Chapter 4

A Combined Research and Development Project

The present project is a combined research and development project. This means that researchers (with preschool teachers and heads) intend to generate new knowledge about, in our case, play-responsive *didaktik* while, at the same time, researchers providing in-service education of preschool teachers and heads. We have a long tradition of conducting such combined projects, dating back to the early 1980s (see Pramling, 1996, and Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2007, for presentations and meta-analyses), and many subsequent projects (see e.g., Björklund & Alkhede, 2017; Palmér & Björklund, 2017; Pramling Samuelsson, Asplund Carlsson, Olsson, Pramling, & Wallerstedt, 2009). There are many gains with such projects, as we will discuss later in this chapter. However, first we will discuss matters of method and methodology, clarifying practical and analytical procedures, transcription, and ethics. The present volume builds on theoretically informed empirical research. This means that the claims to knowledge we present are both empirically grounded and theoretically mediated.

Empirical Data, Transcription and Analytical Procedure

With the interest in how play-responsive *didaktik* relevant to early childhood education (in the Swedish context: preschool) plays out and can be theoretically understood, we need to have empirical data of children (and teachers) playing. In our previous research we have often asked teachers to orchestrate, that is, organize for, children to be able to discern and understand something in a domain of knowing (see Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2013a, for a meta-discussion). These studies have proven highly informative as to what developmental challenges and support teachers, and other children, have offered the developing child. However, they have not been particularly responsive to children's play (other than containing some space for and elements of children's playfulness, see e.g., Björklund, 2014;

Björklund & Pramling Samuelsson, 2013; Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2013b). In furthering our knowledge about how to provide developmental incentive and support in preschool, as a fundamentally play-based institution, we need other kinds of empirical data. Therefore, in the present project we have the ambition of studying play activities with an interest in how teachers through different means provide developmental incentive and support to children. However, documenting children's play is more challenging to research than organized, planned activities where a teacher sits with a group of children with the ambition to make children discern and become aware of some form of knowing. Play activities tend to occur more spontaneously and may take place over different spaces making it difficult to document. Still, studying play activities is critical to making sure that research on play-based *didaktik* is ecologically valid, that is, that the knowledge claims generated are actually grounded in the setting and activity about which claims are made.

Therefore, in the present project we have generated three kinds of empirical data. In order to be responsive to the phenomenon investigated, we have asked the teachers to document activities. This allows us to generate data of more spontaneously occurring activities. We have asked the teachers to document activities where they intend to contribute to children's play and learning by:

- Entering as participants – play partners – in children's ongoing play
- Being attentive of recurring plays (play patterns) and contribute to developing these further, and
- Establishing new play frames (narratives) for children to play in and from

Asking teachers to do so allows us to generate rich empirical data of different kinds of play activities to which teachers intend to contribute in different ways. Asking teachers to *enter as participants* means that teachers try to take a role in children's ongoing play and in this way attempt to provide some developmental incentive to discover new relationships or forms of knowing. Asking teachers to be *attentive to recurring plays* means that if teachers notice that children tend to play a particular kind of play, she can try to provide additional means of playing that play in a more developed way. This is particularly important if she notices that some children always are given marginalized roles in the play. To give an example: if children recurrently play shop, buying and selling goods, the teacher could attempt to make children aware that the merchandise sold comes from somewhere, that is, is bought from another place, they are produced/manufactured somewhere, their prices differ, they are stored according to some criteria in the shop in order for costumers to find what they are looking for etc. If children's conception of a shop or store is merely a place where you buy things, their play may be developed simply by making them aware that it could also be conceived of as a categorization system, that is, what is sold is not merely put on shelves in a random manner; there are sections where dry food is located, vegetables in another, meat in one and, like perishables, in a cooler section (and why that is). This basic conceptual knowledge (Fleer, 2011) can provide incentive to develop their play. Other contributions may concern the fact that what is sold is packaged in certain ways, serving many functions (conservation, transportation, aesthetics and so on), which may also engage children in developing

their play (how to advertise a product, for example). Finally, asking teachers to *establish a play frame* means to try to engage children in a narrative (a make-believe world or scenario) within and from which they can they play on. Hence, we ask teachers to try to initiate play activities, through establishing a narrative play frame, as well as being responsive to what children recurrently and presently play. What we are interested in is how these activities develop, not whether the teacher or the children initiate them. It is the nature of the developing plays and narratives that are theoretically premised to be decisive for what developmental incentive and support children are given in these kinds of early childhood education and care activities.

