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How Conceptual PlayWorlds in preschool settings create new conditions for children's development during group time

Marilyn Fleer, Monash University

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a study that sought to determine if and how, Conceptual PlayWorlds (modified playworld originally developed by Gunilla Lindqvist) created developmental conditions for children during group time. Over 7 weeks we digitally documented the play activities of children (18 children, 3.0-5.8, mean age of 4.8) and their teachers as they participated in an educational experiment of *The adventures of Alice in Wonderland* PlayWorld. We gathered 1,725 digital photographs, 153.3 hours digital video observations, and 32.5 hours of teacher-researcher interviews. The outcomes of the study show how the new play relations changed how group time in the preschool was performed. It was no longer 'circle time on the mat' as is the practice tradition, but rather the mat changed its sense to be a new imaginary situation with new rules, actions and roles, where there were players not children or teachers; thus affording extended mature forms of play at group time. It was determined that a Conceptual PlayWorld created unique psychological conditions for children at group time which positively contributed to their development.

Keywords: play; early childhood; imagination; development; playworlds

1. Introduction

The study reported in this paper examined how a group of young children in a preschool setting enter into, contribute to, and have agency within the new play conditions of a Conceptual PlayWorlds (modified playworld originally developed by Lindqvist, 1995) at group time. Designed as an educational experiment (Hedegaard, 2008), the central question driving the study was, if and how, a Conceptual PlayWorld creates developmental conditions for preschool children during group time?

Relevant to this question, is the theoretical discussion of play and play development within the early childhood period. Vygotsky (1966) theorised that play is the creation of an imaginary situation where children change the meaning of objects and actions to give them a new sense. Vygotsky (1966) also argued that play creates conditions where a child is acting a head taller than their developmental period. He said, "play contains all the developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his [sic] normal behaviour" (Vygotsky, 1966, p. 16). But how does play create these conditions for the psychological development of children during group time, and would a Conceptual PlayWorld make visible a child's development in a condensed form?

To answer this question we drew on the original playworld model of Lindqvist (1995) and Vygotsky's (1966; 2005) conception of play, and designed with teachers an intervention as part of an educational experiment (Hedegaard, 2008) to address the new societal demands for evidenced based models of play pedagogy in Australian early childhood contexts (Australian Government, 2009). We thought group time as an already established practice tradition afforded both a collective orientation and a sense of belonging (Zachrisen, 2016) that we knew was important for teachers work with supporting what Reunamo, Lee, Wang, Ruokonen, Nikkola and Malmstrom (2014) have said, as an uneven distribution of children's abilities in imaginary play in preschool settings. This paper briefly reviews what is known theoretically, followed by the empirical research into playworlds generally, before detailing the study, findings and conclusion.

To situate this study, we begin with a brief overview of the psychological dimensions of our conception of play that informed our educational experiment.

2. A cultural-historical conception of play

Insights into how play contributes to children's psychological functioning was the focus of Vygotsky's theorisation of play. He offered a set of core ideas around play and development that informed this study into if and how a Conceptual PlayWorld contributes to children's development during group time.

First, "In play, things lose their motivating force. The child sees one thing but acts differently in relation to what he [sic] sees. Thus, a situation is reached in which the child begins to act independently of what he sees" (Vygotsky, 1966, p. 11). Consequently, what emerges in play is a change in a child's relationship with their material environment, specifically a change in the way they relate to objects. This means that, "Thought is separated from objects" and "a reversal of the child's relationship to the real, immediate, concrete situation" emerges (Vygotsky, 1966, p.12). Vygotsky determined that the significance of this psychological shift for a child is immense. He argued that "It is terribly difficult for a child to sever thought (the meaning of a word) from object" (Vygotsky, 1966, p.12). He noted that in play children use objects to act as pivots to help them sever the word from the concrete object. Significantly, the object acts as a placeholder for the concrete object and studying how children severe thought from actual objects can give insights into development.

The **second** noteworthy psychological dimension sketched by Vygotsky (1966) relates to **rules** in play. Whenever children are in an imaginary situation, there are rules from everyday life that children adopt as part of their play activity. Vygotsky argued that it is impossible to play in an imaginary situation without rules. "If the child is playing the role of mother, then she has rules of maternal behaviour" (p.10). Significantly, he argued that rules create an affective engagement and relation with the content of the play. He suggested that, "the essential attribute of play is a rule which has become an affect"; "to carry out the rule is a source of pleasure" (Vygotsky, 1966, p. 14). This theorisation is contrary to the general literature on play that sits outside of cultural-historical theory, which suggests that play is pleasurable because children are free from reality (see Singer, 2013). It is the mastery of self in relation to the rules within the imaginary play that gives pleasure to the child. Vygotsky (1966) explained this pleasure of self-regulation in play when he said, "At every step the child is faced with a conflict between the rule of the game and what he [sic] would do if he could suddenly act spontaneously" (p. 14). Here the focus of rules is in relation to the child's self-regulation and this is not something that has been generally taken up within the literature on play. Therefore, studying the moments and turning points of self-regulation in play can give insights into children's development.

Third, studying the contradiction between free will and self-regulation in play may afford insights into the emotional development of children. Contrary to how emotion is presented generally in the literature outside of cultural-historical theory (see Hedegaard, 2010), Vygotsky and his followers have theorised emotions in unity with psychological functions - as part of cognition, rather than separated out. Although only sketched out briefly in Vygotsky's writings on play, he suggested that there is a dual affective plan in play, as "the child weeps in play as a patient, but revels as a player" (p.14). Closest to this theorisation, is the work of Schousboe (2013) and Grieshaber and McArdle (2011) who each draw attention to other forms of emotionally laden play, such as, risky play and wicked play. It is argued that children explore societal and institutional rules and roles in ways that suggest that not all play is pleasurable (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2011). Play brings forth many kinds of emotions and a study of play in relation to emotions, has been under researched (Hedegaard, 2010). The question that emerges, is why do children participate in emotionally charged forms of play, if it is not pleasurable to them? Once again, Vygotsky offers insights into this problem, suggesting that when children are able to self-regulate in relation to an imaginary situation, this gives pleasure to them. Therefore, analysing the contradictory moments between free will and self-regulation in play could be fruitful for understanding how play develops children's emotions.

