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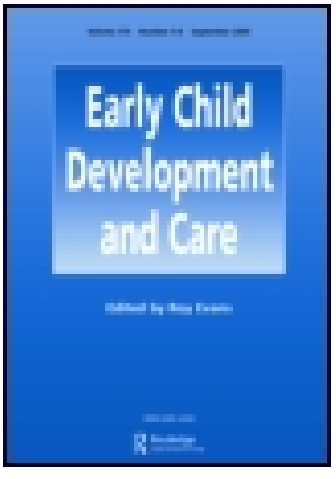

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Pedagogical positioning in play - teachers being inside and outside of children's imaginary play

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Pedagogical positioning in play – teachers being inside and outside of children's imaginary play

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Although there is a long tradition of play pedagogy in early childhood education, teachers have mostly taken a passive role in children's play. There are relatively few studies of the pedagogical roles adults take from inside of children's imaginary play. This paper seeks to fill this gap through presenting the findings of a study where the play pedagogy of five Australian childcare centres was analysed. Video observations of nine teachers interacting with children (3.3–5.5 years) during free play time (399 h of video observations) were analysed using the concept of subject positioning. It was found most teachers positioning themselves outside of children's play. A typology of play is presented which includes teacher proximity to children's play; teacher intent is in parallel with children's intent; teacher is following the children's play; teacher is engaged in sustained collective play; and teacher is inside the children's imaginary play.

Keywords: early childhood pedagogy; play; cultural–historical theory; sociocultural; playworlds

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Introduction

Although a huge volume of the literature on children's play in early childhood education exists, very little of this research systematically examines the role of the teacher in children's play (Singer, Nederend, Penninx, Tajik, & Boom, 2014). Mostly, there is a belief that for something to count as play, then adults should not be involved (see Pellegrini, 2011). However, some studies have questioned this maturational assumption (van Oers, 2013) and have argued that adults can enrich and develop children's play when they act as play partners (e.g. Hakkarainen, 2010), that children need adult support in their play (e.g. Singer et al., 2014), because they no longer know how to play in some communities (e.g. Bodrova, 2008), and that in social contexts, adults do actually teach children how to play (e.g. Ugaste, 2005), suggesting that play is a learned cultural practice (see Goncu & Gaskins, 2007). These cultural–historical studies support the perspective that play should not be viewed as the private business of children.

The majority of research assumes a universal conception of play pedagogy (Fleer, 2014), and does not analyse the pedagogical role of adults when inside of children's imaginary play. To fill this gap, this paper presents the findings of a study that sought to analyse the pedagogical practices of teachers in play-based settings in order to give a more nuanced understanding of play pedagogy. This paper goes

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beyond conceptualising the role of adults in play as a simple binary of the adult being or not being involved in children's play. Rather, the theoretical framing of this paper draws upon cultural–historical theory (Vygotsky, 1966) where play is defined as the creation of an imaginary situation, in which children and adults change the meaning of objects and actions, giving them a new sense within the imaginary play situations (Vygotsky, 1966, 2005). Kravtsova (2014) has stated that in addition to imagination being a central criterion of a cultural–historical definition of play, that 'in play a child is at the same time inside it (i.e. crying like a patient) and outside it (i.e. rejoicing as a player)' (p. 22) highlighting the double subjectivity of players. This premise has been adopted as the central dimension of play pedagogy.

This paper begins with a theoretical discussion of the central cultural–historical concepts that informed this study, followed by the study design and the findings, and concludes with a typology of play pedagogy for better understanding the diversity of roles adults take in play-based settings. The paper goes beyond a universal understanding of play pedagogy, and a binary conceptualisation of the role of adults, and examines the everyday pedagogical practices of teachers in play-based settings.