As we have already argued, there are important gains with generating empirical data in this way. However, there are also problems; the most critical being that the films documenting the evolving play activities have often begun before the films begin. This means that in many cases we will not know (other than through teachers' remembering) how they were initiated; the exception, of course, being the alternative where teachers try to establish a narrative frame for children to play in and from. Another problem is that data may be somewhat fragmentary, that is, we may not have the activities documented from initiation to conclusion. This is due to their often longevity, making it practically difficult to document the activity in its entirety. Of course, it is not always entirely clear-cut at what point an activity is initiated and concluded, respectively. From our theoretical point of departure, these acts are understood as responsive, that is, it is when someone responds to an initiation to play that it is seen as commencing, and similarly, is concluded when others cease to respond to play actions.

One initial problem with our approach was to fully share our research questions with the participating preschool teachers, in the sense that at first the teachers tried to produce films they thought we would like to see, rather than having a more open approach, where we do not beforehand know what will be of most interest to analyze. There appeared to be some initial frustration amongst some teachers that the researchers did not simply say what they wanted the teachers to do. However, clarifying that research entails not knowing beforehand what we set out to study were gradually accepted by the teachers. With our interest in teaching in the context of playfully-formatted activities (van Oers, 2014), the preschool teachers are integral actors in the activities we analyze (e.g., how they make attempts to enter ongoing play, how they plant contents in play). This entails that one contribution of our study will be to develop knowledge about the play competences of preschool teachers rather than about play as such (but as we clarify, with van Oers, 2014, and Wittgenstein, 1953, we do not conceptualize play as something separate, but as a feature of activities) or so-called free play (without preschool teachers or other adults). Hence, our interest in teaching in this way sets the boundaries for our research focus.

As we have already presented, we generate data in the project through asking the preschool teachers to document activities through video observations. The project is a combined research and development project, and we work with the data and the knowledge-building process in particular ways. The set-up is the following:

Researchers, preschool teachers and preschool heads have regular meetings. At these meetings, preschool teachers present their films, through providing some background information and showing their films. This is done in smaller groups of approximately 10 participants. Having reviewed a film, all participants share and discuss what they have noticed of relevance to our mutual interest in play-responsive teaching and *didaktik*. Having reviewed all films, all participants reconvene and discuss what the initial analyses have made visible. Thereafter, the research group presents the (next) theme to be pursued through empirical investigation; presenting theoretical tools for understanding features of children's play and how teachers may be able to contribute to these. Initially, preschool personnel and researchers met, reviewed and analyzed films regularly for a year before the project proper commenced. When the project begun in earnest, three themes were introduced to structure in-service education and empirical investigation. These were:

- Intersubjectivity
- Communicative framing/narrative
- Meta-talk

These themes were chosen on the basis of previous research having indicated their importance to understanding evolving activities with children and teachers (e.g., Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2011). Practically, the researchers gave a lecture as each theme was introduced, followed by a discussion with the preschool teachers and heads, employing empirical examples, to make sure there was enough consensus to use these concepts as thinking devices in our further exploration. Finally, each meeting was concluded by the preschool teachers being asked to generate empirical data of one of the three alternatives discussed above to bring to the next meeting. After the meetings, the researchers transcribe the films, which are collected into a corpus. These transcripts then provide the grounds for in-depth analyses by the research group, resulting in studies consisting of case studies (e.g., Björklund, Magnusson, & Palmér, 2018; Lagerlöf & Wallerstedt, 2018) as well as more global and thematic presentations (e.g., the present volume). This structure, of introducing themes and conceptual resources, and generating and mutually analyzing and discussing data have then been reiterated with the addition of new participating preschool teachers and heads.

The experiences of the participants – preschool teachers and heads, and researchers – have been very positive; looking at and together reviewing and discussing empirical data generated in the participants' preschools provides a productive node for interaction, exchanging experience and generating new insights. This way of working also means that the knowledge generated does not have a 'translation' problem; no additional work to adapt the knowledge to current practices is necessary, since it is already founded on and generated in those practices. The knowledge generated is ecologically valid; meaning not only firmly based in the practices about which it makes claims but also useful to the everyday work of preschool teachers in supporting and organizing for children's development.

