1 A psychological reading of play

INTRODUCTION

PLAY IN THE early years has generally been conceptualised in relation to its value as a pedagogical tool for supporting the development of children's learning (OECD, 2006). A great deal is known about play (for example, Göncü & Gaskins, 2007; Pellegrini, 2011a), but much of this research has theorised play from either a maturational or developmental point of view (see arguments in Elkonin, 2005a; b; Fleer, 2010; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2011; Pellegrini, 2011a). The common and longstanding theories of play have shown how play follows predetermined stages of development, such as solitary, parallel and cooperative play (for example, Parten, 1932, 1933; Smilansky, 1968) where the age of the child determines what kind of play might be expected (for example, Piaget, Gattegno & Hodgson, 1962). Age is a central criterion for marking progression. These theories have also suggested that all children go through these stages of play, and if they do not, then something is wrong with the child, that is, the perspectives sit within a developmental conceptualisation of play. These developmental theories of play conceptualise play as natural and intrinsic, unfolding in predictable ways along a common life span. Poststructuralist researchers have also noted this dominant way of conceptualising play in early childhood education (see Grieshaber & McArdle, 2011).

Despite longstanding psychological literature on play and its observed limitation (see Göncü et al., 1999), mostly the biologically oriented models of play have solidified into early childhood education pedagogy and practice. What has been missing from this conceptualisation of play in early childhood education has been a close study of how play itself develops to form part of a child's psychological

functioning. In this reading, play does not naturally occur; rather, play complexity builds as a result of the engagement between the child's psychological functioning and the social and material conditions afforded in the child's environment. This is a very different view of play because age is not positioned as the central criterion for explaining progression in play. This book seeks to present a case for the psychological value of play within a cultural–historical framework, and through this to give a different kind of reading of play than would normally be expected within the field of early childhood education. In taking a cultural–historical interpretation, the focus of this book is conceptualised beyond a developmental reading of play. It is acknowledged that longstanding play researchers, such as Fein (1989), and Göncü and Gaskins (2011), have critiqued many traditional theories of play (for example, Piaget et al., 1962; Ariel et al., 1985; Leslie, 1987) and made comparisons between researchers (for example, Piaget vs Vygotsky). This book does not seek to replicate these specific critiques and comparisons; rather it works with the essence (for example, view of child development) or foundational concepts that have informed these theories (that is, developmental perspective). This book draws primarily upon literature that is from a cultural–historical perspective. (For a detailed analysis and comparison of theories of play see Fleer, 2013a.)

In this book play is conceptualised from a Vygotskian perspective, that is, in play children create an imaginary situation, change the meaning of objects and actions during their interactions with their social and material world, and engage with roles and rules of everyday life in role-play. Consequently, *Theorising Play in the Early Years* focuses primarily on role-play.

The book begins by presenting, in Chapter 1, a theoretical discussion of play that specifically draws attention to play's psychological development. To provide more empirical evidence to support the claims made in this theoretical chapter, specific aspects that are introduced are taken up in subsequent chapters. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the essence of what constitutes a cultural–historical conception of play. But before embarking upon the content of Chapter 1, an overview of the subsequent chapters is given to guide readers in navigating their way through the content of this book

In Chapter 2 it is argued that role-play is learnt in families as one source of play development. Two case studies of families engaged in play over 12 months show how play is initiated and developed in some families. The

content of this chapter seeks to explicitly challenge a naturalistic view of play, where age marks progression.

In Chapter 3 in line with Hedegaard's (2012a) model of the relations between societal, institutional and personal perspectives, studies of children's play activities (personal perspective) and play practices of the families (institutional perspective) are reviewed. This model supports the argument introduced in Chapter 2, that role-play is learnt and therefore should be viewed as a cultural expression and a specific cultural practice unique to families and communities.

Chapter 4 moves the analysis lens away from the idea of individuals at play in small groups to considering the concept of collective play. Collective play foregrounds the idea that the play we see enacted in kindergartens and childcare centres should be conceptualised as a tapestry of playscripts that are in constant motion across groups of children. Metacommunicative language and intersubjectivity between players support how collective play emerges and develops in group settings. Boundaries between the real world and the imaginary situation, and between individual and collective imagining are porous.

Through analysing the historical evolution of toys in society and the play this affords children, it is argued in Chapter 5 that play is culturally constructed in relation to societal need. With this backdrop in mind, the content of this chapter moves forward to contemporary society, where digital tablets allow for a special kind of reflection in digital play, when children document and create slowmations of their play. Vygotsky's theory of play is expanded to account for digital play by introducing the concepts of digital placeholders, virtual pivots and meta-imaginary situations. Vygotsky's concept of tool and sign is used in this chapter for supporting the analysis of contemporary societal practices where digital play occurs.