Fourth, "In play a child is free. But it is always an illusory freedom" (Vygotsky, 1966, p.10). To explain this, we draw upon an example from Elkonin (2005). He describes in the forward to his psychological theory of play, how he used imaginary play at home to maintain the spirit he had established when his two preschool aged children refused to eat their porridge. Through introducing

into their home the imaginary situation of going to kindergarten, where the children engaged in the routine of taking off their coats, putting away their bags, and then participating in lunch, the rules associated with eating a snack in kindergarten were drawn upon and the children in this imaginary situation enthusiastically ate their porridge. What the children were not able to do in reality, they happily did in the imaginary situation of the kindergarten play. This illustrates the contradiction between the institutional rules of kindergarten and the demands of the father on his children to eat porridge, and the children's motive orientation to play, which appears as a greater force and this suspends the reality of the situation. Studying the moments when children suspend reality in play could give insights into the role of the content of children's play in supporting their development.

The **fifth** psychological dimension of play centres on the meaning of actions. Vygotsky (1966) wrote that a child is liberated from actions in play. He gives the example of how a child moves their hands and fingers as though eating, in the imaginary play of having a meal. That is, "the action is completed not from action itself but from the meaning it carries" (p. 14). Meanings of actions become more consciously realised in play actions, because children need to signal their intent to their play partners so that a shared or collective play narrative can develop. It is through actions as gestures in imaginary situations that children can fly to the moon, or travel 100s of kilometres in a few metres. This Vygotsky (1966) argued explains how "the meaning of things leads to abstract thought, in volitional decision the determining factor is not the fulfilment of the action but its meaning" (p. 15). As with severing the object from the visual field creates a new relationship between the child and environment, when an action replaces another action just as an object replaces another object, then the child also develops a new relationship between reality and an imaginary situation – realised as a consciousness of meaning of actions. However, more needs to be known about how imagination in play supports the development of imagination in thinking and its relationship to abstract concepts.

Sixth, Vygotsky proposed in a letter to Elkonin that, "before play there is no imagination" (published in Elkonin, 2005, p. 14). Imagination as a psychological function develops through play. This suggests that play acts as the source of a child's development of imagination. Play is the leading activity, but not the only activity of the child during the preschool period. Of particular interest to the focus of this paper, is the suggestion by Vygotsky (as cited in Elkonin, 2005) of adding one more concept: "rule + imitation". He said, "it seems to me, [rule + imitation] is just as central and just as related to the imagined situation" (p. 14). Imitation is not simply copying. This is an everyday reading of this term. Vygotsky had a scientific understanding of imitation. He theorised that imitation is about copying with understanding. This suggests that when children are in an imaginary situation, acting 'as if' they are in role following established societal rules of everyday life, and correspondingly emotionally engaged through realising these rules in their play actions, they are consciously imitating with meaning the rules and roles found in society.

This theorisation of play is also about the pleasure of conforming to rules, where imitation in imaginary play is in keeping with the premise that play is when a child is able to be a head taller than themselves. That is, children in play are acting in relation to the next developmental period but only if there is conscious meaning of actions or understanding, and this is the basis of how play creates the zone of proximal development (ZPD) for conscious realisation of rules and roles. Therefore, theoretically the ZPD could be visible in collective imaginary play. Studying the moments of imitation in play could give evidence of children's development through play.

Seventh, there is an absence in the early childhood literature about the cultural development of play. Play is assumed as a practice of children which develops in relation to the biological age of children. Although critiqued by many, it is primarily researchers from a cultural-historical tradition who have used a different theoretical frame for the study of play development. **Development of play** has been described by Vygotsky (1966) in relation to rules. He shows, "movement from the predominance of the imaginary situation to the predominance of rules" (p.15) as a sign of development in play. Most notably Vygotsky (1966) argued that when children spend longer talking about the rules of the play, that this is an indicator of a higher form of play being enacted. Early forms of play are conceptualised as play action in an imaginary situation without explicitly articulated rules, and more mature forms of play are

explicit rules within a more obscure imaginary situation, such as board games and other games with rules readily found being enacted in the playground among school aged children. But Vygotsky's theoretical insights focused specifically on the child and other children. He did not write about how teachers contribute to creating conditions to culturally develop play. This was left to others, as we see in the playworlds literature.

Finally, and related to theorising how play creates conditions for children's **conceptual development** (in unity with emotions and imagination, as discussed above), is how in play children consciously develop concepts through role-playing societal rules and roles. Vygotsky (1966) gave the example of two sisters who in play acted out being sisters. This means that in the imaginary play of role-playing being sisters, only behaviours that show what it means to be a sister are evident in the actions of the children. These behaviours become part of the themes of their play action, such as, walking holding hands, eating together, being in the same house, etc. "What passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behaviour in play." (Vygotsky, 1966, p.9). In this respect, imitation in play affords a consciousness of the roles and rules associated with acting as a sister.