The transcripts are analyzed on a turn-by-turn basis, that is, how activities are sequentially organized by participants (Derry et al., 2010; Wells, 1999). Every

action – verbal as well as conducted with other semiotic means such as pointing or handing over a toy – is read in response to previous action(s) and at times anticipating coming responses. In order to clarify the sense made by participants, a minimum of three consecutive actions (operationalized in the transcript as turns) are necessary; someone acts (e.g., initiates a play), another participant responds (agreeing explicitly or implicitly through going on in the suggested way), and the first participant (or another participant) responds, explicitly agreeing or disagreeing, or implicitly agreeing through going on with the activity. If agreement is not received, explicitly or implicitly, the participant initiating the activity will need to restate the suggestion, make a new suggestion, or engage in meta-talk, elaborating on how or why the suggestion is worthwhile. Through analyzing how participants respond to each other's responses, it is possible to clarify how they make sense and make their sense known to each other. Hence, the participants' actions are analyzed in terms of their perspectives, for example, whether and if so how they make clear to each other that they speak and in other ways act in make-believe terms (*as if*), and coordinate their actions accordingly, or not, and how and why they shift between this *as-if* mode and an *as-is* mode, theoretically premised to be critical to the matter of providing developmental support in play-responsive activities (for further elaboration, see below in this chapter).

As we have already mentioned, the video observations we have access to have been selected by the preschool teachers themselves. The gains of this approach were discussed above. A potential problem with such a procedure of generating data that we have not discussed is that it may create an incentive in the teachers of selecting to share documentations where they in a sense 'succeed' with what they try to accomplish. This may be even more emphasized if they know that the head of the preschool will also see their films. In order to counter this risk, we have at times put the heads of the preschools in a separate group, where they with some of the members of the research group discussed their concerns about, for example, how to organize for working with developing children. We have also recurrently talked with the teachers about this, emphasized the importance of also gaining examples where, for example, intersubjectivity is *not* established between participants, since this may be much informative as to why activities develop in one or the other way, and we have explicated the meta-message that it is in contrasts that things appear. Looking at the corpus of data, and taking part of the reflections of the preschool teachers about these, it is clear that they have in fact not only selected films where things go as planned, but also films where they themselves think that they in some sense did not achieve what they intended.

There is, of course, a further selection process, taking place when researchers in their in-depth analysis single out excerpts from the transcripts for presenting analyses and studies. As Derry et al. (2010) elaborate, there are different criteria according to which such selection can take place. They make a distinction between two ways of selecting data from video: "(a) to locate and analyze data for the purpose of finding patterns within and across events; or (b) to use video clips more holistically to support an evolving narrative. In practice, many research projects blend both selection logistics" (p. 14f.). Also in the present project have we used

both forms of selection; with the more holistic selections being analyzed in the form of case studies (Björklund et al., 2018; Lagerlöf & Wallerstedt, 2018) and, at least in part, the patterns of interaction across films being analyzed in the present volume.

A note on transcription: In the transcripts, we use literal conventions such as initial upper-case letter, comma and point, despite these features not being present in spoken discourse. We do so in order to facilitate reading comprehension. Names written in upper-case letters in the transcripts denote the teacher(s). Text in italics indicate talk in play (i.e., in character) as distinct to talk about play (or outside of play).

Prevailing ethical guidelines of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association have been followed (EECERA, 2015; cf. Farrell, 2016, for further information and in-depth discussion; also the guidelines of the Swedish Research Council). This means, among other things, that participation is voluntary, that all participants (and, in the case of the children, their caregivers) have given consent for participation, and that no identifying information will be provided when reporting the study.

Intersubjectivity and Alterity

Attempts to make sure that participants not only share attention but also perspective, that is seek to establish intersubjectivity (Rommetveit, 1974) is, as we have already argued, a critical feature of activities denoted teaching. As theoretically elaborated by Rommetveit, intersubjectivity is a process, not a state, constantly under negotiation among participants in an activity; it is at best temporarily sufficient, that is allows participants to ‘go on’ with an activity (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953). Without such intersubjectivity, participants will talk past each other and effectively engage in distinct activities (Bendroth Karlsson, 1996; Skantz Åberg, 2018); and what one partner does may not make much sense to the other(s). Attempts to establish intersubjectivity is generally done through engaging in some form of meta-talk (Lagerlöf, Wallerstedt, & Pramling, 2014), that is, explicating and clarifying what one means, what perspective one takes on the matter at hand.

