

Chapter 2

Re-theorising Play as Pedagogical



Abstract *Early Childhood Pedagogical Play* re-theorizes the relationship of pedagogy and play as *pedagogical play* which we suggest is characterised by *conceptual reciprocity* (a pedagogical approach for supporting children's academic learning through joint play) and *agentic imagination* (a concept that when present in play, affords the child's motives and imagination, a critical role in learning and development). We bring these new concepts to life using a cultural-historical approach to analysis of play, supported in each chapter by the use of case studies with visual narratives used as a research method for re-theorising play as being pedagogical.

Keywords Conceptual reciprocity • Agentic imagination • Culturally diverse • Playful event • Role play • Play theorists • Institutional practices • Political landscape of play

2.1 Introduction

At this point we draw attention to the Chap. 2 illustration because it represents our cultural-historical approach in action; an approach that involves accounting for inclusive and culturally diverse thinking. Being three authors writing together, we use widely varied examples, including transcripts and visual images from our original research, to narrate, illustrate and support our analysis of play as learning. In the process of collaboratively writing each chapter of this book, the multiple perspectives represented in the illustration lead us to discuss the following question: What is a cultural-historical approach to analysing pedagogical play?

When a cultural-historical approach is applied to understanding pedagogical play we always include the whole context of a playful event. We *acknowledge the presence of the child's cultural context in order to bring better understanding of their play*. Children from different countries, will play differently for many reasons that may include levels of provision of resources, local cultural beliefs about play and specific pedagogical practices. The inclusion and acknowledgement of social, cultural and historical contexts gives viability and value to understanding play from both child and adult perspectives which we believe is important for the child's learning and development. In our thinking about pedagogical play we also include the relationships that children and adults have with human and non human others and any connections with artefacts and the material environment.

Over the last decade notable cultural-historical scholars including (Elkonin 2005a, b; Kravtsova 2008; Hedegaard 2005, 2008; Gonzalez Rey 2011; Fleer 2010; van Oers 2013a) inspired by Vygotsky's translated works (1929, 1966a, 1978, 1987, 1994, 1998, 2004) have each turned their research attention to matters around young children's learning and development. It is interesting to note that Vygotsky's theories were formed in a period of great social change that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917. In this time Vygotsky immersed himself in an intellectual and cultural life where his ideas were expressed and exchanged with European and Western cultures. This was also the time of great cultural richness and intellectual flowering in Russia, a time in fact, when Pasternak created poetry, Shostakovich composed, Chagall painted, Diaghilev danced, Eisenstein filmed, Pavlov researched stimulus-response in dogs, Nabokov produced novels and Vygotsky proposed his theory of social formation of mind. The growing impact of Vygotsky's legacy and the historical relevance of his work have been written about by many scholars including Cole (1995), Edwards and D'Arcy (2004) and Veresov (2006). Vygotsky's work is based on the application of the Marxist dialectical historical material approach, which focuses on the historical, cultural and social roots of cognition and emotion development, asserting that a person's development must be effective within the cultural-historical environment.

Taking a cultural-historical approach to the task of re-theorising play as pedagogical also means accounting for different environments, cultural beliefs and the effect and affect of these on children's learning and development. Bert van Oers has focused for example on pedagogical value in playful activity. His work showed effective learning in early childhood as being a characteristic of shared playful activity (van Oers 2013a, b). Van Oers re-conceptualised role-play on the basis of cultural-historical theory, rejecting developmentalism and proposed the relevance of role play for cultural development. He urged educators to guide young children, encourage choices and question themselves as to what is the best they can offer to children in their professional work. In order to emphasize the important pedagogical value of educators and children playing in roles (where personal and social rules may be enacted), van Oers also brought attention to the notion of *degrees of freedom* evident in choices made when a role is being played. He showed that playful activity involved negotiation between participants and any negotiation can be a site for pedagogical opportunity.

In thinking about playful activity he wrote:

it is definitely important to study both adults' and children's perspectives on activities that are theoretically construed as play. In particular, further studies are needed on how decisions and evaluations of rules, allowed degrees of freedom, and involvement are negotiated, both by adults and children (van Oers 2013b, p. 196).

Hedegaard et al. (2012) represent examples of cultural-historical scholars whose research builds on the seminal work of Russian scholar Lev Vygotsky (1896–1938). Hedegaard et al. (2012) found in their research (particularly with children from immigrant families), that learning happens when activities change the social relations in a pedagogical practice and thereby give further possibilities for new activities. She takes the view that development occurs when learning takes place across different institutional practices (and this includes the home as a place of 'institutional practices') and qualitatively changes the relations in all practices the child has participated in. When using a cultural-historical approach in research we look for the changes in context and relations evident in children's play activity in order to find where and if learning happens.