Chapter 6 examines imagination in play from the perspective of the unity of emotions and cognition. In drawing upon the cultural device of digital technologies and longstanding fairytale storytelling, this chapter shows how children develop a scientific gaze while also moving from acting with emotions to thinking about these emotions as particular feeling states. The concept of *perezhivanie* is introduced through a discussion of the unity of emotions and cognition in play.

Chapter 7, the final chapter in this book, presents a holistic model of role-play in which the perspective of the child, the institution and society are brought together to understand historical and contemporary play practices and activities. Historical analyses are essentially retrospective accounts,

so they cannot explain how role-play develops into the future. It is through past, present and future[1] analyses of role-play that we can understand the essence of the development of role-play for the child and for societies. In this chapter it is argued that it is the dynamic tension between societal values and needs, and children's motives and demands, that is the source of development of role-play for children and communities.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PLAY

To understand the psychology of play this chapter begins by exploring the essence of what makes play a unique psychological dimension of human development. In this, the work of Elkonin (2005a) is helpful. Elkonin (2005a), in theorising play, gives the following example of playing with his two preschool aged children:

> Spending the day together was a holiday for all three of us. We read, drew, roughhoused, and acted silly. Everything was merry and noisy until time for lunch. I prepared the traditional farina porridge, which they had grown thoroughly tired of. They absolutely refused to eat and would not sit at the table.
>
> Not wanting to ruin everyone's mood by resorting to force, I suggested to the girls that we play kindergarten. They agreed eagerly. I put on a white coat and turned into the teacher, and they, by putting on their school aprons, turned into the pupils. We began to play at doing everything that was done in kindergarten: first we drew, then, pretended to put on our coats, we took a walk outside, marching twice around the room, and then we read. Then in my role as teacher I offered them lunch consisting of the selfsame porridge. Without any protest, and even with signs of pleasure, they began to eat, trying to be as neat as possible; they carefully scarped their plates and even asked for more. In everything they did they were trying to portray well-behaved pupils, and they made a show of treating me as the teacher, obeying my every word without question and addressing me with exaggerated formality. *The relationship of daughters to their father had changed into the relationship of pupils to their teacher and the relations between sisters into the relations between fellow pupils* (pp. 11–12; my emphasis).

[1] The future can only be conceptualised in relation to past or present activities. Similarly, the past can only be understood in relation to present or future accounts. These are relational concepts. Consequently, it is the dynamic tension between the past and present that acts as a source for understanding development, not as sequential, but as a qualitative change – as we see in the metaphor of the qualitative change of the caterpillar, the chrysalis and the butterfly discussed by Vygotsky (1987).

In illustrating this example of play, Elkonin (2005a) suggests that in play a child's actions are transformed to reflect a specific role and in so doing, the child changes their relationship to reality. In the example above, the sisters are no longer sisters or daughters but are kindergarten children, acting out the expected behaviours and actions previously experienced in their kindergarten. In role-play children change the meaning of actions and objects in their world, giving them a new sense. As the imaginary situation develops, a new sense of everyday life emerges. Play creates a unique situation that is different to the educational or preschool context and to the real world situation in which children live. In play, the child is in reality (for example, eating porridge for lunch) as well as in the imaginary situation (pretending to be at kindergarten). This is a unique psychological state of thinking and acting that a child experiences when in play.

In play, children also find themselves at the borderline between the imaginary situation and the real world. Zaporozhets (2002), in studying the borders of the real world and the imaginary situation, has argued that children flicker between the two. He suggests that this movement is an important part of a child's psychological development. The metaphorical idea of borderline that he puts forward is an important psychological state in play that has not yet been explicitly discussed in the pedagogical literature on play in early childhood education. This psychological borderline can be seen when, for example, children are acting out being Goldilocks eating the three bears' porridge (as in the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*[2]) or when they are role-playing cooking porridge in the sandpit, using sand and water to make the porridge. We also see this when children in their role-play take on the serving of porridge using the language of a waiter, as would be found in a restaurant, alongside of the language of the three bears, referencing the sizes of the bowls – large, small and middle sized. In a study of scientific play[3] that was documented in a childcare

[2] Three bears leave their house to go for a walk in the forest while they wait for their porridge to cool. While they are gone a small child called Goldilocks enters their home and sits on each of the bear's chairs, breaking baby bear's chair. This is followed by Goldilocks tasting each of the bear's porridge; she eats all of baby bear's porridge. Finally, Goldilocks goes upstairs and tries out all of the bears' beds, settling into baby bear's bed, where she falls asleep. When the bears come home they find the mayhem Goldilocks has left and her asleep. Goldilocks wakes up frightened and runs out of the house.