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A cultural–historical conceptualisation of the role of the adult in children's play

Like the long-standing research of Bretherton (1984) into children being in or out of the play frame, Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) have drawn attention to the concept of being inside (pretending to be cooking) or outside (gathering materials to support the play) of an imaginary play situation. This important psychological concept (Bredikyte, 2010) draws attention to the imaginary situation in play and the valued place of the players (pretending to be chiefs) in reading the play situation. The perspective taken in the long-standing (e.g. Garvey, 1977) and contemporary cultural–historical research (e.g. Schousboe & Winther-Lindqvist, 2013) has always been in relation to the child and the imaginary situation that she/he creates. Little attention has been directed to the teacher being inside of the imaginary situation together with the children. Paying attention to what the teacher does in the context of the imaginary situation as a unit of analysis for better understanding pedagogical practices in play has generally not been undertaken, and as a result, the pedagogical role of the adult inside the imaginary situation is not well understood.

What is known is that teachers do have an important role in developing children's play (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2010). For instance, Hakkarainen, Bredikyte, Jakkula, and Munter (2013) have examined how teachers in playworlds collectively create imaginary situations with children. Playworlds were first introduced into the literature through the research of Lindqvist (1995) in Sweden. The focus of playworlds is the teacher and the children collectively role-playing together complex themes with problem situations from stories, fairy tales, and other narratives. Hakkarainen et al. (2013) have identified seven characteristics for supporting the development of play in playworlds, which centre mostly on the conditions for play (e.g. fascinating play script, dramatic tension in the play script, and motivating shared theme). However, they also state that adults must be emotionally involved in the play, elaborate critical turns in the play, such as anticipation, introducing new characters and events, or introduce critical incident so that the play continues to develop. Importantly, they recommend that adults take a role in the imaginary play, such as a character in the storyline. In particular, they suggest that 'We believe that professionals working with young children not only have to support the development of ongoing play, but also

have to present and model higher forms of play' (Hakkarainen et al., 2013, p. 216). This is consistent with research in New Zealand where it is argued that 'it is vital to have teachers who position themselves within play-based teaching and learning interactions' (Hedges, 2014, p. 198). This is a very different perspective to not interfering in children's play as has been observed as key to defining what constitutes play (see McInnes, Howard, Crowley, & Miles, 2013).

There is a growing body of research that positions the adult inside of children's play. Beginning with the seminal work of Lindqvist (1995) into playworlds, scholars in the USA (Ferholt, 2010), Finland (Bredikyte, 2011), and Australia (Fleer, 2013a) have introduced play pedagogy that positions the adult as taking an active role inside of children's play, rather than what constitutes the norm of acting as an observer or supporter from outside of children's play. Although the playworlds research has not been conceptualised distinctly from other play research as the 'adult being inside of the play', this is clearly an important difference between playworlds and many other forms of pretend play that feature generally in free play-based settings in many early childhood centres in European and European heritage contexts.

Hakkarainen (2010) has examined the specific pedagogical characteristics in playworlds for building a narrative methodology for developing children's play. The pedagogy is illustrative of how playworlds work and the active role the adult assumes inside of children's play. According to Hakkarainen (2006), the pedagogy of playworlds is framed through the telling or reading of a story and the children and the teacher work together to create the play. However, the play evolves through the introduction of new elements where the teacher and children elaborate the basic theme or plot, constructing scenes and enacting specific roles where they 'agree jointly to imagined particular settings and props' (p. 210). Hakkarainen (2010) has recommended the following pedagogical principles that are reproduced here in order to show the active positioning of the adult inside of children's play:

1. 'Children are invited to enter jointly created imaginary situations based on tales, stories and children's fiction (ideal cultural forms) which serve as the basis of adult-child joint playworlds and child-initiated pretend play.
2. Themes are carefully selected to reflect basic human values and dichotomies as well as coincide with educational needs of the classroom and individual children.
3. The theme is brought alive with adults' participation and emotional involvement (in roles, dramatizations, story telling etc.). Sense and significance of events and relations between characters has to be emphasized and made as clear as possible (without directly telling everything!).
4. Dramatic collisions of tales and stories raise children's questions and are starting points of joint reflection (Why Kai became mean after getting a piece of mirror in his eye [Snow Queen]). Changing or adding dramatic events from other stories causes more collisions and helps in inventing dilemmas, which have to be solved realistically before the story an continue (Shipwreck stopped captain Hook's voyage and children are asked to help him building (planning) a new ship).
5. Creating environments and reserving time for child-initiated play is essential in the development of children's reflection on playworld events. Observation of child-initiated play reflecting playworld events offers valuable hints about new turns or further elaboration of joint playworld themes' (p. 79).