Vygotsky (1966) said, "…the fact that 2 sisters decided to play sisters makes them both acquire rules of behaviour" (p. 9). But how this is realised in play, through consciously considering what it means to be a sister is important. He suggested that, "(I must always be a sister in relation to the other sister). Only actions which fit these rules are acceptable to the play situation" (p. 9). Rules here relate to imitation with meaning. By acting out the rules of being a sister, they become consciously realised in play. It is through this, that children develop a conception of sisterhood. In line with this logic, play can create conditions for children's conceptual development. This theoretically aligns with the intentions of Conceptual PlayWorlds (Fleer, 2019a), which also includes rules of play in relation to societal values, but which specifically includes everyday practices and the rules and content of schooling, acting in the service of children's imaginary play (discussed later).

In this section I have explicated 8 theoretical insights which informed the directions of the study reported in this paper. In foregrounding these dimensions of psychological functioning, we can better understand the meaning underpinning Vygotsky's (2005) play notes, where he said, "Ideas, become affect, concepts, turning into passion: the prototype of this Spinozian ideal in play, which is the realm of will and freedom" (p. 91). Unfortunately, Vygotsky was unable to take this work forward. He did though, raise an important question that can guide current thinking from a cultural-historical perspective on play. He asked, to what extent, "the issue of play in depth (what is under and behind-the subsoil) and in height (the highest attainments, which tomorrow will become ordinary; development from above)" can be studied? (p. 91). This question in the context of the 8 psychological functions guided our research into if and how, a Conceptual PlayWorld could create developmental conditions for preschool children during group time.

3. Educational experiment

In our study we were interested in what psychological value play has in the context of the societal demands for higher cognitive outcomes in Australia, and a corresponding new set of curriculum practices, termed intentional teaching (Australian Government, 2009). To answer this research question, we designed an educational experiment (Hedegaard, 2008).

An educational experiment takes place within a naturalistic setting that is part of the in everyday life of teachers and children. It is a planned intervention into practice. The "researcher builds on already formulated conceptual relations within a problem area that were outcomes" of previous research (Hedegaard, 2008, p.182). The "intervention is planned in relation to a theoretical system and not from agendas of practice" (p. 185). The educational experiment was realized in this study through the design of a playworld.

Lindqvist (1995) first introduced the concept of playworlds as part of her study of the aesthetics of play in a common playworld. Her work was designed to bring teachers and children together to "create a mutual world of meaning" (p. 77) where adults and children can be inspired by imagination. In the

context of stories and drama pedagogy, Lindqvist (1995) said, "When using playworld as a concept, I mean the fictitious world (context) which children and adults come to share when they interpret and dramatize the theme in the classes" (p. 70). She explained, "The theme should be characterized by contradiction, or dialectics, in life" (p. 74), and the theme should bring together the storyline and the reality of life as a form of cultural consciousness for the child through a creative pedagogy of play.

Lindqvist studied how a common playworld created the dialectics between the world of the child and the world of the adult, as a productive contradiction. She believed that children *reproduce* in play the reality they experience, while at the same time *producing* their own play scripts during the process of coming to understand the roles and rules of the society in which they live. Lindqvist (1995) argued that in play, "children are expressing their feelings and asserting themselves in relation to adults" but at the same time the adult senses that children also wish to "move closer to the adult world. This is neither dualism nor harmony – this is dialectics" (p. 50). Lindqvist's (1995) pedagogical model and empirical outcomes were the starting point for our educational experiment.

Our educational experiment was set up between teachers and researchers to develop a Conceptual PlayWorld (Fleer, 2019a) using the story of The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland (Carroll, 2009) and to study if this new model of practice could create developmental conditions for preschool children that went beyond conceptual development (Table 1).

Table 1

A Conceptual PlayWorld of Alice in Wonderland

Planning institutional practices	Activity setting of a Conceptual PlayWorld
Selecting an engaging story	The teachers chose the story of *The adventures of Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Caroll (2009)
Creating an imaginary Conceptual PlayWorld space	The teachers reserved the group time area known as circle time for the Alice in Wonderland Conceptual PlayWorld area
Teachers and children entering and exiting the Conceptual PlayWorld together	Both teachers and children planned before entering the Conceptual PlayWorld the role they wished to be on entering, such as the White Rabbit, Alice, Mad Hatter, Door, Table, etc.
Problems arise in the Conceptual PlayWorld that need to be solved	Concepts act in service of the children's play. How to go down the rabbit hole in order to follow the White Rabbit
Teachers take different roles in the Conceptual PlayWorld to actively support children's play development—subject positioning (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010)	One teacher is the storyteller and the other a character in the role-play with the children

3.1 Data generation:

A Conceptual PlayWorld of Alice in Wonderland was designed as a new practice tradition for the preschool with the teachers. After an initial professional learning session, weekly interviews and discussions on the educational goals and practice outcomes of the educational experiment took place between the teachers and the researchers. A total of 32.5 hours of teacher-researcher interviews/professional development was digitally recorded, in addition to the ongoing field notes of practices, and the teachers' documentation of the implementation which included children's drawings, models, work samples and short clips/photos of collective play actions.

3.2 Participant background:

A total of 18 children (3.0-5.8, mean age of 4.8) and two teachers from central Melbourne, Victoria participated in the study. Most were of European heritage. The teachers hold university degree qualifications and have over ten years of teaching experience. They both are of European heritage backgrounds.

3.3 Preschool context:

The preschool is situated on school grounds and has a large outdoor area with mostly natural play equipment, such as wooden planks, and the area is heavily treed. Indoors is made up of a range of activity settings, such as home corner, block area. There are classrooms close by the preschool and the children from the first year of school (5 year olds) and the children from the preschool (4 year olds) come together for the implementation of a Conceptual PlayWorld. As is common in Australia, preschools normally have one group session mid morning, and one just prior to going home, with unstructured play periods between. In this study one group time and unstructured play period was timetabled and used for introducing and role-playing the Conceptual PlayWorld.