[3] The central research questions examined were: What is the emotional nature of scientific learning? How does affective imagination support early childhood science learning?

centre over eight weeks, in which fairytales and digital tablet technology were used by the teacher to support play and learning, this metaphorical borderline is evident:

> Jason (4 years) is at the Imaginary Table in his childcare centre. Miniatures of Goldilocks and the three bears are on the table. He has taken a bowl of small cut straws to the table and is pouring them into the two equal sized bowls that are on the table. One larger bowl also stands on the table. Jason pours the straw pieces back into the basket, and then turns to the research assistant Shukla and asks:
>
> What can I get for you today? Shukla says she would like something.
>
> **Jason** Porridge?
> **Shukla** Yes. I'd like porridge.
> **Jason** Porridge.
> **Jason** (*takes the basket of straws and shakes them around*) But, I'm going to put it into the microwave, because it gets very hot.
> **Shukla** OK. Is it too hot?
> **Jason** Yes (*shakes the basket*). When I put it in this bowl. (*about to pour the cut straws into the bowl*) Do you want it in this middle sized bowl or the big one, 'cause we don't do middle sized ones. (*shakes his head*) Do you want a little one (*corrects himself*) or a big one, 'cause we don't do middle sized ones (see Fleer, 2013).

What is evident in this example is that Jason is in the imaginary situation, playing the waiter in the fairytale of Goldilocks and the three bears, while still staying grounded in reality, because Jason, in this example, does not eat the cut up straws or expect that Shukla will either. Jason knows he is not serving real porridge or using real oats to cook. Schousboe and Winther-Lindqvist (2013) suggest that in play

Video observations were made of the teaching of science from one site in a southeastern community in Australia (232 hours of video observations). The teachers used fairytales and slowmation as cultural devices to support the concept formation of 3 and 4 year old children (n = 53; range of 3.3 to 4.4; mean of 3.8 years).

Figure 1.1: Imagination table for role-playing Goldilocks and the three bears

children always stay connected to reality and that the psychological relations between reality and fantasy are always porous. Bretherton, back in 1989, also commented on the boundary between reality and pretence, discussing how these are blurred in role-play. These ideas are discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5.

In taking Zaporozhets' (2002) concept of borders one step further, Fleer (2013b) has argued that it is the borderline between the imaginary situation and reality where an emotional tension arises. This emotional tension can be seen when children feel frightened when discussing, or having *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* read to them. In the example that follows, taken from the study introduced above of children setting up to play Goldilocks and the three bears, the emotional tension heightens the child's attention to the imaginary storyline that is being expressed through reading *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, and the motive development for solving the problem of keeping the three bears safe.

Alison and Merrum are both at the Imaginary Table with the slowmation[4] materials and an iPad (see Chapter 5). Also on the table are three bears, chairs, bowls with Lego pieces inside them, a stage backdrop, and plants in the foreground to frame the scene. In front of this is the iPad (see Figure 5.5, Chapter 5). Earlier on Alison made a sign out of wood in the woodworking area outside. She has taken the sign to the slowmation scene. Merrum and Alison engage in a conversation about writing on the wooden sign.

Alison I am going to put a bit of black on it (*sign*). A dot. (*picks up a black felt pen and places a small dot on the wooden sign; research assistant Sue asks about this*)
Sue What will the dot do?
Alison It says not be scared.
Merrum That dot is called 'Nobody gets scared'. Can I just put another spot in there?
Alison No.
Merrum Even [a] purple one to keep Goldilocks away? (*gesturing with purple felt pen to Alison*)
Alison I like black better. (*moves sign to the top of stage set; adjusts post so that it is straight*)

Alison then moves the sign to the top of the stage set, adjusting the post so that it is straight.