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Singer et al. (2014) have shown the importance of how the teacher physically positions him or herself in close or distant proximity to the infants and toddlers that they research in Dutch childcare centres, noting the close relationships between teacher proximity and a positive level of play engagement in two- and three-year-old children. Singer et al. (2014) found that teachers mostly spent their time walking around and focused on the individual needs of infants, rather than being sensitive to the collective group play being enacted by the infants and toddlers. Through the individualised approach of care by teachers in the Dutch childcare centres, it would seem that the possibilities for being inside of group play were seriously reduced. This is consistent with research by Goncu (1998) who noted the importance of intersubjectivity or shared understanding between children and adults in social pretend play. His review found that 'intersubjectivity changes from one point to another as a result of continuous knowledge exchange and negotiation between partners' (p. 120) and in pretend play, this means that, 'children take for granted that their partners share their knowledge, leaving implicit some of their meaning. Doing so obliges children to make and test assumptions about what their partners mean, thus creating intersubjectivity' (p. 121). In the context of research into mothers and their infants, the communication of shared meaning when signalling something as pretence (see Lillard, 2007) features exaggeration of gesture, sound and physical movements, as is observed between children when using meta-communicative language (originally in Bateson, 1955) to establish intersubjectivity in pretend play as noted by Goncu (1998). Intersubjectivity in group settings for establishing social pretend play between children and teachers has not been the focus of research attention and little is known about the pedagogical role of teachers in such contexts.

These studies suggest that a greater understanding of the role of the teacher is needed, particularly in relation to what role the teacher takes (or not), within the children's imaginary play situations.

Study design

Research question

This study sought to understand the role adults take in children's play within play-based settings, such as childcare, preschool, and kindergarten. Specifically, it asked, 'What role do teachers take when inside the imaginary play situation in play-based settings?' Previous research in this area has been in the context of playworlds, which is limited in number and across countries. This study focuses only on the general pedagogical practices of teachers found in five Australian contexts where playworlds was not a part of teachers' day-to-day play practices.

Sample and scope of data gathering

In order to answer the research question, video observations were made of nine teachers interacting with children during free play time and group time. Teachers, families, and children were invited into the study, and informed consent was gained through informal gatherings with families and teachers about the intent of the research. Distribution of letters and consent forms took place at this time. Children were asked if they wished to participate on an ongoing basis, and the digital video camera marked the field of the data gathering process for the children. Children actively engaged in looking

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Table 1. Overview of sample and data generated.

Centre	Number of teachers	Number of children	Age range	Observation period	Data generated
Centre A	3	53	3.3–4.4 years; mean age of 3.8 years	8 weeks	242 h
Centre B	1	20	4.6–5.7 years; mean age of 5.0 years	5 weeks	55 h
Centre C	1	30	3.3–5.3 years; mean age of 4.2 years	3 weeks	74 h
Centre D	2	24	4.0–5.2 years; mean age of 4.5 years	4 weeks	20 h
Centre E	2	24	4.4–5.5 years; mean age of 4.11 years	3 weeks	8 h

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through the view finder in order to gain insights into the video documentation process of themselves and their friends. Only consenting families and children were filmed. A summary of the sample and data gathered is shown in Table 1.

All the teachers in the study are credentialed with an early childhood qualification, and have a minimum of 10 years of teaching experience. Eight of the nine teachers were of European heritage background, and one was of Asian descent.

Three of the five centres are located in urban regions, one in a capital city, and one in a rural context in Australia. Teachers use the national curriculum framework that advocates for both free play and intentional teaching (Australian Government, 2009). Collectively, the children were drawn from families of European heritage, Asian heritage, and African heritage backgrounds. This range is typical for the regions in which the centres are located. In all centres, teachers introduced concepts into the play-based settings to support children's play and learning.