3.4 Data collection procedure:

Over 7 weeks two cameras documented the play practices of children in a preschool setting. Both indoor and outdoor settings were included in data capturing. Field notes, drawings, models and work samples from children and teachers contextualised the video recordings, and weekly interviews with teachers gave more meaning to the emerging planning and implementation of the Conceptual PlayWorld. A total of 1,725 digital photographs and 153.3 hours digital video observations, and over a 150 pages of field notes were gathered. For the focus of this paper only group time data were drawn upon. One camera was mounted on a tripod and placed in close proximity to the area of the centre where group took place, and a second hand-held camera followed the children and teachers during group time and free play period of the timetable. The hand-held camera also captured still images.

3.5 Data analysis:

We analysed these data holistically by conceptualising the play practices as a dynamic system of social relations rather than as a collection of psychological functions. For the focus of the research questions guiding the analysis reported in this paper, we began by first, organising the data sets digitally into folders related to the week in which it was collected (teacher interviews, digital observations, photographs, field notes, emails, artifacts, such as children's drawings, program plans), alongside a table of weekly descriptions of practices and logistical details, such as times, who filmed, etc. Second, we viewed all the data and prepared detailed logs of major activity settings and activities that were taking place for each visit of data collection, such as, group time (activity setting) with tagged activities, (e.g., story reading), and later in relation to cultural-historical conception of play (imaginary situation, pivots). Third, all digital data were copied and made into short video clips of play practices relating to the focus of the study, and then placed into named folders. Clips and folders were prepared in relation to teacher practices of the Conceptual PlayWorld and child-initiated play. In preparing these folders of situated practices, it was possible to identify a density of data relating to particular practices. Finally, a theoretical analysis was undertaken using the concepts of crisis (demands/motives/contradictions/tensions/contradictions), imitation and what was learned from the theoretical study of a cultural-historical conception of play previously outlined (8 psychological dimensions of play).

4. Findings

The outcomes of this study build on previous Conceptual PlayWorlds research, where the teachers' beliefs about teaching were studied (Fleer, 2019b), digital practices were researched (Fleer, 2019c), and understandings gained through a study of how the preschool child could be subjectively constituted

through play in a common playworld (Fleer, 2020). In this paper we examine if and how, a Conceptual PlayWorld creates developmental conditions for preschool children during group time?

4.1 Experiencing the imaginary situation collectively through storytelling and role-play

The study found that collective imagining appears early on through story telling. In the early moments of the educational experiment the collective imagining is shown through how Olivia and Ruth, the teachers, create the imaginary situation through storytelling at group time.

4.1.1 Storytelling:

In Vignette One we observe how the children stayed with the collective imaginary situation of Alice, adding to the storyline when saying, 'a tiny door', 'she was dreaming', and then discussing the smallness of the keyhole.

> *Vignette 1: Storytelling at group time creates collective imagining and develops agentic problem solving by children*
> The children are sitting in a circle with three adults, Olivia, Ruth and Sue. Olivia is telling the story of the scene of Alice going down the rabbit hole, shrinking, and trying to get the key from the table to open a small door. But she cannot reach it. Olivia says, "She tried to climb up", gesturing with her hands as though climbing a vertical wall, "Can you try to climb up?". The adults and children mirror Olivia's gesturing as she says, "…Oh slippery. Ooooo slipping down". Olivia and the children fall forward in synchrony suggesting they are collectively imagining. In self-talk as Alice, Olivia says, "Oh, it is no use. I can't get that key. I've been so silly. Then she thought, No, don't cry Alice." Olivia places her hands on her hips, 'as if' Alice, and then in a determined voice self-talks as Alice, "Be brave. Don't be silly. Get yourself together! Come on!". Then she concludes as the storyteller, "So she did". Olivia puts her hands to her chin and says, "She thought, what shall I do?".
>
> At this moment Alex says, "It's just a dream". Olivia continues, "I really want to get through [pausing], that door". Thomas says in a quiet voice, "A tiny door". Alex announces, "She dreamed that she went through the keyhole". Ruth acknowledges Alex's suggestion by rubbing him on the back, smiling and saying, "That's a great idea". Charlotte responds, "That would need to be a very small keyhole, and she would even need to be smaller". Ruth supports her ideas and says, "She would need to shrink even more".
>
> Olivia continues as the storyteller, as Ruth stays with the children listening and mirroring actions of the story.

It is in the collective imagining through the storytelling shown in Vignette 1 that we see how the children begin trying to help solve the problem that has risen, through both actions and discussions about Alice shrinking and being too small to reach the key on the table. The children also introduce the idea of Alice perhaps shrinking more to fit through the keyhole. This is, as an imagined solution or thought experiment that is not part of the original story. This **agentic imagining** is suggestive of both the emotional engagement with the story narrative, at the same time as thinking about the contradictions that are emerging in the play plot. It shows a collective orientation to the imaginary situation of Alice in Wonderland. It is also suggestive of how emotions and thinking are concurrently acting within the storytelling and collective sense of imagining across the children, as they discuss the contradiction and add to others' suggestions – "That would need to be a very small keyhole, and she would even need to be smaller". This vignette of the second time the children were experiencing the story, is an illustrative example of how the foundations for the Conceptual PlayWorld were established collectively through a shared imaginary situation of Alice in Wonderland.

4.1.2 Role-playing:

Vignette Two is an example of how collective imagining is maintained in pretense of acting 'as if' in Wonderland during group time. Ruth is inside of the imaginary situation of Wonderland. Building on the storytelling, Vignette Two is an example of role-playing the story of Alice in Wonderland.

In Vignette Two Ruth takes on the role of being the table. They are role-playing the scene of going down into the rabbit hole and seeing 3 doors. In the story, Alice has shrunk and can no longer reach the golden key on the table – which appears to be so tall. In role, Ruth stretches high as Elaine acts 'as if' Alice and tries to reach the key. In Vignette Two the teachers amplify the drama and the emotions from inside of the imaginary situation, responding directly to the agency of the children as they play with the narrative of the story.

