her play role as a mother and its expected characteristic (bravery) in play. Here the visible expressions of the child's raw emotion serve to communicate to the adult what the child is experiencing, and enabled the adult to recognize and name the emotion, making it a conscious feeling state for the child. The emotional expression functions as the link between the adult and the child's conscious feeling state (Holodynski & Seeger, 2019). Furthermore, as Diandian became conscious of her own emotional expression, and subsequently her play role as Mummy Bunny and the corresponding bravery, she was able to adjust and regulate her expressions to fit her role in play, for example, standing up against the intruder and fending for her babies.

Additionally, the educator's active involvement as a play partner supported the process of making conscious of raw emotions for Diandian. When play is viewed as a cultural activity, adults' role in play is of utmost importance because they not only enrich play by modelling mature play and cultural forms, but they also add to the dramatic tension in play, which must be resolved so that play can proceed (Hakkarainen, 2010). The educator's enactment as the Wolf brings fear to life for the child to experience and experiment in a contained environment of play. She also used

metacommunicative language, both in words and in gestures, to move out of play and remind Diandian that Mummy Bunny was supposed to be brave. This helped Diandian realise her raw emotional expression of screaming and her body touching the floor. Realising this, Diandian stopped acting afraid and started being a brave Mummy Bunny, which became a turning point in her quest for overcoming fear. Therefore, drawing upon the child's interest to play, the educator can sustain the collective imaginary situation by being a play partner (Fleer, 2015) and create conditions for change through re-directing the development of a play role, in this case, the Mummy Bunny and supporting children regulate their emotions in a play role.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that collective play as an important cultural device creates conditions for ER development in orphanage children through facilitating the dialectics between raw emotions and conscious feeling state. This study fills a gap in the literature on institution-based interventions, that is, ER development in orphanage children. It specifically focuses on the child's experience in relation to the social environment within the dynamic and emotionally charged imaginary situations, which facilitated the child's ER development. In collective play, emotional qualities are highlighted in terms of the choice of the theme and plot, enactment of roles, and provision of new experiences. It is supportive of the children in the orphanage to transition from the everyday emotional expressions to the conscious realization of feeling states.

Emotional development in children is "a crucial pedagogical task" (Zaporozhets, 2020, p. 67) that requires further research attention. It is a limit of this study that due to the constraint of time, it was unknown whether there was any improvement of Diandian's regulation of her fear in real life. We also acknowledge that one single unit in the current orphanage context does not necessarily represent every orphanage context in China, but this study introduced some concepts and ideas that could be useful to institution-based interventions, where play and emotional development in collective forms are highlighted. Cicchetti (2007) rightly states that it is crucial that research be conducted to investigate the key developmental processes and the corresponding interventions for the disadvantaged young children. The findings of this study contribute to the current knowledge about ER development for children in the orphanage, especially how they can be supported pedagogically. We believe that even though an orphanage as a collective institution is not comparable to typical family settings, there are still possibilities that even within the less-than-ideal situation of an orphanage, a dynamic social environment can be created for its children where ER development is supported.

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8. References

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