2.2 Why Use Cultural-Historical Theory Today?

One of the strong reasons for using cultural-historical theory is that it is not a reductive or static theory but renewable and expansive. Cultural-historical theory has conceptualized human development in relational and open-ended terms, and this, represents a fresh world-view for research into child development.

The intention of this book is to take a cultural-historical approach to thinking about play and learning. It became clear in our research that learning, as Vygotsky (1978) had proposed, was much more than a process that took place in individual minds; it was a social phenomenon based in the external circumstances of the child's everyday life and times.

Vygotsky argued that the dynamic developmental process resulted from the individual's interactions in the social and cultural context, which is the fundamental difference between human beings and animals (Minick 1987). The social interaction is a key concept of a cultural-historical approach. At times, visual narratives are used throughout this book to help illustrate children's social interaction with others in play and develop our analysis of children's play experiences in their daily life circumstances including participation across different institutional contexts (home, centre/school, community). Our examples help to re-shape, change, enhance, extend and even transform thinking about pedagogical play in its multi-cultural, multi-layered contexts and complexities, and overcome common misconceptions of what play means for babies, young children, families and educators.

2.3 Political Landscape of Play

We understand that early childhood education is a political endeavour because it always reflects particular values, beliefs, as well as economic and social conditions of its time and place in history. Elkonin (2005a, b) who examined the sources and nature of role-play noted that the origin of role play was social, linked historically to community and family life and the child's place in the everyday activities of that life: *'the nature of children's play can be understood only by relating play to the child's life in society'* (2005a, p. 57). In addition, van Oers (2013c) realised the political context of early childhood when he stated that educators had a pedagogical responsibility in their work, to make choices for quality provision but that tensions would arise in the choices made as *'all educational practices should now be considered basically cultural-political constructions'* (p. 180).

The essence of recent guides and texts for early childhood educators (e.g. Allen and Cowdery 2012), is to encourage early childhood educators to give thought to how children are included and what children are learning in play-based curriculum. In Australia for example, outcomes for children's learning are stated in a mandated framework,—the Early Years Learning Framework—developed by the Australian Government through what was then the Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR 2009). In other words, the whole notion of pedagogical play is clearly on the agenda for quality provision of early childhood education.

We read in published support booklets, about different types of play e.g. Role Play (Harries and Raban 2011) and Sensory Play (Gascoyne and Raban 2012). In a series of practice based 'how to' booklets published on 'Play in the Early Years' designed to support Australian educators in reframing their work with a mandated play-based curriculum, we noted an emphasis on elevating the pedagogical role of play. For example readers of 'Role Play' (Harries and Raban 2011, p. 8) are informed that *'Play is not a break from learning, it is learning, and there should be rigour in play which stimulates and challenges children to develop their learning'*. In a similar vein, readers of 'Sensory Play' (Gascoyne and Raban 2012, p. 5) are reminded that *'opportunities for children to actually touch or taste are often discouraged, or limited to plastic'*. In these booklets we find efforts directed at re-thinking the role of play in young children's learning.

Re-thinking what pedagogy and play means for developing quality early childhood education and care is on the political agenda in Australia, China, Mexico and elsewhere. Early childhood curriculum changes are occurring globally (e.g. Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010) and in Australia have been brought about by the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR 2009).

Political changes to policy and practice always have consequences for early childhood professionals, pre-service teachers and families who are expected to build new understandings about how play-based curriculum may be enacted in daily interactions with young children. The political landscape clearly makes new demands on educators in the early childhood field to reframe their professional work.

It is important to understand play in contemporary times and to understand play we need to have some knowledge about how it has been theorised in the past. Play is variously interpreted (Wood 2013; Singer 2013; Hedges 2014; Pramling-Samuelsson and Fleeer 2009) and to illustrate this point we have created a brief summary of past influential play theorists and theories.

Table 2.1 overview has follow up references for detailed information, as our intention is to flesh out the new insights brought by cultural—historical views on play and acknowledge influential play theorists

In an historical overview of the foundations of best practices in early childhood education, Follari (2011), wrote that ‘*Piaget valued the role of experience as well as the internal processes engaged in by the child on his or her quest to know the world*’ (p. 41) but that the work of Vygotsky (1978) has taken researchers ‘*beyond the theories of Piaget*’ (p. 41). Contemporary theories of play are characterised by new cultural-historical approaches to research (Hedegaard 2005; Siraj-Blatchford 2007; Kravtsova 2008; Rogers and Evans 2008; Fleeer 2010; Singer 2013; van Oers 2013b) that show how children’s play is uncultured and institutionally contextualised and therefore lead to thinking more about the pedagogical relationships that exist in play experiences. The potential for the child’s learning is at the heart of our re-theorisation of play as pedagogical.