In the nature of communication, there is an inherent tension between participants making attempts to coordinate their communicative efforts – that is, establish temporarily sufficient intersubjectivity – and different understanding among them. That is, what participants take with them from communicative encounters will not be identical; rather, participants enter activities with partly different understanding and they leave the activity with partly different understanding. This is independent of the nature of teaching, even if the activity can be more or less powerful to support children developing certain insights or forms of knowing. Theoretically, intersubjectivity is thus paired with the concept of alterity (Wertsch, 1998). This concept and the relationship to intersubjectivity are thus elaborated:

The general point to be made about intersubjectivity and alterity [...] is not that communication is best understood in terms of one or the other in isolation. Instead, virtually every

text [communicative activity] is viewed as involving both univocal, information-transmission characteristics, and hence intersubjectivity, as well as dialogic, thought-generating tendencies, and hence alterity. (Wertsch, 1998, p. 117)

Intersubjectivity can be understood as what participants do to establish some mutual ground, allowing them to coordinate their actions into one shared activity or project (e.g., a play project). Alterity indicates that whether temporarily managing to establish such intersubjectivity or not, different perspectives, voices and understanding will be at play during mutual activities. How these differences are managed – negotiated, picked up, suppressed, challenged – will be critical to how the activity (or activities) engaged in will develop, their trajectories. Making children aware, through making visible, that there is a naturally occurring variation in the group in terms of experience and understanding constitutes a key practice of the tradition to which we intend to contribute with the present study (see e.g., Pramling, 1990, 1994, 1996).

From these theoretical premises, that is, that communication lives in the dynamic tension between processes of attempting to establish intersubjectivity and alterity, situations where participants come to explicitly negotiate how to understand what they do, or are going to do – for example, what play to play or how a particular kind of play ‘goes’ – will be illuminative instances of how meaning is created in mutual activities. Hence, occasions when participants shift from talking and acting within an activity, for example a play, and when they ‘go out of’ that communicative frame or narrative to, through meta-talk, clarify what they mean and intend are of particular interest for studying play-responsive *didaktik*. Meta-talk may also be employed when activities are initiated and play frames (narratives) are suggested and developed (see e.g., Lagerlöf, Wallerstedt, & Pramling, 2013). How such narrative frames are constituted will open up for particular forms of actions, contributions and participation, rather than others. However, in the nature of evolving activity, through processes of alterity, there will always be the possibility that also the narrative ‘within’ which the play is played out will come up for re-negotiation and transformation. If and if so how this is done is also of great interest to research on play-responsive *didaktik*, in indicating what participants orient toward and how different understandings and intentions come into play, and potentially generate new understanding. Informed by these theoretical premises, initiating narrative frames for children to play within, and potentially beyond, is one thing we have asked the teachers participating in our study to do (see above).

In line with, and building upon the theorizing of Rommetveit (1974), Linell (2014) points out that “Intersubjectivity is not automatic, inevitable or complete” (p. 180); “The other, whoever (s)he is, is not quite as oneself”. This reasoning highlights “*alterity*, the role of the other as being *different from self*. Communication is not always about striving for mutual understanding or consensus” (ibid., italics in original). “There is a positive value in alterity, in the lack of complete intersubjectivity. Without differences, there would often be no point in communicating” (ibid.). “Asymmetries of knowledge are a driving force in social interaction” (p. 181). Without differences in experience, we would in principle not have anything of value

to tell one another. That is, it is our different experience that constitutes the basic premise for our communicative activities, that is, what at a fundamental level makes it interesting for us to communicate (Pramling, 2016). However, this difference must also be understood in relation to the simultaneous process of striving towards some temporarily shared understanding, otherwise all communication would simply be attempts to submerge the interlocutor under one's own understanding. Rather, trying to clarify what one means and understand what the interlocutor (or play partner) means with what he or she says is also a driving force in communication. As Wertsch (1998) emphasizes, and we have already mentioned, there are always processes of intersubjectivity and alterity in communication (cf. Matusov, 1996). However, the relationship between these processes and the development of the activity in which they take place may be fundamentally different (e.g., trying to establish mutual play vs. trying to convince someone of one's political opinion).