The worry of 'nobody gets scared here' signals the emotional tension that is clearly inherent in the storyline of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Both Alison and Merrum deal with this emotional tension by creating a sign that signals to all that the play area is a safe zone. The children are at the table, in the real world designing and making a sign that they add to the physical presentation of the storyline at the table. But they are also in the imaginary world of Goldilocks and the three bears. What is evident in this and the previous example, is that in play children are simultaneously moving between the real world and the imaginary situation. The emotional tension that arises at the borderline between the real and the imaginary

[4] 'Slowmation' (abbreviated from 'slow animation') is a simplified stop-motion animation that is played slowly at two frames per second, thereby enabling the creators to narrate the images (see www.slowmation.com).

situation creates a new self-awareness on the part of the child, making conscious the child's feeling state and cognitive attunement for solving the problem scenario that presents itself in the storyline of the fairytale or in the narrative that forms in play.

Vygotsky (1991) has discussed how, when children become aware of their own emotions through fairytales, art and story, usually through some form of emotional tension or tragedy (depending upon the art form), particular raw emotions are consciously understood as feeling states. Holodynski and Friedlmeier (2006) name the resultant self-awareness as a movement from interpsychological (between people) to an intrapsychological level (part of the child's thinking and development) of functioning in their work on emotion regulation. It is through social relations that children have their raw emotions identified and named as particular feeling states (for example, you are feeling sad, happy, frightened), and in play this doubleness becomes evident as they feel happy to be playing even though they are feeling frightened by the pending fairytale plot. These concepts and empirical material introduced here are discussed further in the latter part of the book.

Heightened examples of emotional tension are evident in the research by Fleer (2013b) and Zaporozhets (2002) where children role-play the adventures inherent in popular fairytales. In the former of these two, the children use tablet technology to reproduce the stories and role-play through photographing and creating an animation (slowmation; see details of software in Fleer & Hoban, 2012; see also Figure 6.2, Chapter 6) of the story inside a diorama of Goldilocks and the three bears, thus enabling an additional level of cognition about their feeling state, moving from the interpsychological level to the intrapsychological level (discussed further in Chapter 5). The telling of fairytales is a longstanding cultural practice that acts as a cultural device for specifically creating an emotional tension that has been proven to engage children in a moral journey of some kind on which they wish to help the characters (see Fleer & Hammer, 2013).

An emotional tension can also be seen in the playworlds researched by Lindqvist (1995), Hakkarainen (2006) and Bredikyte (2010), where complex storybooks or puppets act as cultural devices for building a psychological tension that needs to be resolved and is acted out in role-play or dramatisation. The adventures that Lindqvist (1995) and Hakkarainen (2006) create by introducing new problem situations and characters, take the children into complex imaginary situations that go beyond the original storylines. Hakkarainen (2006), by suggesting that the door to the kitchen in the kindergarten is now the door of the cupboard in the story of

Narnia,[5] creates a cultural device for moving the children into an imaginary situation where they can go on the adventures directly expressed in the storybook through dramatisation. Lindqvist (1995) achieves this same goal through recreating the adventures of complex storybooks where children move in and out of the imaginary situations as they solve the problem or embark on the same adventures as the characters in the storybooks she reads to the children, for example, sitting inside a large basket with balloons attached, imagining a balloon ride to distant lands. A further example can be seen in the stories written by Enid Blyton where the wishing chair acts as a cultural device for taking children from the everyday reality of home life into adventures in imaginary worlds. The creation of a cultural device, such as the cupboard or a wishing chair, is important for framing or signalling the movement between the real and imaginary worlds. Children also do this in their free play, where they use metacommunicative language to signal when they are in frame or out of frame (see Bateson, 1955; Bretherton, 1984; see also Chapter 4). The emotional tension is created in the imaginary situation as children relive the storyline, feel themselves as the characters in the story and seek to solve the problem that emerges through the predictable and well-known storyline in the book. This can also be seen when children act out in play familiar roles in society, such as a firefighter or bus driver, when they reproduce the social roles and actions they observe in their community, often adding to the particular adventures the community members might have.

Elkonin (2005b) paradoxically suggests that when children are in role-play they move closer to reality because they are re-presenting what they have observed in the real world or imagined through listening to or reading stories (as vicarious experiences). In role-play children engage in the rules and roles of society, coming to understand what they see in their social and material world or through the re-enactment of how the characters in stories have solved the problems presented in the storyline. Vygotsky and Luria (1994) argued that the ideal form or full expression of a situation, role or event needs to be present in children's environment before it is possible for them to understand or re-enact these experiences in play. The ideal form is demonstrated in society through the ways in which adults and significant others attend to real world situations. The ideal form is also present in stories because the characters show how they deal with problems that emerge, and, even if they are not real, stories often emulate real world situations

[5] C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950. *The Chronicle of Narnia* series.