> *Vignette Two: Role-playing: Collective imagining– teachers in pairs support children's "as if" pretense*
> Ruth is in character in the role-play of the scene where Alice has drunk the drink me drink me potion, and she says as part of the role-playing, "And then she is shrinking". She pauses and the children stand and slowly go down and curl up into a ball. A chorus of "shrinking" sounds are heard from the children. Olivia adds to the narrative, "And then you notice something (pausing), that is way up high (pointing)". The children shout, "The key", and Charlotte adds on, "She tries to open that door". Ruth extends by asking, "Who opens the magic door?". She pauses, and suggests, "Was that Elaine?". Elaine jumps up and down and moves into position in the centre of the circle, whilst Olivia continues, "So now that you have shrunken Alice, shrunken Alice can go over [to the door]". Olivia keeps the storytelling going by saying, "She tries to get through the door, but the door …" Charlotte interjects and offers a solution, "She opens the magic door". Ruth responds, "She can't open it she hasn't got the key". The children rush around as though trying to find the key, and Alex stands tall announcing he is now the table, which Ruth notices and acknowledges, "Oh Alex (acting as if the table) doing a great job of being the glass table". Alex declares, "You can't reach the key" as he moves slightly back and stands on his toes, so Elaine in role as Alice can't reach the imagined key, as both teachers confirm, "Yes, you can't reach the golden key".

Vignette 2 illustrates three important findings noted in the overall study. First, in Vignette Two the adults are both together with the children inside of the imaginary situation re-living the story. They coordinate their narrative in relation to each other, in relation to the storyline being role played, and in relation to how the children are contributing and extending the collective imaginary situation of Alice in Wonderland. Ruth initially acts 'as if' she is the table. But she is no ordinary table, as she stretches up in relation to the play plot to be taller than Elaine, who is acting 'as if' she is Alice trying to reach the top of the table to retrieve the golden key. Elaine embodies the story she has just heard and seen through Olivia's animated actions, through imitating the actions of climbing up the side of a table; this is further developed by Alex who decides to act 'as if' he is the table. Ruth immediately relinquishes her character and both adults make comments on Alex's actions, who despite being shorter than Elaine in character 'as if' she is Alice, manages to stretch sufficiently to give the illusion of Alice not being able to reach the golden key. Both children create this illusion through their actions. The story supports the children to collectively imagine and act 'as if' in Wonderland.

Second, Vignette Two also shows how collective imagining emerges within the role-play of Alice in Wonderland. Specifically, we see collective imagining being established with the children as a relation between them and the adults who are supporting the children with the detail of the play plot. This is because one teacher is in the position of the storyteller, while the other teacher acts "as if" a character in the story. Both act in unison to keep the story plot going – gluing all the parts to make the whole narrative work. This creates the situation where children can act 'a head taller than themselves' because the story plot and drama are maintained and within this, the children experience the imaginary situation and 'as if' pretense through adults use of metacommunicative strategies. For instance, stretching up and at the same time saying, 'Stretching' to emphasize the meaning of the

actions (Bretherton, 1984). What emerges is a higher form of role-play that continues for an extended period of time when collectively imagining is supported by the teachers.

Third, for the plot to be further developed, so that children can successfully act 'as if' they are in character, it was found that both teachers needed to narrate, but did so in different ways. Ruth in character acts 'as if' she is a table prompted from within the story plot, as we heard when she said, "Who opens the magic door. Was that Elaine?". In this way Ruth uses play language from inside the imaginary situation to support the role-play of Alice in Wonderland. Further, Olivia as the storyteller, creates the narrative inside the role-playing, as we saw in the example of her saying, "And then you notice something, that is way up high". Both teachers use common play terms, such as "And", and "Then" to signal that the story is ongoing. The metacommunicative language of play is drawn upon, but in the Conceptual PlayWorld, the teachers use it from within the frame of the imaginary situation. The teachers are not outside of the play acting as the director, but rather what is different in the Conceptual PlayWorld, is that there are 2 teachers who are in harmony with each other and the children, and who are collectively working within the frame of the imaginary situation to act 'as if' they are in Wonderland together. Other than cultural-historical play researchers, this dynamic within the imaginary situation has not previously been reported in the general early childhood play literature, primarily because most teachers do not become part of children's imaginary play (Reunamo et al., 2014). However, it is key characteristic of playworlds (Lindqvist, 1995) and to Pramling's et al. (2019) play-responsive teaching. Further, the mutual play and storytelling relations between the teachers acts as a new form of **metacommunicative glue** to hold the collective play narrative together so that the children can successfully act 'as if' they are in Wonderland. This finding has also previously not been reported in the general play literature (not cultural-historical play literature) as a role for adults. Closest is Pramling et al. (2019), who like Lindqvist (1995) and other playworld researchers, and Reunamo et al (2014), noted the important role of the adult in creating imaginary situations in support of a relational move between 'as if' worlds with 'as is' experiences.

4.2 Teachers regularly change meaning of objects and actions in the imaginary situation

It is through the teachers' and children's participation inside of the imaginary play situations at group time that a new relation with their environment emerges. This was evident because the teachers announced that the group time area had become the imaginary situation of Alice in Wonderland. Rather than a space for group instruction, the space had become the collective Conceptual PlayWorld of Alice in Wonderland. The teachers had changed the meaning of the environment to give it a new sense – just as children do when engaged in child-initiated play.