In his elaboration of the concept of 'intersubjectivity', Matusov (1996) emphasizes that this process is one of coordinating actions, not necessarily sharing perspectives. He argues that in psychological research a distinction has been made between "three sequential movements of joint activity: the beginning, the intermediate, and the end" (p. 29). According to this distinction, the first phase concerns what he refers to as participants having some "common backgrounds", constituting a precondition for communication; the second phase is characterized by participants "creating a common ground of engagement" (encompassing some mutual understanding of the situation); and the end phase concerns "a common outcome of the joint activity, what is learned in the activity by all the participants" (loc. cit.). Phrased differently, we can say that what is here referred to as the first phase concerns what Rommetveit (1974) has argued in terms of "intersubjectivity has to be taken for granted in order to be achieved" (p. 56), that is, we have to presume something to be able to start communicating with each other (cf. Wittgenstein, 1969). What Matusov (1996) refers to as the intermediate phase of intersubjectivity concerns the negotiating work with which we are particularly concerned, as it highlights how different perspectives come into play and are responded to in mutual activities. Finally, what Matusov (1996) refers to as the end phase, premised to be "a common outcome of the joint activity" is not feasible from our perspective. We cannot presume that there is such a common outcome from participating in a joint activity. Rather, we know from research (see e.g., Marton, Dahlgren, Svensson, & Säljö, 1977/1999, for clear examples) that learners not only enter an activity with (partly) different experience and knowing but they also leave the activity with (partly) different experience and knowing. There is no causality or linearity between participating in an activity – whether a teaching activity or any other activity – and learning, what sense participants make of the activity.

Matusov (1996), critical of the assumptions of the three phases of intersubjectivity briefly rendered above, points out that "differences, disagreements, and misunderstandings among the participants are no less relevant to the joint activity than similarities, agreements, and understanding" (p. 29). As we have already discussed, this is certainly the case; without such alterity, there is not much incentive to go on communicating. However, even to participate in an activity that at heart concerns

disagreement, such as an argument, interlocutors must presume some intersubjectivity, that arguing is what they do and that this entails certain practices (responding, perspectivising, finding discrepancies in the other's rendering, trying to convince the interlocutor of one's position etc.). The relationship between processes of intersubjectivity and alterity thus also needs to be understood as situated; if returning to our example of a teacher intending to make children aware of geometrical shapes (see Chaps. 1 and 2 of the present volume), participants (teacher and children) may have different perspectives on the physical objects at hand. They may perceive these in terms of their size, colour, material, and/or other features. However, if the teacher intends to make children aware that there are certain geometrical shapes, it is important that this is made known in the activity. This does not mean to simplify the world into disregarding other characteristics of the objects at hand, such as colour or size, but it entails making known that despite their difference in colour, size etc. there are some mutual properties, in this example, their shapes. In other activities, for example, trying to establish a play project (see Matusov, 1996, on 'playcrafting'), participants may disagree as to what to play, how to play, and what role each child is to have in this play. At this stage of the activity, alterity will be highlighted. However, in order to actually go on with a play project, being able to play a mutual play, some intersubjectivity needs to be established. Still, in the nature of this process, intersubjectivity will be temporary and sufficient to go on with a joint activity; it is not theoretically presumed that all participants understand the play in the same way. However, the participants themselves may presume – that is, take for granted – that they have agreed on what to play and how to play, but during the play activity instances of alterity is likely to come to the fore, as evident in participants shifting from talking and in other ways acting *within the play frame* to meta-communicating *about it*, before returning to the play frame and continue playing, initiating a new play or end playing together.