For a useful summary about defining play we found Pramling-Samuelsson and Fleeer’s work (2009) to be both international in scope, and most comprehensive.

2.4 Cultural-Historical Conceptualisation of Play

In thinking about play in cultural-historical terms, we used Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of the *imaginary situation* as being a defining characteristic of all play:

... in establishing criteria for distinguishing a child’s play from other forms of activity, we conclude that in play a child creates an imaginary situation (1978, p. 934)

We understand that play for children is a cultural and historical construction and that imagination is present and intact in the highly varied situations and spaces that children find themselves in. In different cultures and spaces, play is understood differently. For example, in a rural community in the north of Mexico children have open spaces and very few resources but they are able to imagine and play with the objects available to them.

In order to discuss the pedagogical play opportunities for educators we need to think more about the value of children’s imagination. We use a cultural-historical approach to analyse how a young child always learns to play within their own cultural and social context. Their context may include human activity related to cultural signs, symbols, language systems, objects, values and rituals that are best understood ‘*when investigated in their historical development*’ (John-Steiner and Mahn 2006, p. 2).

Table 2.1 Overview of some influential play theorists

John Dewey ^a	Maria Montessori ^b	Mildred Parten ^c	Grusec and Lytton ^e	Jean Piaget ^d	Lev. Vygotsky ^f
Play is separate from work	Play is the work of the child	Stages of play	Typology on cognition	Play as intellectual development	Play as cultural development
Manual education promoted to encourage skills and teamwork	Children’s activities as play: “ <i>The delight that children find in working</i> ”	Including: Solitary play (infants) Parallel play (Toddlers) Cooperative play (Preschooler)	Functional play Constructive play Pretend play Games with rules	Related to ages and stages of child development from biological perspective- natural line of development	Link to cultural line of development. Social interaction is major impetus for development. In play child creates an imaginary situation. Play as source of child’s development of abstract and symbolic thinking

^aDewey (1900)
^bMontessori (1970)
^cParten (1932)
^dPiaget (1962)
^eGrusec and Lytton (1988)
^fVygotsky (1966b)

We interpret pedagogy as the art and science of teaching and use the term play to describe the *imaginary situation* created by children in the active experiences of their everyday lives. We emphasize that children's lives are lived across home, community, and early childhood settings and pedagogical play can be in all situations. Our research examples are temporally and culturally varied to make the point that young children have their own perspectives whatever their age or circumstance.

In a cultural-historical conceptualisation of play the child's play relationships are mediated by human activity, the language used, and the spaces, materials and artefacts of the present time. Within these contemporary elements, children construct their own imaginary situations and it is in these spaces that pedagogical relations can be formed. When this occurs the child can be supported to learn and develop from their own perspective and in their particular social, cultural, and historical context.

In our examples of play activity we draw on internationalised and essentially westernised approaches to young children's play that occurred in the contemporary settings of our research. Our research has examined cultural-historical factors from social, geographical, environmental, emotional, local and traditional perspectives. In our visual narrative examples we use different and contrasting play activity to re-conceptualise what play from the child's perspective can mean for learning and development. We have taken early childhood to be the period between birth to eight years.

We share our research observations of social, cultural and historical influences in play for example, in a Mexican classroom for three–four year olds, in Australian home life with two cousins (five months and eight years), outdoors in a pre-school (three–four year-olds), in family play with a grandfather and fathers, and in a primary school classroom (six year-olds). These first hand accounts demonstrate that play experiences are fertile ground for children's learning and development. In all instances we build on the understanding that the children '*are embarked on a course of making meaning of the world, a constant process of constructing knowledge, identity and value*' (Dahlberg in Rinaldi 2006, p. 13) and that pedagogical strategies in varied forms are present. Pedagogical play is complex. When time is taken to observe and listen and acknowledge that the child has their own motives and ideas, their own power, their own imagination and their own perspectives, we can better understand why staged theories of play (such as those of Piaget) are debated and should be built on.

2.5 Contemporary Theories of Play: Towards More Unified Opportunities for Learning

Recent publications on play, (Brooker and Edwards 2010; Fleer 2010, 2013a, b; Smidt 2011; Bruce 2011; and Wood 2013) bring wider theoretical framing of play as learning and focus further on 'role-play' and 'imaginative play'. Van Oers (2010)

discussed enculturation through play and his concept of Developmental Education (van Oers 2013c) for young children was foundational to understanding more about enactment of play-based curriculum. Attention given to conceptual development in play by Fleer (2010) advanced thinking about the importance of play for development of science concepts. Bodrova used cultural-historical framing in *Tools of the Mind* (2008), which gave focus to learning to play with developmental outcomes and self regulation in mind, and van Oers' rich ongoing research on *Developmental education* (2013a) brought focus to cultural agency in children's play.