In addition, the teachers initially helped the children with changing the meaning of objects and actions in support of the role-playing of Alice in Wonderland. As will be shown in the first part of Vignette 3, the teachers and children encounter a problem of what prop to use as a placeholder for a rabbit hole. Then in the second part of Vignette 3, the children work out how to position the prop, and finally in third part of Vignette 3 they solve the problem and agentically use the object as a placeholder for the action of going down the rabbit hole.

> Vignette Three: *New relations with the environment is created by the teachers*
> *Finding the right prop:* The children are role-playing Alice in wonderland scene of going down the rabbit hole. A problem arises about how to imagine going down the rabbit hole. Olivia decides to introduce a prop (plastic contractable tunnel) but cannot think of the name of the prop to act as a rabbit hole. The children support her by naming the object, and then extend the role-play by suggesting in the unfolding plot that the tunnel can also be used to show Alice 'shrinking'.
>
> Alex says, "We need to go down the rabbit hole". Oliva responds by asking the children, "Could we use…, could we use, oh I've gone blank… could we use this for a tunnel?" Olivia moves out of the group circle area where the role play is taking place and collects a plastic contractable tunnel that is used primarily outside for crawling through in a horizontal position. As she returns with the tunnel, Charles says, "Yes. We could use a tunnel for a tunnel.". Alicia agrees, "Great idea".

How to position the prop – vertical or horizontal: Now that the children have incorporated the new object into their play, changing its meaning to be a rabbit hole, a new problem emerges between the children about which way to position the tunnel.

Charles begins to follow Alex into the tunnel, when Charlotte says, "No remember..." suggesting he has taken on the wrong role. Alex who immediately moves back out of tunnel and stands up and says, "No. I need to be the tunnel. And I need to be standing up", suggesting that a horizontal tunnel is not what should happen, it should be a vertical tunnel. One child immediately crawls through the tunnel which is now horizontal. Charlotte says, "You need to be the door" to which Alex says, "No I need to be standing up, and opening my legs,", signaling that Alice will go under her legs as though going through the door. Charles lifts the tunnel into a vertical position, before it falls horizontal again. In another conversation Charlotte proposes to Alex, "Or you could be at the end of the tunnel" (holding open the end of the tunnel for Alex). Alex rejects this as Charlotte takes the side of the tunnel and lifts it up so that it is vertical. She then stands inside of the tunnel and says, "I know you could be at the end of the tunnel (holding it open and vertical)".

Props that can show going down a rabbit hole: Establishing the positioning of the tunnel to act 'as if' it is the rabbit hole is finally established. However, the storyline of Alice in Wonderland needs to show the rabbit and Alice floating down the rabbit hole.

Alex says, "No I got an idea, someone could hold it up, and then when they let go, then they go down". Ruth begins to suggest not using the tunnel as a prop, but rather the children should be the prop themselves. In response to this Alex draws on the established logic, and introduces the idea of using your bodies for the representation of action, the action of going down the tunnel vertically. He asserts, "Using our bodies. And I'm the door". The other children use the tunnel in turn to act 'as if' they are going down into the rabbit hole. Some of the children introduce the idea of practicing this part of the story. Ruth says to Thomas who is standing inside of the tunnel now, "Thomas can practice falling down…" The children ask each other if they can have a go, and in turn they each fall down the rabbit hole by standing inside the vertically held tunnel and letting it contract to the floor, as they simultaneously drop their bodies to the ground level.

It is through being inside of the imaginary situation that teachers create the conditions where children are supported to use objects as placeholders for new meaning. Vignette Three is an example of how Olivia raises the need of determining what prop to use as a tunnel for the White Rabbit. The children immediately expand on her suggestion and use the actual outdoor tunnel 'as if' it was both the rabbit hole and tunnel. What these children do is not only change the sense of the visual field, they also show a process of moving down a rabbit hole through re-orienting the tunnel from the horizontal position suggested by Olivia to a vertical position, where they drop the tunnel over the child to show the process of travelling down the rabbit hole. The sense of action is changed. This is a collective imagining, as the children immediately explore falling down the rabbit hole together by using the tunnel 'as if' it was the rabbit hole and tunnel, and 'as if' it induced the action that begins the story. The children collectively work out how to show complex actions in the narrative and expand the imaginary situation by creating a new sense of the situation. The agency of children is evident, as they take over changing the meaning of objects and actions. The Conceptual PlayWorld appears to create the conditions at group time which support children to actively change the meaning of actions and objects from inside the imaginary play.

4.3 Free will and an illusionary freedom in play

The free will of the child is said to emerge in play, yet as Vygotsky (2005) notes, play is paradoxical because there is only an illusion of free will in play. Play gives rise to an exploration of what Vygotsky (2005) argued was "the developed world of higher form of specifically human activity, contained in the environment as a source of development" (p. 91). Alice in Wonderland gives rise to many narratives that this study showed were dynamically being lived in the Conceptual PlayWorld as a source of development for children. In Vignette Four is an example of the children discussing why Alice would consider going down the rabbit hole without thinking about the consequences. A moral theme is introduced by Alex into the collective role-play at group time and this is debated with Charlotte.

Vignette Four: Morally oriented discussions

The children are sitting in a circle and the adults introduce in storytelling the scene in the book where Alice floats down the rabbit hole. In response to this, Rodney says, "But it was just a dream". Charlotte says, "No it wasn't", sounding annoyed. Immediately Alex defiantly says, "Yes it was". Olivia then begins making arm gestures as through floating, and then with a sense of lightness in her voice says, "I'd love to be able to float, fly, deep down". As she moves her arms in a floating gesture she says, but pausing midsentence to make the floating more dramatic, "I think…. I would think about lots of different things, if I had a chance to float". Within this context, Charlotte announces to the group, "I would actually think about it before I went down the rabbit hole". Olivia asks, "Would you?" whilst Ruth acknowledges Charlotte's perspective, and says, "I think Charlotte you would". Olivia suggests, "I think she just jumped in, following the White Rabbit". Dramatically Charlotte says, "Why didn't she think about it? She didn't know what was down there. And she didn't know". Alex adds to this, "And she didn't think!" Charlotte continues, "And she did not know (shaking head) how she would get out. And she did not know what it would do". Olivia agrees, "No". Whilst Alex emphasises Charlotte's analysis, "And, she did not, and, she didn't think before she went in". Alex then asks Charlotte, "Yeah, she definitely didn't think before she went in, would you think before you would go in?". Charlotte answers, "Yeah", and Alex agrees, "Yeah I would too".