Language as Constitutive and Perspectivizing

Language is particularly important to our present endeavors; language not understood as a reflection of, or as a set of labels for, objects in the world. Rather, language is understood as constitutive (Vološinov, 1929/1986). Through language we bring into being phenomena in certain terms rather than others. This means that we do something with language. This perspective also means that communicating always implies perspectivizing, that is, we always take a perspective when speaking. Vološinov (1929/1986) expresses this with a pair of ocular metaphors; arguing that language 'refracts' rather than 'reflects' phenomena, that is, with language we see something *as* something. In the Vygotskian tradition, this feature of language and language practices would be conceptualized in terms of 'semiotic mediation' (Wertsch, 2007). That language is constitutive further means that we cannot speak without (temporarily) establishing some 'object' of reference; we speak *about* something. In contrast to a common argument that children not speaking the

majority language first need to learn the language before they can learn about different domains of knowing, this perspective thus means that these two processes are inherently intertwined; since we cannot speak without speaking about something, appropriating a first and/or second language at the same time means learning about something (Kultti & Pramling, 2016). This realization is particularly important in contemporary preschool, with the advent of many children not speaking the majority language. This intertwined relation between language and ‘object of reference’ is critical with an interest in play-responsive *didaktik*: What ‘objects’ are constituted in talk, and how are these perspectivized/semiotically mediated (Wertsch, 2007), negotiated and perhaps shared and appropriated by children, are integral to clarify through empirical research.

Language is both the means of communicating with others and of communicating with oneself (i.e., to think). What communicative resources – in the form of categories, distinctions, concepts, metaphors, narratives etc. – the child is introduced to and supported in appropriating will thus be decisive for his or her knowing. The child’s knowledge development is understood as contingent on the social practices she gets to participate in and experience. This is conceptualized by Vygotsky in his famous law of sociogenesis:

[E]very function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two forms – at first as social, then as psychological; at first as a form of cooperation between people, as a group, an intermental category, then as a means of individual behavior, as an intramental category. This is the general law for the construction of all higher mental functions. (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 169)

And as he further argues, “speech, being initially the means of communication, the means of association, the means of organization of group behavior, later becomes the basic means of thinking and of all higher mental functions, the basic means of personality formation” (p. 169); thus “[t]hrough others, we become ourselves” (p. 170). Hence, even our personality, what in a sense is unique to us, is constituted in interaction with others (cf. Mead, 1934/1967; Nelson, 1996). Engaging children in shared communicative activities will be critical to what opportunities and support they are given in preschool, including their emerging identity as knowledgeable (as ‘musical’, ‘mathematical’ etc.). The nature of these activities will be characteristic of the *didaktik* privileged in the setting; for example, whether there is a strict line of demarcation between perceiving and talking about phenomena *as is* or *as if*, or if this line is permeable, allowing participants to go between these modes of talking and in other ways acting during shared activities (cf. Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2010, discussed in Chap. 3 of the present volume).

While not necessarily shared by all the activities participants consider play, some theoretical concepts and reasoning will provide entry points into the data. These are *freedom from* versus *freedom to* and the *open-endedness* of play; the distinction between *playfully-formatted* and *procedurally-formatted* activities; the distinction and relationship between *as if* and *as is*; and the relationships between *actions*, *objects* and *meaning* as young children develop their play.

The Freedom of Play and Open-Endedness

One of the hallmarks of early childhood education is what is typically referred to as ‘free play’. This concept is often employed as a rhetorical strategy in public debate about the nature, tradition, and future of preschool, and how it allegedly differs from school. Hence, ‘free play’ is generally used as a *normative concept*, that is, it provides an ideal for how stakeholders want preschool to be, rather than necessarily building on analytical work of empirical data as indicative of what actually characterizes this institution for promoting children’s development and well-being. While matters of how we organize for and promote children’s development in an institution such as preschool is a ‘hot topic’ to which it may be difficult to remain distant, to conduct research, and on this basis provide knowledge about how to design developmental activities in this setting, it is critical to take an analytical stance and ground claims in empirical data generated in this setting (rather than, for example, in laboratory settings).