Video observations were made using at least one camera and sometimes three. One camera (and sometime a second camera) followed the children during free play time for detailed close up filming of playful activities. Another camera on a tripod captured a long view of the centre during free play time. Usually, only one camera filmed whole group time, which took place twice per day during the observation period in each of the centres. A total of 399 h of video data were generated.

Teachers were also informally interviewed about their role in the play and learning planned in the centre. These informal interviews were undertaken *in situ* or at the end of a day of filming, in order to gain greater insights into teacher thinking and planning about play and learning. In addition, teachers were involved in professional learning activities associated with the cultural–historical concepts of play, learning and development, in the context of play and learning science concepts in early childhood. These sessions were video recorded and constituted approximately 2–5 h of video data per centre from the overall data set detailed above.

Analysis

Video observations were analysed using the analytical concept of subject positioning (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010) to examine the roles the teachers and the children took during the free play sessions. Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010) in their pedagogical research have conceptualised teachers into pairs (i.e. pair pedagogues) where

'positioning' is always a relation to the other teacher or a child(ren). An interactive moment can be categorised as 'above the child', 'equal with the child', 'below the child', 'child is independent of the teacher' and in the 'primordial we' position. This is shown in Figure 1.

Adult and child positioning in play can mean many different things in the analysis frame. For instance, when a teacher leads children, then the teacher is 'above the children', as we might see when a teacher makes suggestions in playful settings. Play positioning can also include an interaction where a teacher takes the lead from the child. According to Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010), the teacher is then in the 'below position'. When the teacher takes an 'equal position', then the child and the teacher are contributing equally to the play moments and interactions. In the 'primordial we position', the teacher actively models to the child playful interactions, where the child is swept along with the play, being a part of it, but not necessarily understanding or demonstrating agency in that context. This can be seen in children's play when older children lead the play, but allow younger children to enter the play and to be a part of the storyline, even if they do not necessarily understand the storyline or the imaginary situation being generated. For example, an older child or a teacher might take the hand of a younger child and help them to 'mix a cake' in pretence. The younger child may be making mixing actions, but does not necessarily follow the intricacies of the imaginary cooking experience being developed by the older child or teacher. In the independent position, the child is acting without the teacher, but she/he does engage in social referencing from a distance. For example in play, a child will play independently of the teacher, but will regularly look back to the adult for confirmation or to see if they are physically present or observing them.

In Kravtsov and Kravtsova's (2010) research, they have used subject positioning in pair pedagogy contexts, showing how one teacher can be in one position, such as 'above the child' while the other teacher can be 'equal with the children'. In the Australian context, this theoretical positioning of pair pedagogy is unfamiliar to teachers and could not be used as part of the unit of analysis. As such, the concepts of subject positioning were used in the context of adult–child interactions, rather than pair pedagogy (i.e. adult–adult–child) interactions, as was originally conceptualised by Kravtsov and Kravtsova (2010). Furthermore, the study also drew upon Vygotsky's (2004) concept of imagination and creativity and his theory of play (Vygotsky, 1966) as discussed above, in order to analyse the teachers' positioning in the context of being inside or outside of the imaginary situation that the children were playing within. This latter analysis has not yet been explicitly undertaken in subject positioning, and offers a new way of framing the analysis of the teachers' role in play-based settings.

TEACHER ⟷ CHILD					
Above					Below
Below					Above
Equal					Equal
Primordial we (above)					Primordial we (below)
Independent					Independent

Figure 1. Adult and child positioning in play pedagogy.

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Limitations

Although nine teachers across five centres could never seek to be representative of early childhood teachers in Australia or elsewhere, the detailed analysis of video observations of playful interactions in these settings does give some insights into a range of pedagogical possibilities in play-based settings. A broader sample would and should reveal other possible adult–child interactions during free play time, and potentially illuminating further pedagogical positioning in play. As such, the findings reported in the next section, should be viewed with this limitation of sample size in mind.