The storytelling of the scene of Alice going down the rabbit hole appears at the contradiction between the collective imagining of Alice's adventures and the reality of thinking before you act – as a morally oriented engagement with the story. The contradiction of imagining an exciting adventure and the consequences of actions without thought, open up the possibility of conscious considerations of one's action. As theorised previously, free will to act as you please in play was critiqued by Vygotsky (2005) and conceptualised as a paradox in play. That is, "typically the child is subjugated to rules and denied what he [sic] wants, and here, the subjugation to rules and prevention of acting on immediate impulses is the route to the maximum pleasure (how many conflicts there are between two pleasures, how many fights occur during play)…and in play there is the opportunity for the child's highest achievements, ethics" (p. 91). We saw this when Alex and Charlotte engaged in an argument about thinking before you act. Because Vygotsky considered play as actions in accordance with rules, and the paradox between rules and desires exists, then the storyline of Alice going down the rabbit hole brings with it the developmental possibility for self-regulation in play and a consciousness of thought in relation to the play actions of the story. Free will and self-regulation as a pleasurable and agentic contradiction for children within a playworld, has generally not been fully studied or reported in the literature in this way.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that collective imagining in a Conceptual PlayWorld had realised mature forms of play at group time, resulting from teachers being together with the children during storytelling and role-play. A Conceptual PlayWorld also appears to change the developmental conditions for children over time, by extending the period in which children have access to higher forms of play thus lifting the children into their zone of proximal development – as was also suggested by Vygotsky (1966) for imaginary play generally.

The results also show how teachers in preschool settings in Australia can create the motivating conditions for children when they are together inside of the play plot expanding the narrative of the story. What was unique, was how a Conceptual PlayWorld changed the real role of the teachers into the role of a play-partner, and children interacted with their teachers in new ways (see also Hakkarainen, Brėdikytė, Jakkula & Munter, 2013) during group time. Rather than teachers being directors of group time, they acted collectively with children, where one teacher was together with the children role-playing, whilst the other teacher was aligned with the narrative of the story. This is in line with the research undertaken by Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) who showed through pedagogical positioning that teachers can take different positions when interacting with children (e.g., above, below, equal, primordial we, independent). But what is new, is how pedagogical positioning can take place in a Conceptual PlayWorld during group time.

We also learned that the new play relations changed how group time in the preschool was being performed. It was no longer 'circle time on the mat' as is the practice tradition, but rather the mat changed its sense to be a new imaginary situation with new rules, actions and the new roles of teachers and children as players. Through the emotionally charged storytelling, the drama of the role-play took shape, and the children appeared to live through the contradictions agentically with their teachers, imagining and role-playing new possibilities for the story and the subsequent role-play. That is, the contradictions in the drama of the story were resolved through a form of magical metamorphosis (drink me potion and then shrinking) and others were discussed morally (I would think before I act and go down the rabbit hole). It seemed that play created an emotional tension through the contradiction between children's reality (don't fit inside a rabbit hole) and the imaginary situation of the PlayWorld (shrinking to fit). The children's lived experiences of the drama and their additions to the narrative in the collective play at group time, appeared to be productive rather than reproductive (Lindqvist, 1995). Instead of group time on the mat, Playworlds in Wonderland gave new practices and developmental conditions for group time for the children.

If Vygotsky was right about play showing in condensed form the child's development, then the results of this study contribute to better understanding how teachers can create new developmental conditions for children in play-based settings at group time. The results of this study contribute to the literature by showing how teachers of children aged 3 to 6 years do this in Australia, where the societal demand is for increased cognitive outcomes in play-based programs. Conceptual PlayWorlds seem to give teachers new pedagogical tools which created new developmental conditions at group time in support of play as the leading activity for preschool children in Australia.

6. Conclusion

Increasingly, greater attention is directed to studying play, due in part to changing societal values for greater academic content for play-based settings. Widely recognized as problematic (Hakkarainen, 2006), the academicization or schoolification of the play-based programs has afforded the need for new institutional practices. But as noted by cultural-historical play researchers, bringing play and learning together is theoretically and practically challenging. A cultural-historical theoretical reading of the current practice-policy context would suggest that new societal values are placing new demands on institutions for greater outcomes, and this in turn creates new demands on teachers to change their existing practices. It is in this context that our study was located.

We know from theories of child development that play is the leading activity of the preschool child (Vygotsky, 1966), and preschool institutions are charged with developing play-based programs to support their learning and development. What is not known is how the new societal demand for learning concepts within a Conceptual PlayWorld setting changes the conditions for children's development. In the study reported in this paper, we introduced the Conceptual PlayWorld (Table 1) of Alice in Wonderland as part of an educational experiment to study the new institutional practices, activity settings, and developmental conditions for children.