In his theoretical elaboration of play, van Oers (2014) differentiates the notion of ‘free play’ into two concepts: *freedom from* and *freedom to*. As he emphasizes, in normative discussions about ‘free play’, children’s right to play free of adult ‘interference’, as it is often labelled – clearly indicating the negative connotations of teacher participation in these kinds of activities – is emphasized, that is, what he refers to as *freedom from*. However, he further argues, the freedom of play may be differently understood; as the freedom to pursue activities in unforeseeable directions, that is, being responsive to the inherent *open-endedness* of activities we call play. This latter conceptualization of the freedom of play is what he refers to as *freedom to*. That children are free to explore and pursue what they engage in without needing to know beforehand where it will lead them, that is, where their play may end up, does not, van Oers emphasizes, preclude teacher participation in these activities. Rather, it remains an open and empirical question whether teachers do so and, if so, what this means to the trajectories of these activities and children’s participation and engagement in them. The latter lies at the very heart of what we intend to study in the present project. The distinction between the *freedom to* and *freedom from* of play thus provides a useful heuristic tool for analysis. This issue is further complicated in the present case with the ambition to study teaching in this context, since the latter implies outlining some form of trajectory (i.e., having an intention to make children discern, make sense of and appropriate some form of knowing, take part in some domain of cultural experience), while the former by its very nature is premised to be open-ended.

Rather than singling out play as a particular kind of activity, van Oers (2014) argues that “in essence, all activities can be accomplished in playful versions or in more strictly proceduralised versions” (p. 62). That is, any activity can be, what we above referred to as, communicatively framed and engaged in *as if* or *as is*, more or less strictly separated or with ‘permeable dividers’ (for empirical illustrations of such differences in early childhood education, see Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2009). Whether framing activities as make-believe (*as if*) or not (*as is*),

teachers may or may not participate in these. As van Oers (2014) concludes, mirroring our reasoning above, “all sociocultural activities are essentially seen as basically interpersonal endeavours in which more people actually or virtually participate. Hence there is in principle no objection to adult participation in play as long as the play format for the children themselves is not destroyed” (p. 63). How participants – children (and at times, teachers) – communicatively frame, engage in, and negotiate the nature of mutual activities, and what this means to the continuation of these activities and what children are supported in appropriating are therefore important to analyze from these theoretical premises.

***As If* and *as Is* and Learning from Fiction**

In his early elaboration on the importance of what he refers to as fictions to human sense making and learning, Vaihinger (1924/2001) singles out ‘as if’ as the ‘driving force’ of play and aesthetic activity. He argues that engaging with fictions – what we know is not actually the case (*as is*) – allows us to do things we could not otherwise do, such as imagine what is not there to be seen. Thinking and in other ways acting *as if*, from this perspective, is indicative of humans as sense making agents; we invent worlds, we do not merely reflect or mirror existing ones (cf. Bruner, 1990). Thinking *as if* and imagining how it could be allows us to create order and make sense of experience. A similar idea was later taken up by narrative scholars, emphasizing how by retelling our experience we can transform these into a form allowing a more developmentally productive identity (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991). From engaging with fictions – that is acting *as if*, for example in play – we can experience possibilities and their potential consequences. These imaginary actions require some cultural tools and insight into how these may be used to such ends (see elaboration below). This reasoning thus implies that through engaging with *as if* (imagination, fictive worlds) we can learn about the world *as is* (conventional knowledge), including what consequences our actions may have. It is therefore important not to consider *as if* and *as is* as dichotomous poles, with the former contrary to the latter. Not only individuals can learn about the world of experience through play and other activities engage in *as if*, also collective knowledge building in science, Vaihinger emphasizes, is contingent on conscious fictions. We may add that also cultural projects such as social justice is dependent on fiction; if we could not imagine the world differently than it is, we would not know what a just society could mean and what needs to be done to work towards achieving it. Hence, engaging with *as if* is critical to understanding and managing *what is*. On an overarching level, this reasoning reminds us that matters such as play and learning, or play and teaching, cannot productively be understood as dichotomous, contrary matters. Rather, and, we argue, understanding and orchestrating for children’s development in preschool presumes that we learn more about how these relate; how can teachers teach in play without transforming play into non-play, and what can children learn in play and from play, are critical to illuminate in order to further

collective knowledge about the developmental potentials of early childhood education. The ‘play of fantasy’, that is, engaging in imaginary *as-if* activities or explorations, “far from serving to deceive reason,” Vaihinger (1924/2001, p. 338) concludes, “guides and aids it”. Reconceptualized in this way, play (*as if*) is premised as critical to developing knowledge (also of an *as-is* kind) rather than contrary to the latter. Furthermore, as argued by Sutton-Smith,

Given that there is nothing more characteristic of human achievement than the creation of illusory cultural and theoretical worlds, as in music, dance, literature, and science, then children’s [...] full participation in such play worlds can be seen not as a defect, or as compensation for inadequacy, but rather as participation in a major central preoccupation of humankind. (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 54)