Findings and discussion

As might be expected, the findings show that a diversity of teacher pedagogical positioning in play was evident across and within the centres. However, what was new was how teachers demonstrated pedagogical positioning in the context of being in or out of the imaginary situation. It is this particular finding that is elaborated in this paper. The typology of play pedagogy that emerged from this research shows that the teachers acted in five different ways in relation to the imaginary situation.

1. Teacher proximity to children's play
2. Teacher intent is in parallel with the children's play intent
3. Teacher is following the children's play
4. Teacher is engaged in sustained collective play with groups of children
5. Teacher is inside the children's imaginary play

These five categories within the play-based settings were determined in relation to whether or not the teachers were acting inside of children's imaginary play. The categories are discussed in the context of an example that is illustrative of the full data set.

Teacher proximity to children's play

Consistent with the research of Singer et al. (2014), the physical positioning of the teacher mattered. When the teacher was sitting close by the children who were at play during free play time, the teacher had the opportunity to enter into the children's play, and to sensitively support them, as we see in the example below of two- and three-year-old children.

> The teacher is seated low on a child's chair next to a light table and projector. She is next to Harry and Warren who are role-playing Goldilocks and the three bears. The children have placed on to the light table a series of blocks and transparencies of characters from the fairy tale they have drawn. The children are moving the objects and observing the images that are projected onto a wall, but become distracted by the projector light and the shadow their hands are making. The teacher points to one of the children's transparencies they have drawn and says, 'Baby bear, and the … ' (pausing for a response). Warren instantly says 'Papa bear'. The teacher continues and says '… and the (pausing). Harry responds by saying 'Mumma bear'. The children continue their role-play, being supported through prompting by the teacher.

Because the teacher knew the storyline that the children were attempting to role-play, she was able to prompt the children, and therefore able to help them play together to re-create the fairy tale of Goldilocks and the three bears. Being in close proximity meant

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she could analyse their efforts and determine when to enter into the imaginary situation. Interestingly, the teacher supported the children from inside the imaginary situation as a narrator rather than an actor in the children's play, as we might see in the pedagogical practices of teachers drawing upon a storyworlds approach.

Teacher intent is in parallel with the children's play intent

In line with previous research (Goncu, 1998; Fleer, 2010) which has shown that when the level of intersubjectivity between teachers and children is not closely aligned, both children and teachers find themselves in completely different imaginary situations. In this study, there were many examples of rich imaginary situations which were completely missed or misinterpreted by the teachers, often because they were not proximally close (Singer et al. 2014). However, the most common misalignment was due to the educative agenda that was being overlaid on particular imaginary situations by the teacher. It is not surprising that teachers would focus on learning outcomes. Hedges' (2014) refers to this pedagogical practice as smuggling content knowledge into play. For example, a small group of three children are seated around a tub of water, and are actively involved in role-playing pirates. The teacher introduces into the play a block of ice:

> The teacher invites the children to consider how to melt a block of ice that she has placed into a tub of water. The tub contains a boat with oars, and two small clear plastic containers. Sam is holding a plastic Lego pirate, and says in response to the invitation made by the teacher, 'The pirate's hat is too big.' The teacher smiles at Sam, and then returns to the block of ice, touching it and saying, 'Is it melting?'. Corey says 'No.' The teacher says, 'Shall we leave it in there for a while?' to which Corey says, 'To make it melt'. The teacher and Corey discuss several ideas about the melting ice. Eventually the teacher is called away to deal with a distressed child, and Sam says, ''The pirate's hat is too big' returning to the original storyline he put forward previously.