We learned through studying the activities within the activity settings of a Conceptual PlayWorld at group time, that a collective imaginary situation which includes the teachers, appears to create a zone of proximal development for the children. This is because having 2 teachers together with the children, introduced into the collective imaginary situation the next period of play in a developed form, as mature play, and this makes available to the children a higher form of play. What we learned was that the Conceptual PlayWorld appeared to create unique psychological conditions for children. Different to previous play research that focuses on dyads or individuals, and in line with Zachrisen (2016) who also studied group interactions during play, we found that the storytelling and role-playing in a Conceptual PlayWorld introduced a collective narrative and collective play actions. This meant that the children and teachers were experiencing the imaginary situation collectively. This is in keeping with the research

need by Reunamo et al., (2014) who argued that, "If the children cannot advance in their play the teacher needs to scaffold them and help them in getting involved in their pretend play activities" (p. 630).

We also identified that when the storyline and play plot introduced in the Conceptual PlayWorld were known and established, that this afforded a very different kind of play by all the children. Like Zachrisen (2016), we learned that the interactions changed between teachers and children when collective imagining was core, supporting their idea of a feeling of shared involvement and a collective experience of 'we' which builds "social belonging between the children" (p, 189). When this happens, we learned from our research, that new developmental conditions were created for the children at group time.

Further, we identified that group instruction, as normally happens at whole group time in preschools, was now located within an imaginary play context of the Conceptual PlayWorld. This was a new practice tradition for teachers, and as explained by Zachrisen (2016) in her research, "teaching sessions very rarely included pretend play even though according to the research results they were the best way to involve children in the activities!" (p. 63). How children's development was realized in a Conceptual PlayWorld can be summarized as four key conditions.

First, the characteristics of the Conceptual PlayWorld explicitly afforded an active role for the teachers to be a play partner where teachers change their real relations as a teacher into play relations as a player. What we found was that when one teacher is with the children acting 'as if' a character in the story, and the other teacher is acting as the narrator, that mature forms of play become available to the children. We found the children stayed with the plot and played for long periods of time in the collective PlayWorld. This meant that children experienced through the collective play longer opportunities for a collective move from object-oriented play, to role-play of everyday life events with simple rules, through to more complex role-oriented play with complex rules. The teachers' active role inside of the collective imaginary play appeared to afford this possibility.

Second, we found in the Conceptual PlayWorld, teachers were signaling metacommunicative actions (floating down the rabbit hole with actions and words 'floating'), changing the meaning of objects and actions (circle time became Wonderland), and amplifying emotionally dramatic moments (rubbing eyes when crying). In the form of metacommunicative language the teachers amplified 'slipping', 'floating' and 'shrinking', but also emotions by rubbing their eyes and crying and asking the children how they thought Alice was feeling. Later these same actions and language were used by the children to amplify and communicate 'as if' a character in the adventures of Alice in Wonderland and to produce and add to the storyline.

Third the teachers also adopted play language when inside the imaginary situation, where they used conjunction terms such as, 'and' and 'then' to build the storyline with the children (Bretherton, 1984). But also, the teachers used words to signal actions and intent in the play in ways that linked and moved forward what the children offered as part of the storyline that was building and being played out by the children. But rather than using truncated language in play, which happens for children when the narrative is established, the teachers expanded the narrative, such as when children referenced 'the key', they repeated what the children said, but added "the Golden key". Some children subsequently also expanded their language, referencing 'golden' when discussing or introducing the key. This is an interesting finding, albeit not unexpected, as teachers are charged with the development of children's language and will deliberately expand what children say. Therefore, more needs to be known about this contradiction. What is the role of truncated language in play by children in play? We need to learn more about what is its purpose.

Fourth, contradictions were amplified in the Conceptual PlayWorlds, because teachers regularly changed the meaning of objects and actions in the imaginary situation to give them a new sense. In the Conceptual PlayWorld the teachers simultaneously used different kinds of pivots, from using objects as pivots to using actions as pivots (hand gesturing as though floating or trying to reach something) and using words in play to signal the sense of something. We found the children no longer relate to the concrete situation of circle time on the mat in real relations, but acted in imaginary play in a play

relation. Theoretically, contradictions emerge and support development of play when there is a tension between the *visual field and the sense field* – seeing one thing, but giving it new meaning. Not just any object can be a pivot for supporting the imaginary play of children. A form of agentic imagining was evident, as shown through how the tunnel when horizontal, did not give the right play conditions, and the children re-oriented the tunnel vertically so that it could support the action of going down the rabbit hole. Children collectively changed the visual field from inside of the Conceptual PlayWorld.

It can be theorized that the collective play within the PlayWorld of Alice in Wonderland acted as the ideal form of collective imagining, and the real form of the children's play was lifted above their cultural age because Conceptual PlayWorlds created the dynamic between the real and ideal form of playing 'as if' they were in Wonderland. Vygotsky (1994) has argued that "*in child development that which it is possible to achieve at the end and as a result of the developmental process, is already available in the environment from the very beginning.* And it is not simply present in the environment from the very start, but it exerts an influence on the very first steps in the child's development" (pp. 347-348; Original emphasis). Conceptual PlayWorlds gave the possibility of the psychological characteristics of play to be present and available to the children as an ideal form of mature play.

Taken together, the results of the study suggest that the activity setting of a Conceptual PlayWorld appeared to act as an ideal forms of mature play. These play practices by the teachers introduced through the Conceptual PlayWorld, meant that mature forms of play were constantly in the environment and available for the children. Consequently, the contradiction between the real and ideal form of play was always in motion acting as a potential source of development for the child. We determined that in the Conceptual PlayWorld, rather than the play narrative developing in an ad hoc way, the children and teachers collectively drew on the story narrative, which potentially gave all children opportunities to be as Vygotsky (1966) said, a head taller than themselves in the Conceptual PlayWorld. In line with Vygotsky (1966), Hakkarainen and Brėdikytė (2015) argue that "play promotes child development only if the child moves from elementary to mature forms of play" (p. 36). Conceptual PlayWorlds at group time appears to create the conditions to support this development.

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