Vygotskian ideas on learning as a social process continue to influence all areas of education. In Holzman's (2009) publication *Vygotsky at work and play*, for example the idea of being and becoming was discussed. This led to further thinking about performative roles and role play. Children and adults learn as they perform or role play as someone else in a situated activity. Throughout this book we also argue that play is a place of learning and therefore a pedagogical experience. Role play for example makes a space where, together, humans can create who they are. We offer examples of where children have experienced the building of shared intentions and making choices and in doing so have become '*collective creators of their emotional growth*' (Holzman 2009, p. 33).

Children are involved in pedagogical play through their relationships with families, educators and cultural communities. The child's motive for play generates and grows when conceptual reciprocity is achieved. We believe from our video data and research (e.g. Trevarthen 2011) that this can happen *from birth* in the child's particular cultural situation. Conceptual reciprocity recognizes the nature of intersubjectivity in pedagogical play. Children are not only seen as a player, but also as a contributor to, and constructor of, the play, showing responsive relationships with each other. This requires that a play event provides an environment responsive to children's interests and knowledge of everyday cultural practices and experience with others. When the child connects their real life and imagined world, agentic imagination is formed and its presence will support children's learning and development. Play only becomes pedagogical when conceptual reciprocity and agentic imagination are present.

2.6 Re-theorising Play as Pedagogical Play

We re-theorise the relationship between pedagogy and play as *pedagogical play* and we suggest two new concepts that characterise pedagogical play: *conceptual reciprocity* and *agentic imagination*. Conceptual reciprocity is when an educator (parent, teacher, more knowledgeable peer or other adult) brings to children's play subject matter knowledge, values the child's perspective, creates shared intentions, looks further, adds on, plans opportunity for activity and thereby builds conceptual connectedness; it is a pedagogical approach for supporting children's learning

through joint play. Agentic imagination simply means that the child has actively connected their real life and imagined world; when present in play, the child's motives and imagination have the opportunity to play a critical role in their learning and development.

In particular, *conceptual reciprocity* is given a detailed explanation in Chap. 3 where play is examined from the child's perspective as well as from the educator's perspective.

Chapter 4 examines how educators actively interact with children and support their learning in play-based curriculum. Siraj-Blatchford's concept of sustained shared thinking is illustrated as effective pedagogy in playful situations where interactive support occurs within Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development will be further explained.

In Chap. 5 the qualities of the interactions between humans, and non-human objects are examined closely and bring forward new ideas about the presence of *affective attunement* and *affective engagement* in pedagogical play right from birth. This chapter also covers the cultural dimensions of play, and discusses the nature of degrees of freedom, roles and rules.

In Chap. 6 affordances for learning that children are provided across the different institutional settings of their daily lives are discussed. Elements of time, continuity and culture in pedagogical practices are examined.

Agentic imagination in pedagogical play is conceptualised in Chap. 7 where we give examples of children actively connecting their real and imagined worlds with adults entering the play. We analysed the pedagogical practice, the play space and in doing so, uncovered the presence or absence of *agentic imagination*.

In Chap. 8 we think more about what visual strategies educators and families can use to support their pedagogical role. When intentional teaching and reflective practice becomes part of re-theorising play as pedagogical, we need to be intentional ourselves in order to frame our documentation methods for capturing pedagogical opportunities in play and recognising those productive opportunities in order to sustain and extend children's agentic imagination.

Chapter 9 brings further understanding of how to recognise relationships and embedded cultural influences in pedagogical play. We use dialogue commentary as a technique to reveal the often invisible personal cultural influences present in community and family play. Examples of planning a project brief involving risk and collaboration between older and younger children, and the provision of an outdoor play program in a bushland setting are also discussed.

The final chapter brings together a collection of research in practice narratives important for showing how pedagogical transformation may occur when play is seen from the multiple perspectives of participants: infants, family members, pre-schoolers, schoolage children, educators and their cultural communities. A past-present dialectic enables us to re-conceptualise pedagogical play with particular materials as being historically influenced so new perspectives are seen.

2.7 Conclusion

We invite educators to examine their relationship with children and we challenge all those who work with children, to think about how to integrate the often contradictory perspectives on play and learning taken by the child and adult. We offer opportunities to build insight into thinking about play as pedagogical and as a leading activity for children (to be explained further) that can bring new processes and changes to their development (Veresov 2006).

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