As might be expected, many instances of misalignment were due to the nature of large group settings, where many imaginary situations are taking place simultaneously, making it difficult for a teacher to closely align or follow all of the play themes running in the centre. In the example of the pirate boat (child's perspective) and the block of ice (teacher's perspective), the children and the teachers were working in parallel worlds. The children were already in an imaginary situation. The teacher had an educational agenda of introducing science concepts into the play materials she had provided for supporting their play activity. The teacher was smuggling into the play-based setting a science education agenda. That is, she provided materials to support the development of a range of imaginary play to emerge. But she also wanted to use the same play infrastructure for science learning outcomes. Consequently, the children drew upon the materials for imaginary play, play that was being established, but which did not link at all with the introduction of the science education agenda. In contrast, the playworlds literature shows pedagogical practices that involve all the children in one imaginary situation, rather than having a range of self-initiated play themes simultaneously occurring. The agenda in playworlds is to develop an imaginary situation with all the children, and to use props to enrich the imaginary play. This is different from the example above, because in playworlds, problems are initiated and solved in the context of the plot or storyline. The example of the block of ice melting in the context of the broader literature suggests that a continuum of how problems can be introduced into children's play may exist.

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Teacher is following the children's play

The predominant mode of interaction and the time spent interacting in the play-based settings across the teachers was to monitor or supervise children's play. As might be expected in early childhood contexts, teachers were skilled at setting up and resourcing children's play. Their role was predominantly to observe rather than to enter the play. Many of the teachers spent their time outside of children's play resourcing the emerging and developing play themes. For example,

> Alicia is drawing a design, which captures the ideas she has put forward about making a fridge to cool down things in the centre. She takes the drawing over to the teacher who is helping children at the painting easel. Alicia holds up her drawing to show her. The teacher says, 'Can you put it on the table and show me all the different parts?' Alicia takes the drawing back to the table and says as she points to different parts of her drawing, 'That's the part over there with the cement, and that's the dog hair.' The teacher follows her, but stands and says 'I just love the idea of the dog hair mixed with the cement.'. Alicia smiles and murmurs. 'Ummm'. The teacher asks, 'Can you tell me what the dog hair does to the cement?' Alicia responds by saying, 'Makes it softer.' The teacher repeats this and asks, 'Will the cement still set with the dog hair in it? What will it look like do you think?' Alicia says, 'Black cement'. The teacher adds, 'Cement with bits of dog hair through it.'
>
> Do you use a little bit of dog hair or a lot of dog hair?'. Alicia says, 'A little bit'. The teacher asks, 'That much (showing with hands) or that much (moves hands further out)?' Alicia responds by saying, 'That much (showing hands cupped together).' The discussion continues, and then Alicia goes outside and takes a wheelbarrow and begins to collect all the ingredients by picking leaves and sticks from the garden. She adds sand to the wheelbarrow, and then places the organic objects into the sand, mixing as she goes. She verbalizes to herself the cement 'ingredients', taking with her the drawing (which she names as 'instructions'). The teacher stays inside and continues to help children at the painting easel.

This example explicitly shows teacher interest in Alicia's play. However, the teacher stays outside of her play. She does not follow up or become part of her imaginary play. Rather, she quizzes her about the content of the play, inviting Alicia to elaborate and verbalise her thinking. This example was the most common form of teacher–child interaction in play found across all of the teachers in the study.

Teacher is engaged in sustained collective play with groups of children

There is a body of research in the UK that shows the importance of sustained and shared conversations with children for supporting children's learning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007) and for supporting the development of their play (Hakkarainen (2010)). Consistent with this research, this study also found that teachers engaged in shared sustained conversations related to imaginary play (Fleer, 2013b). However, sustained collective imaginary situations were noted rarely, suggesting that this mode of teacher interaction is less common in play-based settings. In contrast, the playworlds literature focuses completely on building sustained and shared imaginary play with a whole group of children.

Teacher is inside the children's imaginary play

The teachers were predominantly outside of children's play, only acting as visitors to their play for short periods, or interacting in parallel with their play. Most teachers

did not go inside of the children's play. As might be expected, evidence of initiating and leading children's play from within the imaginary situation was rare. Although teachers actively set up imaginary play situations by providing materials or reading/telling stories, they did not take an active role in the play, as has been suggested by Hakkarainen (2010) as important for developing children's play.