Engaging with the World *as Is* Through *as If It Were* Across the Lifespan

Like Vaihinger (1924/2001), as we have already discussed, also other more contemporary scholars have emphasized *as-if* modes of engaging with the world (*as is*). One example is Josephs’ (1998) study of the development of self (identity), built on empirical data of adults visiting their former partner’s grave and there engaging in a dialogue with the deceased. The grave-related dialogues engaged in by the participants in her study, she argues,

proved to be structurally and functionally similar to symbolic play: Like a child, she required certain real life props, which then became part of her constructed as-if world (e.g., the flowers, the tombstone, etc.). Rather than being an act of ‘animistic thinking’ [...] this as-if functioning is understood as a constructive and adaptive way of making sense of one’s world and regulating one’s emotions. Thus symbolic functioning is a way to cope with reality and at the same time a way to construct a new reality. (p. 191)

Engaging in imaginary *as-if* activity thus, according to this reasoning implies both world-making (Goodman, 1978) and self-making (emotional and identity work), that is, both one’s world and oneself are in a sense transformed through engaging in *as-if* activities (whether pretend playing or engaging in imaginary conversations).

In their commentary on Josephs’ study, Göncü and Gaskins (1998) argue that there are three important differences between the *as-if* engagement and understanding of children and adults. The first difference they propose is that “we feel that the motives of children’s *as-if* activities are not consciously connected to the actual activities themselves” (p. 201), for instance if a child plays police she is not aware of why she plays this play. The second difference proposed “reside in where the references of these activities come from” (p. 202), with children’s activities said to “derive from events actually experienced [...] as well as from fairy tales and folk tales (e.g., Cinderella and Pocahontas), exposure to other people’s experience (e.g., stories of peers), and fictional characters of the screen (e.g., Superheroes)”, while such activities in adults “are deeply embedded in the personal experience of participating individuals” (ibid.). The third difference proposed “resides in the

planning or progression of these activities” (ibid.); with children pretending, the activity is “planned flexibly and often without an apparent logical sequence of events”, in contrast to adults whose activity is “planned with an articulate sequence of events” (ibid.). Arguably, all three claims can be questioned. Regarding the first claim: To what extent children (and adults for that matter) are aware of why they engage in a particular imaginary (*as if*) activity is not easy to determine (note also the vague terms used by the researchers to state this proposition: “we feel”). Regarding the second claim: children may or may not build their *as-if* activities on a wider repertoire of experience than adults who engage in such activity; but is this necessarily so? Adults have more experience to draw from. Another reason why it may appear that adults ‘only’ draw on what the authors refer to as ‘deeply embedded personal experience’ perhaps has more to do with the nature of the kind of activities studied in Josephs’ (1998) study, on the one hand, and that it may be ‘controversial’ for adults to admit that they engage in fantasizing with reference to fiction (e.g., imagine themselves being a character in a movie they have seen), on the other hand. Regarding the third difference pointed out, such generalized claims are difficult to make on the basis of the discussed study (cf. our objection to the second point). However, in what way and to what extent imaginary (*as if*) activities of children and adults differ are not the topics of our investigation and we will not further pursue this discussion. Suffice to conclude in the context of our present study is that engaging in imaginary activities (*as if it were*) is a feature of how human beings at large relate to the world of reality (*as it is*). The ability to do so is nurtured and potentially developed already in early childhood, particularly in play activities. Hence, developing the ability to engage in imaginary play worlds has implications way beyond childhood (for collectives, e.g., science; Vygotsky, 1930/2004; and individuals; Fleer, 2011; Josephs, 1998).

Summary

To summarize, the theoretical ideas here presented and discussed emphasize that conceptual learning is founded on engaging in imagination (*as if*), and moving between *as if* and *as is*; that more experienced participants have critical roles in the child’s development in promoting rich experience from and with which to play, and introduce cultural resources for developing existing, and orchestrating new, plays. What critically remains to find out is how engaging with children in play activities can provide the means and support of developing their knowledge in the context of preschool. And how can the inherent tension between these processes – teaching as always directed while one of the characteristics of play is its open-endedness – be understood through looking empirically at how this plays out and is managed in actual everyday activities in ECEC.

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