Although all the teachers were predominantly outside of the imaginary play situation, in the context of reading a story or telling a fairy tale story, the teachers did enter into the imaginary situation created through the story being told/read. But, the teachers did not take on a character from the story or fairy tale when transforming the telling/reading of the story into a role play, as suggested by Lindqvist (1995) and Hakkarainen (2010). Rather the teachers acted as coordinators and resources for the role play. However, on some occasions, the teachers did take on a role in the play, but it was restricted. For example,

> It is group time and the children and the teacher are gathered together. Four children volunteer to be characters in the fairy tale of Goldilocks and the three bears. The teacher asks the children to decide which bear they would like to be, but for expediency, she gives each child a soft toy of the character that they will role-play. The teacher acts as a narrator to the story and counts off each character to begin the story, 'We've got, 1, 2, 3 bears'. She then asks, 'Have we got three chairs?'. The children look around, and together decide they have 3 chairs. The teacher then asks, 'Do we have three bowls … to tell our story?'. Three bowls are found and placed with the other props. The teacher asks Goldilocks to 'Go and hide'. The story begins by the teacher saying, 'Once upon a time in the'. The teacher pauses and asks, 'Where did they live?'. The children together with the teacher tell the story of Goldilocks and the three bears, using the props. The children move the props as the story is narrated by the teacher. The children 'speak in character' as the storyline progresses. However, when they arrive at the scene of needing to cook the porridge the children ask, 'Where is the microwave oven?'. The teacher responds by saying, 'Here. I am the microwave' as she postures into a square shape, receiving each bowl of porridge to be cooked. The story continues to be narrated, and the children role-play each scene.

In this example, the teacher is narrating the story and therefore actively positioning herself outside of the imaginary situation. She keeps the storyline moving. But as was shown in this example, she also entered into the imaginary situation, acting as the microwave oven. She did this so as not to interrupt the role play being enacted by the children. Once she had finished being the microwave oven, she returned to acting as the narrator.

Overall, the teachers were mostly outside of children's play. Teachers did enter into play as the example shows, but not as actively as is suggested by Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (2014). Collectively, the teachers' relationship with the imaginary situation can be symbolised as shown in Figure 2. In this figure, the teacher is conceptualised as being inside of the play or outside of play across a range of play-based settings.

Taken together, what was new in this study from previous research into play was whether or not the teacher was inside of the imaginary play with the children in traditional (not playworld settings) play-based settings. The practice of being inside of the imaginary play with the children in play-based settings was not common in this study of the nine teachers. Apart from the emerging playworlds literature across a number of countries, having an adult inside of children's play does not appear to be a standard conceptualisation of the role of teacher in the pedagogical practice of supporting children's play.

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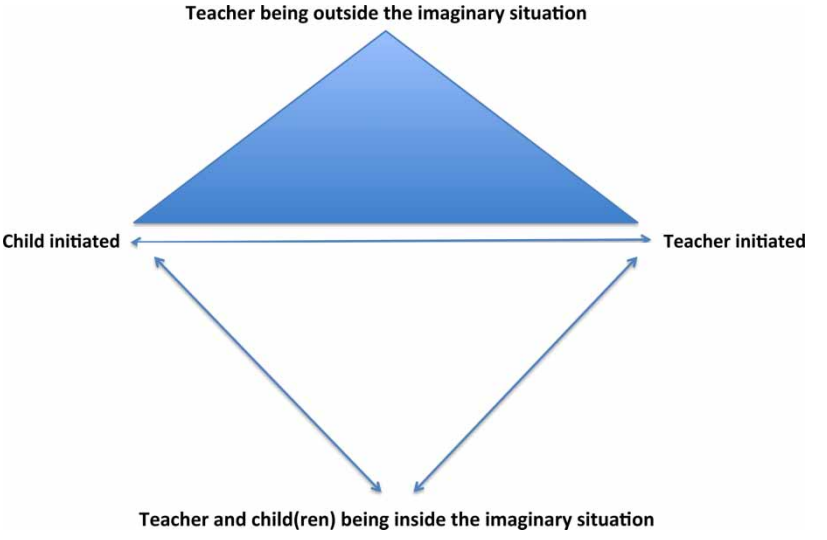

Figure 2. Pedagogical positioning inside and outside of children's play.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings identified a diversity of pedagogical play practices that featured the teacher mostly outside of children's play. Specifically, the pedagogical positioning of the teacher included being in parallel with the child, as a narrator or prompter of the imaginary play, being in close proximally when supporting children's play, but generally not engaged in sustained collective play inside of the imaginary situation. As might be expected, teachers did not act as a play partner when engaged in children's play, but did focus on learning outcomes in the context of their play. Play–pedagogy of this kind with its focus on 'smuggling in content knowledge' (Hedges, 2014), rather than focusing on developing children's play complexity (Bredikyte, 2011; Kravtsova, 2014), is consistent with the work of Wood (2014) who has examined the play–pedagogy interface in the context of contemporary international debates about play. She has found that there are three modes of play–pedagogy evident – child-initiated, adult-guided and technicist-/policy-driven – where the latter is gaining more international ground. She suggests that the global push to position play in relation to curriculum goals for academic learning emerged as a strong policy force in many countries. She names Hong Kong, the UK, and the USA as recent examples, stating that 'Policy constructions of play as pedagogy are instrumental: the focus is on planned and purposeful play, and the forms of learning that are privileged reflect developmental levels and learning goals' (p. 152). Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (2014) have also noted the international trend to make play more academic, stating that:

> Different play forms are combined with a variety of learning objectives, producing the concept of 'playful learning' … Often 'playful' means the addition of elements of play (game, toys, singing, role characters, etc.) to school lessons … . The partial use of play elements indicates that 'playful learning' is dominated by learning objectives … . (p. 249)

Wood (2014) puts forward in the adult-guided categorisation an alternative perspective which has synergy with the research of Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (2014), suggesting

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that '*children need more challenging forms of play* that support progression towards social and symbolic complexity' (p. 153; my emphasis). In the research of Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (2014), they have shown in storyworlds how the 'joint play of adults and children creates collective higher mental functions' (p. 249) where play complexity is actively built, because the ideal forms of play interactions found in the fairy tales and narratives, that form the basis of the collective joint play that teachers introduce, are shared with all the children and become a common plot to be played out and elaborated. The problem formulations introduced through the stories, set up tensions that the characters of the play must solve. Role play gives children opportunities to see and experience living adult models, as adults too are part of the imaginary play, acting as a character in the improvised and extended stories – thus modelling complex forms of play. Hakkarainen and Bredikyte (2014) argue that, 'Play offers an opportunity, or invitation, to experiment with transforming ideal into real forms of behaviour without overwhelming responsibility (play is just play)' (p. 248), where children 'decide whether to accept the invitation or not' (p. 248). What is unique about playworlds is that the adult is part of the imaginary situation, taking on a character, or having a clear play partner role. When the teacher is part of the imaginary play, she/he has an opportunity from inside of the play, to develop the play further, introducing complexity and I would suggest genuinely using learning goals that are detailed in curriculum to help solve the tensions in the imaginary situations. Rather than smuggling in content, or bolting onto an existing play event a learning goal, as was shown in this study, when the teacher is inside of the play, she/he is more in tune with the storyline evolving or being acted out, and can better establish intersubjectivity inside of the imaginary play. It is possible that in the push to make play more academic that the diversity of play–pedagogy has narrowed, leaving teachers firmly outside of children's play. The findings of this study suggest that teachers do not routinely become a part of children's play. But this finding must be considered in the context of the limitations of the sample size.

Wood (2014) has stated that, 'The challenge for the early childhood community is to maintain an expansive understanding of play and pedagogy, and to hold that space against reductionist policy discourses' (p. 155). The diversity of play–pedagogy noted in this Australian study, contributes to beginning to address this challenge. However, a more theorised view of play pedagogy is urgently needed if important elements of play pedagogy are to be intentionally used (see Ryan & Northey-Berg, 2014) for supporting the development of play, as well as for providing a broader range of play practices for meeting the country specific learning outcomes of early childhood education that have become increasingly political imperatives. More needs to be understood about the pedagogical practice of adults inside of children's imaginary play, so that a more nuanced understanding of play pedagogy from inside of children's play can be developed.

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